

TENNIS, EVERYONE!

by Jonathan Whitbourne, Editorial Director for Meredith Custom Solutions in New York
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Professional tennis' glitziest tournament, the U.S. Open, has an interesting secret: It's played entirely in a public park (Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, Queens, New York). This makes sense. At its core, tennis is an egalitarian game that embodies such bedrock American ideals as self-improvement, work ethic and sportsmanship. Nowhere does this shine more brightly than on the thousands of tennis courts in public parks across the country where players of all ages, abilities and backgrounds gather to trade groundstrokes and stories. It's a beautiful site and a movement worth growing.

Organized tennis in public parks exists largely thanks to collaborations between Community Tennis Associations (CTAs) and local park departments. CTAs — often affiliated with the United States Tennis Association (USTA), tennis' national governing body — offer tennis programming to the communities they serve. Charged with developing and promoting tennis at its grassroots, the USTA has more than 1,000 registered CTAs across the United States. Often, these programs, such as tennis instruction and leagues, are played on public park courts. In the simplest of terms, CTAs supply the tennis expertise and programming; public parks provide the venue, promotion and facility maintenance.

Many CTAs leverage tennis and education to help youth in underserved communities through the National Junior Tennis and Learning (NJTL) network. Through more than 500 nonprofit youth development organizations, the NJTL network provides free or low-cost tennis and education programming to more than 225,000 under-resourced youth.

"The USTA is proud to be a part of these dynamic park partnerships with local programs whom we've supported for so many years," says USTA Chairman, CEO and President, Katrina Adams. "These programs are the backbone to our mission of promoting and developing the growth of tennis. We are inspired by their dedication and commitment to generating everlasting impact on children on and off the court, as well as their families. As a player who grew up learning tennis on a public park court, I know firsthand that CTAs and NJTLs are invaluable to our great sport, as well as help our communities thrive. Many champions who we have come to admire are products of these programs, and we look forward to more champions and other leaders as a result of the great work of CTA, NJTL and public park partnerships nationwide."

To get a better understanding of this partnership, highlighted below are four communities where tennis in parks is thriving. Each story is unique, but readers will notice a common theme: When CTAs, NJTLs and public parks team up, everyone wins.

Trenton, New Jersey

In the heart of this proud city stands the history-rich Cadwalader Park, a 100-plus-acre green space designed by famed landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead. In the 1960s and 70s, Cadwalader Park's 18 tennis courts (12 hard, six clay) were teaming with players and even hosted iconic champions such as Arthur Ashe and Althea Gibson. However, subsequent decades brought economic downturns, social unrest and budget cuts to the local park departments. As a result, the public courts fell into disrepair and tennis participation slumped.



During these challenging times, however, a promising seed began to sprout: The National Junior Tennis League (NJTL) of Trenton. Formed in the summer of 1975 by four volunteers with a \$500 budget, NJTL of Trenton offered three weeks of free tennis lessons to 30 neighborhood kids on the Cadwalader Park courts. By all accounts, it was a success. But, few could've imagined that this humble pilot program was destined for big things.

Flash-forward to today: Renamed the National Junior Tennis and Learning of Trenton to better reflect its diversified mission, NJTL of Trenton now provides more than 2,700 kids with a progressive curriculum that combines tennis and education. Participants are taught the importance of inclusion, responsibility and striving for academic excellence while enjoying top-notch tennis instruction. Even better, this all takes place free of charge at the gleaming Cadwalader Park public tennis complex, which includes 20 refurbished courts and the beautiful Dan Haggerty Jr. Pavilion, named after one of NJTL of Trenton's original founders. "The program's success and its beautiful home would not be possible without tremendous support from the city of Trenton," says NJTL of Trenton Executive Director Rob Howland.

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“From grants to promoting our programs on its website to maintaining the courts perfectly, the city of Trenton has been an invaluable partner,” Howland continues. “The city recognizes that tennis is more than athletics — it’s socially uplifting and allows kids, especially under-resourced kids, a chance to develop important life skills and maturity. Together, we’re changing lives for the better and we’re using public parks as an important vehicle to do that.”

Trenton officials couldn’t agree more. Says Fiah Gussin, Trenton’s director, Division of Recreation: “The benefits to our children are countless. Because of the city’s relationship with NJTL of Trenton, the parks are able to provide low-income families with high-quality tennis programs. We couldn’t do this without each other. We work together to overcome any obstacles that may get in our way and we will continue to do so because it’s the best thing for our community and our children.”

Las Vegas, Nevada

At the Marty Hennessey Inspiring Children Foundation, a pioneering program that combines athletics with academics, the numbers speak for themselves. Two-hundred and sixty disadvantaged kids receive free tennis instruction annually in schools and parks, 95 percent of the graduates of its elite leadership development program receive college scholarships and almost every alum of the program returns to help mentor the younger children. But these success stories would never have come to fruition were it not for a successful partnership between the foundation and the city of Las Vegas.

neighborhood, where families live, and show them another way they can enjoy their parks as a community,” says Emily Schaefer, HPARD director of tennis. “Getting the entire tennis community behind the outreach efforts is rewarding in so many ways. For us, the combination of a parks agency and Community Tennis Association (CTA) working together is the perfect fit. My message to other parks and recreation departments: If you’re not currently partnering with your local CTA, try it. It’s a win-win for everyone.”

“At the beginning [of 2003], we were homeless, like tennis gypsies traveling from court to court,” remembers Foundation co-founder Ryan Wolfington. “We could only really help 15 to 20 kids annually because we didn’t have a facility. We had the passion and the know-how but no set place to call home.”

That all changed in 2009 when a deal was struck with the Las Vegas Parks and Recreation Department, allowing the foundation to conduct its free programming at Lorenzi Park, a public tennis facility with 10 pristine courts. Since then, the foundation has flourished.

“We can help as many as 300 children now — we can expand our programming and get more kids into our leadership development program, and at zero cost to the children and their families,” says Trent Alenik, a foundation alumni and now the organization’s executive director. “That’s a game-changer. That’s a life-changer.”

It’s also a boon to Las Vegas residents and a thriving testament to how organized tennis in public parks helps strengthen communities.

“By partnering with the Marty Hennessey Inspiring Children Foundation, the city of Las Vegas has been able to provide more quality mentoring, education and athletic programs than ever before,” says city of Las Vegas Councilman Ricki Y. Barlow. “Growing up within the ward I now represent as a councilman, I spent countless hours at Lorenzi Park, participating in educational programs such as these. It’s very powerful to see

that tradition continue at such a high level and I’m proud to partner with a foundation that utilizes our city’s parks and facilities to inspire and improve the lives of our citizens.”

Indianapolis

Famed film director Woody Allen is credited with first coining the now well-worn adage that “80 percent of success is showing up.” If true, National Junior Tennis and Learning (NJTL) of Indianapolis will continue to thrive for many more years. Founded in 1969, NJTL of Indianapolis serves more than 1,500 kids annually across 15 local parks in Marion County, Indiana. The nonprofit group, which provides everything from low-cost summer camps to reading programs and advanced tennis instruction, is upfront about its secret to success: An undeniably strong bond with the local parks.

“If we didn’t have the parks available, it’d be impossible to make the programs financially accessible to all kids, which is what we’re all about,” says Monica Brase, executive director of NJTL Indianapolis. “And, geographically, the locations of the parks throughout Indianapolis make it easy for families to hop on a bus, walk or ride their bikes to the programs. We have such great turnout because our programs are affordable and accessible, and much of that is because we function in public parks.”

Another benefit of organized tennis in public parks: Families who play soon discover other wonderful resources in their local parks. “Every park has its own personality and something unique to offer,” says Brase. “So many of our [tennis] families will tell me, ‘I didn’t know this park had a community garden or a waterpark.’ They’re excited! They now realize how much great stuff takes place in the parks — and they want to be a part of it.”

Houston, Texas

They say everything is bigger in Texas, and that’s certainly true of the spirited Houston Parks and Recreation Department (HPARD). Founded 100 years ago, the department provides Houstonians with a robust number of free events and programs that’s reflective of the city’s rich diversity.

One of the most popular programs is National Junior Tennis and Learning (NJTL), a free, youth-focused initiative that uses tennis to develop the character of young people. In NJTL Houston, kids ages 4 to 18 learn the fundamentals of tennis and are also given opportunities to develop academic, artistic, social and life skills, as well as qualify for scholarships.

The free program — offered at more than 45 parks and serving thousands of kids annually, many of them at-risk — is made possible thanks to a strong collaboration between HPARD and the Houston Tennis Association, a nonprofit that promotes local tennis via programming for players of all ages and abilities. Together, they are able to provide high-quality tennis programming and academic mentoring for free in accessible and well-maintained parks and facilities.

“What makes our programs so unique is that we take tennis out into the neighborhood, where families live, and show them another way they can enjoy their parks as a community,” says Emily Schaefer, HPARD director of tennis. “Getting the entire tennis community behind the outreach efforts is rewarding in so many ways. For us, the combination of a parks agency and Community Tennis Association (CTA) working together is the perfect fit. My message to other parks and recreation departments: If you’re not currently partnering with your local CTA, try it. It’s a win-win for everyone.”