



THE REC DEPARTMENT; It's a perfect match; Hub kids play with `Tenacity'

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It wasn't yet 10 a.m. and 15-year-old Meldonar Patterson had already worked up a sweat. His glistened with drops while perspiration semi-soaked his white T-shirt.

But he didn't seem to mind. He was just glad to be taking a water break from the tennis drills being conducted at the Carter playground in the South End last Wednesday. Along with racquet pal Dexter Hunter and 50 other youths, Patterson was participating in an activity that was simultaneously taking place at 19 other Boston playgrounds.

Aptly named Tenacity, the 5-year-old program has already introduced thousands of city kids to a sport traditionally linked to the suburbs.

"This is alright," Patterson said approvingly. "I'm still learning the basics, but you get to hit a lot of balls over the net."

Fellow Dorchester resident Hunter noted that tennis also brings a social aspect.

"I know everybody here," he said as he gazed across the Carter courts, where a horde of boys and girls ages 7-15 were swinging away, volleying, and chasing down errant shots. "I like it because it keeps me busy during the summer."

Those are the kinds of words any parent would appreciate, including Monica Taft, who had pulled up a lawn chair to watch her daughter, Nicole, and cousin, Hakim, learn the basics.

"My daughter heard about it in school, and when she said `tennis' I knew I wanted her to be part of it," Taft said. "And to come out here and see all these people, inner-city kids, I was really impressed."

And those were the kinds of words appreciated by Ned Eames, the former New England junior standout, San Diego State team captain, one-time pro, and Tenacity co-founder and executive director.

"What has unfolded over the past five years is beyond our realistic expectations - but consistent with our dreams," Eames said. A major element of the Tenacity program, Eames said, is to use tennis and the senses of confidence and focus it sharpens to improve educational performance.

To that end, his organization conducts an ambitious program to link sport and learning at eight Boston middle schools; Tenacity is also spreading into both the elementary and high school levels and works with the Boston Centers for Youth and Families.

In addition, Harvard University has become a Tenacity benefactor through an after-school initiative called "City Serve."

Eames said that even as an insider, he found the program's growth astounding.

"I want to credit Mayor (Thomas) Menino and the city," Eames said, "but what's been most important has been the kids. In that first year we were hoping for maybe 500 and 1,200 showed up. And that's what's really been driving Tenacity's success."

The continued dominance of the women's game by Venus and Serena Williams has also been a factor.

"The Williams sisters are great role models for these kids, girls and boys," Eames said. "Their actions show it's okay to play tennis and, more importantly, it's okay to excel in whatever you do."

With several hundred youths being added each summer as playgrounds from West Roxbury to East Boston have become involved, Tenacity expects to introduce the game to upwards of 2,500 this year.

Sisters Karmen and Okha-Maria Ramos of South Boston are both program devotees, for perhaps different reasons.

"They've been working us pretty hard," said Okha-Marie, 13. "But it's a good workout." Added Karmen, 12, "I like tennis because you get to meet a lot of new people. And have fun."

For more information on tennis opportunities for Boston youth, contact Tenacity at 617-562-0900 or visit the organization's Website: www.tenacity.org. The Boston Centers for Youth and Families can be reached at 617-635-4920.

Caption: TENNIS, ANYONE? Tawndalaya Daroza and Kandis Bannister wait their turn at Carter playground in the South End. Staff photo by Nancy Lane

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