A Positive Spin

The growth and popularity of adaptive tennis programs are helping participants, as well as the sport.

By Judy Leand

Adaptive tennis programs provide physical, mental and emotional advantages to three groups of athletes: Those with cognitive and developmental disabilities, such as Down syndrome and autism; players with physical disabilities, such as ambulatory on-court without a wheelchair, and the vision-impaired; and those with emotional and social disorders, such as PTSD.

“Health and intellectual benefits are prompting program directors around the country to develop and expand programs,” says Marcy Hirshberg, chair of the USTA’s National Adaptive Tennis Committee. “The USTA is very supportive of these programs, which makes it easier to grow them.”

To date, there are 340 USTA-registered adaptive tennis programs in 44 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Each program serves between 10 to 500 players, and together encompass 43,000 athletes and 41,000 volunteers. (Wheelchair tennis is a different classification and is not part of the adaptive tennis category.)

“The majority of adaptive programs serve more adults than children,” adds Jessie Taliaferro, vice chair of the USTA Adaptive Committee. “This is important because, post-school-age, not a lot of programs exist for cognitively or intellectually disabled adults.”

In 2017, adaptive tennis was put under the auspices of the USTA’s Diversity and Inclusion Department. The USTA offers grants to run programs, and October saw the second annual national adaptive tournament at the USTA National Campus in Orlando, with 11 USTA sections participating. For 2020, an Adaptive Tennis Day is in the works.

“It’s exciting to see the growth in adaptive programs and to know how much more we can accomplish,” says Hirshberg, who points to these three organizations as great examples of groups that go above and beyond to develop, provide and promote adaptive tennis programs.

Special Pops Tennis

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Special Pops Tennis is to “enrich the lives of children and adults with intellectual disabilities through the lifetime sport of tennis,” says Jim Hamm, SPT’s executive director and chair of the USTA Southern Special Populations/Adaptive Tennis Committee. “Our slogan is ‘Play Tennis, Make Friends, Live Life.’”

SPT began year-round training in 2005 at three sites in metro Atlanta with 25 athletes. Today the program utilizes 18 sites, serving more than 600 athletes ages 8 through adult—with no upper age limit—and has more than 575 volunteers, including 50 coaches. Free programs include year-round instruction, league play and tournament competition. Other SPT events include travel to tournaments in the Southeast and participation in the Special Olympics Georgia Summer Games.

The 14th annual Fall Classic, SPT’s preeminent tournament, was held over three days in late September, attracting more than 140 athletes from 10 states, and over 400 volunteers.

Local league play consists of Special Populations Unified Doubles, which pairs the group’s athletes with local tennis players in competitive doubles. Athlete exhibitions have taken place at local clubs and the BB&T Atlanta Open, and SPT hosts several volunteer and coaches’ training clinics to teach people how to begin adaptive tennis programs in their communities.

“Our vision is that every person with intellectual disabilities in metro Atlanta should have the opportunity to participate in an adaptive tennis program,” Hamm says.

“We’ve witnessed the results that have come from our programs. Just one tennis enthusiast can be a spark that will ignite the entire community.”
The health and intellectual benefits of tennis are prompting program directors around the country to develop and expand adaptive programs.
The Laredo Tennis Association aims to provide anyone in the local area who wants to play tennis a chance to do so. The LTA’s adaptive programs include Tennis for the Blind and Visually Impaired, launched five years ago, and the Stroke Survivor Tennis Club, now in its fourth year. Earlier this year, LTA launched a program for those with Down syndrome. LTA serves about 55 athletes across all of its programs, and has nearly 40 volunteers.

“The challenge now is to grow these groups,” says Tina Trevino, LTA president. “We’ve beefed up awareness via local newspapers, TV, posters around the city and especially Facebook and other social media.”

> The Tennis for the Blind and Visually Impaired program began when a tennis pro who was teaching at a school for the blind approached the LTA. Trevino contacted the Laredo Braille Club and the Special Ed departments of two school districts and the city’s Parks & Leisure Services Department for use of a gym.

“The tennis balls are made to jingle, so that blind and visually impaired players can hear them,” says Trevino.

The LTA now holds two tournaments a year for both its blind/visually impaired players and for its Stroke Survivor Club members. In April, LTA players will travel to Austin to compete against players from the Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

A large pool of volunteers is key to making these programs work. To that end, LTA actively seeks high school tennis players by offering scholarships. Between $10,000 to $18,000 per year in scholarships is given to local high school varsity players for higher education or vocational training; these players must compete on their school team and volunteer in LTA programs.

In addition, the organization helps its graduating high school volunteers start tennis programs on their new college and school campuses.

Going forward, LTA is hoping for a boost in participation and awareness following the city’s construction of an 18-court tennis complex, expected to open by early 2021 on the Texas A&M International University campus.

“The joy of tennis is the passion, friendships and ability to share with people of all ages and abilities,” says Trevino. “That’s the motivating factor for why LTA does what it does.”
SAN DIEGO

Wounded Warrior Tennis Program

> In San Diego, tennis is a means of rehabilitation and community integration for wounded, ill and injured service members and veterans of all ages. The Wounded Warrior Tennis Program consists of free weekly tennis clinics and annual national camps that have served more than 800 participants since 2009. The program is run by more than 100 volunteers, and serves 30 athletes per week and 60 at annual camps.

“Our goal is to use tennis as a vehicle to get out of the hospital environment and to promote reintegration,” says Steve Kappes, director of military outreach for San Diego District Tennis Association. “The experience creates a new sense of optimism and hope.”

Every week, the program provides 30 participants with an hour and a half of tennis, followed by lunch. In addition, for the past eight years the organization has offered an annual, weeklong camp for up to 60 wounded warriors across the country at no expense to them.

“We’ve had successful fundraising and support from San Diego and local businesses, and have enjoyed broad support from the USTA Foundation, USTA sections and vendors in the tennis industry,” Kappes says.

The success of the Wounded Warrior Tennis Program has been instrumental in the establishment of similar grassroots-based programs across the country. In the near future, Kappes would like to see more clinics per week, and he’d like the organization to host more annual tennis camps, either in San Diego or other parts of the country.

“It’s a labor of love,” he says. “Everyone involved has full-time jobs and family responsibilities, but we’re gratified to see the positive results. We’re very proud of what we do and appreciate everything our partners provide.”

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