



THE REC DEPARTMENT; Kids display Tenacity

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Venus and Serena who?

A unique partnership between the City of Boston and Tenacity, a private, nonprofit group dedicated to bringing tennis from the suburbs into the heart of the city, is expanding mightily in only its fourth summer.

And as hundreds of children and teens from traditionally under-served black, Hispanic and Asian neighborhoods are introduced to the joys of serve-and-volley, it's becoming apparent that the success of such African-American tennis superstars as the Williams sisters is just not that important to them.

At least not to the 40 young players banging away at the English High School courts in Jamaica Plain on a recent morning.

Jasmine Cornish, 11, said, "I like it because I see my friends here and it's a good time. You learn to hit the ball."

And hit the books.

The Tenacity program's motto is, "Game. Set. Life." So, along with several instructors and assistants, a reading instructor was on hand the other morning at the English courts, one of four sites this season that also feature summer reading programs.

Tennis is the big draw, Tenacity executive director Ned Eames acknowledged, "but what we're about is scholastic achievement, character development and physical development. And we focus equally on all three."

Friends Marina Valdez and Rose Merisier, 12 and 13, respectively, love the tennis. But they're not as excited about cracking the books - especially when they're out of school.

"We have to read, but we like tennis better," admitted Merisier.

Valdez, in her second year with the program, added, "But this keeps us busy during the summer and away from the TV."

Those are the kind of words program organizers like to hear.

"It's all about showing them the basics of the game, introducing them the right way with lessons, and watching them go from there," said site director Tyler Post. "But we try to instill other lessons as well. So it's great to see the kids progress on a number of different levels.

"Especially," Post said, "for those kids who come back the next summer."

Of course, the fact the Williams sisters continue to wow the tennis world is a definite plus. "It certainly doesn't hurt," Post said with a grin. "They're great models for a lot of our kids, but on the other hand, these players are just doing it on their own."

Program founder Eames added, "We don't even mention Venus and Serena. We let these kids discover the game the way they want to."

Tenacity, which began in 1999 with a few score uncertain participants, has grown into a tennis juggernaut that is projected to draw 2,300 city kids this summer.

Within five years, the goal is 4,000 devotees - including an expanded after-school program at Boston middle schools, according to Eames. Organizers expect that city tennis will be around long after the Williams sisters hang up their racquets.

As first-year tennis enthusiast Merisier said, "I think it's great, especially because they both won (in Wimbledon doubles), but I'm here to hang with my friends and hit some balls."

Dewayne Whyte likes that part best.

And the 12-year-old can hit the ball hard. After a brief lesson on serving from former New England standout Eames, Whyte fired three in a row over the net, all good. "This is my second-favorite game, after football," said the solidly built youngster.

And does he have a favorite tennis player?

Yes," he answered shyly. "Venus Williams."

The Boston Parks and Recreation Department, in association with the Tenacity program, offers tennis at 15 sites across the city. The Stillman Tennis Center in Charlestown draws players and newcomers from that community as well as from East Boston and Chelsea. For more information, call 617-635-4505, ext. 6201, or go to the Web site www.tenacity.org.

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