

## CREATING ACES, ON THE COURT AND IN CLASS

By Joseph P. Kahn, Globe Staff

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Shanice Darlington of Dorchester was among 1,100 youngsters attending a tennis clinic this week at the Reggie Lewis Track and Athletic Center in Roxbury. The star attractions were members of the US Fed Cup women's team, which competes against the Czech Republic in Lowell this weekend. Leading the US squad are Serena and Venus Williams, ranked first and third in the world respectively, who rallied with the kids for a couple of hours and cheerfully answered their questions about tennis, fame, and life.

Though the Williams sisters were the main draw, they were not the only story. Darlington and hundreds more like her sitting in the grandstands were part of it, too. Darlington, 14, is enrolled in Tenacity Inc., a nonprofit organization that offers free tennis instruction and academic guidance. Darlington, who introduced Fed Cup captain and Tennis Hall of Famer Billie Jean King at Wednesday's event, is talented enough to play this spring for the Boston Latin Academy tennis squad, part of an all-city team, and hopes to swat balls for Harvard someday. Math is her best subject.

Tennis "helps me organize myself," said Darlington, a slim girl with a bright smile and long braided hair. In the Tenacity program, she said, "The coaches care so much. If you get a bad grade, they really step in and help you."

Betsy Cardoso, a sixth-grader at Dorchester's Gavin Middle School, is another advertisement for Tenacity's focus on youth sports and learning. Cardoso took up tennis this year - inspired by the Williams sisters, she said - and enjoys reading and math. Basketball and track are also favorites. Yet it's tennis, which demands practice, patience, and sportsmanship (players make their own line calls), that has had an impact on her study habits.

"I concentrate better," Cardoso said after hitting balls with Fed Cup team member Meghann Shaughnessy. When she talked about hitting with Venus and Serena, her eyes lit up. "They have such fun out there."

The two girls represent what Tenacity is all about, said Kaytie Dowcett, the program's academic coordinator.

"Generally, these kids are below-average academically when they come in," said Dowcett, sitting courtside. "Our first priority is to help get their homework done. Some kids only get to play tennis on weekends, until we see better effort in the classroom." The tennis draws the kids, she added, but it's the individual attention they get "that's truly meaningful."

Tenacity, which receives its funding from public and private sources, is made up of two components: an after-school program, with tutored study halls, and a summer program, spread across 22 public facilities, six of which offered reading classes last year.

Founded in 1999, Tenacity grew from serving 1,200 youngsters (double the initial projections) to 2,300 last year. Administrators soon laid out a \$10 million, five-year plan to serve more than 4,000 kids.

But all is not aces for Tenacity. The immediate plan to expand the summer reading program sites from six to 12, and the number of kids served to 2,700, is in jeopardy, according to Tenacity cofounder Ned Eames. Goals may be trimmed, he said, not because of a lack of enthusiasm by public-sector partners such as the mayor's office and Boston Centers for Youth and Families, but a scarcity of funds.

"It's a brutally tough time," Eames said. "We're trying to create opportunities for high-school kids like Shanice to keep playing. The demand is there, and so are the facilities."

The summer programs cost \$200,000 to staff, he said, yet Tenacity may get only half the funding it got last year. Ironically, looming cutbacks coincide with a rising interest in tennis among minority and city kids - despite an overall flattening of interest in the sport, according to a recent United States Tennis Association study. That spike is credited at least in part to - guess who? - the Williams sisters, whose presence in Roxbury was more than a star turn. It was a statement to kids like Darlington and Cardoso.

Serena said during a break in the action that meeting stars such as Zina Garrison when she was young was "the best thing in the world," an inspiration to her as she began fine-tuning her groundstrokes. "It made me feel really special" to return the privilege at Wednesday's clinic, Serena said.

King smiled as she recalled running youth clinics in Boston 40 years ago. "It's all about giving back by example," she said. "Maybe one child here will change his or her life in a positive way. Everything is an opportunity."

Tennis's image as a suburban, country club sport took a healthy beating this week, under the roof of a Roxbury gym. With a little luck and tenacity, plus a Williams sister or two, the beating won't end soon, either.

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