LOCAL HEROES

These dedicated volunteers from each of the USTA’s 17 sections are helping to grow this game where it counts the most—at the grassroots.
HAwAIi PaciFiC
Serving the Underserved

For decades, Vailima Watson has been helping the youth of Hawaii believe in themselves, and her service to the community has made her somewhat of an institution in the local tennis scene.

In 1989, she and her husband, Jerry, started a free tennis program at the Kokua Kalihi Valley Clinic, a community-organized nonprofit in Honolulu formed to meet the health needs of the valley’s growing Asian and Pacific Island population.

Since its inception, the program has provided tennis to thousands of children in the typically underserved area. By the early 1990s, Watson began feeding her students into USTA Junior Team Tennis programs, many of which she coached herself.

“Life for me is to live and to make people happy,” says Watson, a 2009 inductee into the section’s Hall of Fame. “What’s important is each other. It’s not who you are or how rich you are. What’s important is you as a person, your character.”

Watson’s guidance extends well beyond the court, as she serves as an academic mentor—98 percent of her students not only graduate high school, but go on to college.

“You can’t take anything else with you when you leave this world,” she notes. “You can only take your good works, what you’ve done, and how you’ve treated people. I know they’re going to pass that on to their kids one day.”—Ryan Trujillo

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CARIBBEAN
Creating a Special Tennis Legacy

Adrián Hernández has been contributing to and promoting tennis in Puerto Rico for 35 years, involved in developing players at all skill levels—beginner, college, league and advanced. He even works with instructors. While he has a great passion for the sport and what it can bring to people of all ages and abilities, his greatest pride comes from being a mentor on ethics, discipline, perseverance and respect.

One of Hernández’s remarkable efforts is leading adaptive tennis. As an instructor at the Parque Central tennis facility in San Juan, Hernández has impacted the lives of more than 7,000 children, juniors and adults with special needs each year with his lessons from Tuesday to Saturday. Since 2007, as a coach of multiple Special Olympics teams, he has led his players to more than 40 medals at international events, including 13 gold medals.

“Through tennis, I’ve had the chance to share my knowledge about the sport and serve my country with pride,” Hernández says. “Tennis is a lifestyle for me, because when I am not teaching, I am giving support to my wife and daughter, who are also players. And, as a plus, through tennis I have built an extended family.”—Section staff

PHOTOS COURTESY OF USTA

Hernández says he "has a great passion for helping others."
For Orlando Volunteer, ‘It’s Just Tennis’

For a guy who says he likes being behind the scenes, Jeff Dinsmore is pretty out there when it comes to the Orange Blossom Tennis Association. The Facebook page manager for the association, which is a social tennis group for LGBT players and their allies in Orlando, Fla., Dinsmore also manages the schedule for weekly round robins, arranges court dates and sends out e-mail blasts.

“I am a bit of a control freak,” he admits. Dinsmore started out as a player in the group, then became a player representative on the OBTA board, then became group secretary three years ago. “We are a small group, always open for others to join,” Dinsmore says. “We enjoy getting out and playing some good and not-so-good tennis—but always having fun and laughs. We offer a weekly round robin, open to all ages and levels of play.”

These days, says Dinsmore, tennis is just tennis on the courts. “I feel the days of ‘gay’ tennis groups are coming to an end, and I am O.K. with that. It’s served its purpose. But now with the times finally catching up, it’s just tennis. It’s not ‘gay tennis’ or ‘straight tennis’ or any other tennis—it’s simply getting on the courts and hitting that tennis ball.”—Rick Vach

In a League of His Own

Obong Akpan of Brooklyn, N.Y., is a passionate USTA League player. He currently captains four League teams in the USTA Eastern’s Metro Region, where he organizes practices and matches three times a week. A captain since 2008, Akpan also plays on several League teams himself—last season he played for seven teams.

“My favorite part of USTA League is the competition,” he says. “I’ve also been fortunate to meet a lot of people and make many friends through playing.”

But Akpan, who was named USTA Eastern’s Organizer of the Month for April, takes his love of tennis to the next level. He volunteers at Youth Tennis programs in his community and introduces his League teammates to volunteer opportunities in their local communities.

“I try to recruit members of my team to coach Junior Team Tennis or get their kids to play on teams,” Akpan says. “It’s rewarding to watch the kids develop into good players from season to season.”—Kelsey Clark

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In the winter, Garcia takes his program indoors to elementary schools and PE classes.

Gibson cites her USTA team as “my lifeline” and is grateful for their support.

The USTA Missouri Valley has honored Platt for his contributions and community service.

INTERMOUNTAIN
Tennis in Boulder is ‘Gonzo’!

Gonzalo Garcia, better known as “Gonzo,” runs a year-round playroom for the Parks & Recreation Department in Boulder, Colo. It may consist of drills that teach hand/eye coordination and how to live an active, healthy lifestyle—skills kids need to play tennis—but it feels more like a party.

“Tennis isn’t fun unless you play it with Gonzo,” says 4-year-old Finn Muller.

“When I first started ‘Gonzo Tennis’ in 2007, we had maybe 10 kids in the tennis program,” says Garcia, a USPTA pro from Argentina. “But I had a vision. I’m passionate about coaching. I’ve been doing it for more than 30 years and I wanted to develop a program that had a strong identity and consistency, similar to the one my brother and I developed in Argentina called ‘690’—because tennis is a sport you can play from age 6 to 90.”

A typical summer program has 500 to 600 participants on court in two-and-a-half months and can be found at two Boulder Rec Centers.

“I credit a lot of our success to our unique and important partnership with the city,” Garcia adds. “It’s a win-win—the city gets programs run by professionals that get people excited about playing tennis and out on the 53 courts in Boulder. And I get the exposure and opportunity to promote my baby.” —Wendy Anderson

MIDWEST
Sharing Tennis and Fun

Beth Gibson’s 11-year-old son Will is her hero. Born with Down syndrome, Will was the inspiration behind the creation of Buddy Up Tennis Inc., an adaptive tennis and fitness clinic for children and adults with Down syndrome.

In 2008, Gibson noticed how Will would watch when she and her older son played tennis at Wickertree Tennis & Fitness Club in Columbus, Ohio. Two staff members, Stephanie Anderson and Doug DiRosario, also noticed and volunteered to teach Will how to play.

While researching teaching techniques, they realized there was a need for tennis and fitness programs for individuals with Down syndrome. Later that year, Gibson, Anderson and DiRosario conducted the first Buddy Up Tennis clinic. The program is now offered in 15 locations nationwide.

“Will has given me a different perspective on life and I feel lucky to be able to value what is important: family, friends and tennis to keep us all having fun,” says Gibson.—Section staff

MISSOURI VALLEY
Building From the Ground Up

Name a successful tennis player from St. Louis, Mo., and it’s likely that they got their start in one of Mark Platt’s programs.

Platt created Beginner’s World Tennis in St. Louis in 1984 to encourage new tennis players, team tennis leagues and community events. More than 30 years later, it’s not uncommon to have over 1,000 people of all ages participating in Platt’s programs and events at more than 25 facilities across the St. Louis area. He also has a staff of 10 who teach lessons, and Platt’s program will have more than 10 Junior Team Tennis squads this summer.

Platt was named Grassroots Champion of the Year by Tennis Industry magazine in 2002, and he received the Eve Kraft Community Service Award from the USTA in 2004.

“Everything I’ve done has often been met with at least some resistance, but it eventually becomes an industry trend a few years later,” Platt says. “I try to stay ahead of the game.” —Andrew Robinson

PHOTOS COURTESY OF USTA
“Sharing something I feel passionate about is quite fulfilling,” says Cutone.

In 2003, the courts in Milbank were named in honor of Larry, known as “Mr. Milbank Tennis.”

MID-ATLANTIC
Coaching Overtime

Enoch Thompson, known as “Coach Enoch,” has taught tennis for 25 years. He started coaching USTA Junior Team Tennis 10 years ago and has managed the Young Masters program in Washington, D.C., for the past five years.

Of the many benefits of tennis, the one that resonates most with Thompson is how lessons learned inside the lines of a tennis court can be applied to life outside as well.

“Junior Team Tennis teaches kids how to win and what to do when they don’t win,” Thompson says. “I don’t like to use the word ‘lose.’ Being part of a team helps develop real life skills they can take off the court—like how to support others and overcome hardships.”

One of the hardships a player of his had to overcome was the death of a parent. Ajani Bell, age 10, was a player in Thompson’s program when his mother passed away in 2015. Thompson encouraged Bell to stick with tennis, keeping him in a supportive and safe environment. Coach Enoch serves as a mentor to Bell and has made him a fixture of the Trinity Washington University tennis team, where Thompson serves as head coach.

Thompson epitomizes what tennis offers: activity, fun, life lessons, support, teamwork, friendships and memories.

—Chris Miller

NEW ENGLAND
Maine Contributor

It’s hard to top the dedication of Dr. Steven Cutone of Kennebunkport, Maine. Cutone, a USTA League player, is a volunteer for the Rec Department’s summer tennis program and at the indoor Apex Junior Tennis Academy. He also sponsors charitable tournament play and has rallied parents and instructors in his community to start programs.

“Volunteering has been a great source of pleasure for me,” Cutone says. “There are so many life lessons that can be taught through the game of tennis.”

In 2015, Cutone received USTA New England’s Maine Volunteer of the Year award. That same year, he and his family (wife Jen; kids Olivia, 8, George, 10, and Alberto, 7) were honored by the Maine Tennis Association as the Family of the Year for their continued work hosting a weekly youth tennis night.

“Steven and his family have been tremendous contributors to our game, and we are extremely grateful,” says Scott Steinberg, USTA New England president & CEO.—James Maimonis

NORTHERN
Family Tennis Affair in Milbank

When it comes to tennis in Milbank, S.D., well, the Cantine family is tennis.

“Tennis—Larry, Loretta, Kevin, Greg and Scott—organized a Level 8 tournament and USTA Play Day to introduce juniors to the sport, while Kevin ran the summer program aimed at kids ages 12 to 16. Kevin also is president of the Milbank Community Tennis Association, after taking over from his father this year, who had run it the previous 40 years.

In 2015, the Cantine family was named USTA Northern Family of the Year.

The Cantines play area tournaments and fund-raise year-round to support teams and camps. They also work with Combined Appeal, showing the value of tennis activities for the community.

“We never have felt like we did that much,” Larry says. “It is just a great game. Who wouldn’t want to be involved in tennis?”

—Lisa Mushett

“Coach Enoch” is a fixture in Washington, D.C. for his support of tennis-playing children and their families.

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Above and Beyond in Sacramento

The Sacramento Community Tennis Association, founded in 1999 by Alan Criswell, offers affordable junior tennis programs to more than 300 youngsters in the Sacramento area, with a focus on underserved kids. Criswell's work continues to boost the sport in Northern California, and in 2015, the Sacramento Community Tennis Association was named the section's Outstanding Community Tennis Association.

Criswell focuses on all players. In 2010, he was awarded the Wheelchair Tennis Outstanding Volunteer, which goes to an individual that has gone above and beyond in providing outstanding service to the wheelchair tennis community. “The staff and people at USTA NorCal help make us a success,” Criswell says. “We’re supported in all areas and implementing programs that follow the USTA model and player development pathway for junior tennis, and we have had support from the very beginning.” — Section staff

Known as “Mr. Antelope Tennis,” Criswell was instrumental in the creation of the Antelope Tennis Center.
Kester’s persistence and acumen has kept Piedmont Park’s tennis center humming.

Henry has coached national champions and helped bring families together on the court.

SOUTHERN

Teamwork Boosts Atlanta Tennis

Dan Kester knows the names of all the players on his tennis league teams. That may not sound unusual, but Kester leads about 30 teams every year.

While Kester himself can’t play on 16 USTA League, 15 ALTA teams and two young adult rec teams, he has figured out how to keep them all going. He uses his organization skills that help make his business, I Play Atlanta, a success. Kester has a solid business model and asks others to implement it.

“My goal is to get more players playing,” Kester says. “So, I set up the teams and then have someone on each team make up lineup cards and handle rainouts and other details.”

But Kester’s service to Atlanta tennis goes beyond organization. “About five years ago I went to USTA Atlanta and asked how I could help,” he says. “The Atlanta Youth Tennis & Education Foundation asked for used racquets. I was able to collect 150.”

Since then, Kester has donated more than 1,000 racquets. Kester then set up a collection box at this store for used balls; each year, he brings roughly 5,000 balls to the AYTEF. Additionally, he collects used shoes and sells the rubber, donating the money to the AYTEF. —Ron Cioffi

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

A Tennis Mentor Changes Lives

Since 1971, Dee Henry has been leading the tennis team at Biola University in La Mirada, inspiring players to become outstanding students and leaders. “It’s a thrill to see a player develop,” she says. “I love teaching tennis and find great fulfillment in doing it year in and year out.”

Henry’s involvement with the Southern California Tennis Association began in 1983 as a site coordinator for the LA84 Foundation NJTL. A product of the Vic Braden Tennis Academy, Henry is a Level P1 certified USPTA pro. After meeting Brad Parks, she wanted to be involved in wheelchair tennis, too, and received her certification in 2008. She also has been recognized for her work serving challenged athletes in the community. In 2008, Biola was selected as the SCTA Organizational Member of the year.

“Dee is and has been a mentor to me and so many others over the years,” says Melanie Bischoff, director of community tennis for the section. “She’s a perfect SCTA hero.” —Linda Milan

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Southwest
Going For the Gold in Arizona

Kaitlyn Verfuerth of Flagstaff, Ariz., has been around the globe and back a few times over, and she doesn’t plan on stopping. The 30-year-old is a dynamo with luggage and tennis bag in tow, playing ITF events to keep her wheelchair women’s tennis ranking among the top 20 in the world. Now, her sights are set on the Rio Paralympic Games in 2016 (the top 22 in the world qualify).

Verfuerth was a Paralympian in 2004 and 2008. She knows the effort it will take just to return to Rio this year. “I’d always wanted to play the Paralympic Games, ever since I was a kid and learned about it,” she says. “It’s just such an amazing experience to be able to represent your country.”

When not playing international events, Verfuerth is an assistant tennis coach for Flagstaff High. Earlier this year, she was honored as the USTA Southwest Adult Player of the Year.

A car accident put Verfuerth in a wheelchair when she was 7. “I had one or two choices, even early on as a kid, on how to take the hand I’d been dealt,” says Verfuerth, who came to Arizona in college to play on the school’s wheelchair tennis team, one of the few in the U.S. “I was either going to just live my life in a chair and do whatever, or I had this opportunity to play sports and travel the world. It was a pretty easy choice.”

—Section staff