



Tennis, *Everyone*

Adaptive tennis programs in the parks can bring future players off the sidelines and into the game

By Mary Helen Sprecher

In the morning, you'll see them: athletes filtering onto the park tennis courts before the North Carolina heat catches up to the day. After a short warm-up and a review from the coaches, lessons, drills and play begin in earnest. The sounds — cheers when a point is scored, yelps of frustration over the occasional bad shot — can be heard any morning on a thousand municipal courts around the country. Except, these players, who range from raw beginners to being able to hold their own in league play, have developmental disabilities. Many still live with their parents, despite being adults. Some have jobs, some don't. Some may never have jobs and some live in group homes.

But, they all play tennis in the park, where passersby stop and watch. And that, says Jessie Taliaferro, who works with Abilities Tennis Association of North Carolina, is the biggest win of all. Without ever saying a word, these players are opening the eyes of the general population.

The Abilities Tennis program, which began in 2007 inside a private racquet club in Raleigh, North Carolina, has proliferated across the state. There are now 13 programs in different cities, and of those 13, nine are held on public courts. "Typically, we would have one to three

athletes show up a week,” says Taliaferro. “We were wondering, ‘Why aren’t we reaching more?’” Then, one of the pros involved in the program contacted a nearby park, which agreed to host the clinics. The heightened public profile of the program resulted in a weekly turnout of 15 players.

Those with disabilities are often marginalized in terms of recreation. It’s why programs held in public parks can make a difference and why tennis program organizers are encouraging parks departments to partner with them and with the United States Tennis Association (USTA), which encourages adaptive tennis programs.

Success Spreads

Nationwide, park departments are offering adaptive recreation, and tennis is a huge part of that. Google keywords like “adaptive tennis parks and recreation,” and you’ll see hits, across the country. In many cases, parks have paved the way in the fight against isolation on behalf of individuals with disabilities.

“We often view adaptive recreation as service to individuals with disabilities, but adaptive programs have the opportunity and ability to serve the greater need of all individuals in our communities,” says Nikki Speer-Raleigh, program director with the city of Raleigh’s Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources Department-Specialized Recreation and Inclusion Services. “Having programs for adaptive sports and recreation is obviously a great way of serving the whole population and of keeping people healthy and connected, and Raleigh has obviously done a great job of partnering with Abilities Tennis in order to do this.”

Making Programs Successful

Over and over, the subject of continuity in programming comes up. After offering her first free skill clinic, Beth Gibson, who founded Buddy Up Tennis for individuals with Down Syndrome, had parents pleading with her “not to let this be the only one you do.” Because most individuals with developmental disabilities cannot drive themselves to parks, clubs or other venues, one-time sports clinics can be more frustrating than rewarding.

“You don’t realize how much people depend on this,” says Gibson. “I’ll get to the courts every Saturday, and the kids will already be there ahead of me. They’re wearing their T-shirts, they have their racquets, they’re ready to go.”

Many students with special needs go to public schools alongside more typical classmates. Those other students, following graduation, will move on to college or work. But, for individuals with developmental disabilities, there’s widespread inertia when not only the routines, but also the friendships are lost. Many become clinically depressed, gain weight and are at risk for diabetes, heart disease and more.

In addition to physical fitness, Abilities Tennis, Buddy Up and other publicly available programs offer something adults typically take for granted: a social life. “You always hear people talking about the kids, the kids, the kids,” says Taliaferro, “but most of Abilities’ participants are adults. They need recreation, and they need to be with people, but they live on the fringes of society.”

Compounding the isolation is the difficulty of making friends. Often, individuals with typical lives, jobs and skills are intimidated by adults who are developmentally disabled; as a result, they are less often approached or spoken to. “This might be the one thing people do all week where they’re with friends,” says Gibson. “You need to have a program, versus an event.”

And, there are success stories. One participant in the Abilities Tennis program, for example, began playing in a 3.5 league at a local club, holding her own alongside athletes without disabilities and earning their respect throughout the season. Organizers at Buddy Up Tennis watched a man blossom after learning the sport. “He lost a lot of weight, he gained confidence, he was wonderful,” says Gibson. “He actually got to know the staff at the club where he would play, and the club eventually hired him to work at the front desk. Now, he has a job, and he interacts with members and he still plays.”

The city of Raleigh is on board with the need for inclusive recreation, citing its ability to provide “opportunity for participants to develop and maintain skills that will encourage and promote a healthy lifestyle.”

Starting the Program

Those who want to create a program need to first decide which public they want to serve. It is easy to become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of developmental, physical and emotional disabilities that exist, but it is essential to keep the focus tight.



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“Success breeds success,” Taliaferro notes, “but you can lose your way. Find what you do well.”

Richard Spurling, together with his wife, pediatric neurologist Shafali Spurling Jeste, founded the national program, ACEing Autism, for children with autism spectrum disorders. Spurling, who is also the USTA’s Adaptive Tennis Committee chairman, says it’s often a matter of finding the right niche.

“We saw that parents were really obsessed with the therapy their children were getting. What they weren’t thinking of was any kind of recreational play-based program — that was really our *aha* moment. We said, ‘What about using tennis for recreation?’ Nobody else was offering it.” ACEing Autism is now offered in more than 20 states and continues to proliferate.

The Resources

To start a program, resources are needed, and it’s helpful when all those resources can be found in one place. The USTA’s Adaptive Tennis Committee recommends contacting a tennis representative, also known as a section contact, who can provide information on a wide range of topics, including financing and education materials. Information can be found by going to www.usta.com and typing “adaptive” into the search box. According to Katrina Adams, chairman, CEO and president of the USTA, the sport is versatile enough to be applicable to multiple segments of the population.

“The beauty of tennis is that it can be played by individuals of all ages, genders, races and abilities. We need to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to take part in and enjoy this amazing game. These programs accomplish just that, helping to make the sport accessible to countless players throughout the country.”

Lay the Groundwork

The success of any program, Taliaferro says, depends on the details. She cautions those creating their own programs

to make sure all paperwork is in place. It’s not exciting, but it’s essential.

“You can’t have a group that is based just on one person’s special interest,” says Taliaferro. “You must formally create the organization because if that person isn’t around, the program will fall apart. Set up bylaws, policies and procedures, best practices and your mission statement. A program can be sustainable if it is held at a public park with assistance from park staff, since the park and rec department can carry the program forward.”

In addition, says Spurling, it is essential to develop a training program for volunteers and to be able to constantly bring in new helpers. “We rely on our volunteers, but no matter what, there is always going to be a lot of volunteer turnover. Students will volunteer for a year or two and then move on — either their classes will make them too busy or they will graduate and get a job. People’s interests will change or they’ll move out of the area. You need to keep enough people to keep your program going.”

Finding the Participants

Across the country and across the spectrum of disabilities, all organizers have experienced at least initial frustration in not being able to reach the individuals for whom their program was targeted.

Gibson finds participants for Buddy Up Tennis through Special Olympics, Down Syndrome organizations and more. Taliaferro finds that parents of individuals with special needs will share resources and information, meaning they can become excellent advocates. She also recommends contacting the local community tennis association, or CTA, whose contact information can be obtained through USTA. Spurling finds word-of-mouth among parents of children with autism to be an excellent means.

Leveraging Funding

The USTA’s resources include information on grants available to adaptive

For information on any of the programs mentioned in this article:

The **United States Tennis Association** has an Adaptive Tennis Committee. To access information, go to www.usta.com and search “Adaptive Tennis.” A list of programs by state is available.

Grants are also awarded by USTA: contact yasmine.osborn@usta.com.

Abilities Tennis Association of North Carolina (Participants with developmental disabilities): <http://www.atanc.org/>.


ACEing Autism: <http://aceingautism.org/>.

Net Generation (Register your tennis program today!): <http://netgeneration.com/>.

USTA Free Webinar, September 21 at 2 p.m. — CEU Credits (How to Start & Sustain Adaptive Tennis Programs in Your Community): usta.com/webinars.

Buddy Up Tennis (Participants with Down Syndrome): <http://buddyuptennis.com/>.

tennis programs. Organizers also recommend taking stock of who in the community identifies with an organization’s mission and wants to help further it. It’s also the way to get volunteer staff and the way to leverage the publicity a park program can provide.

“I’m a true believer in partnerships,” says Gibson. “We’re really lucky to have the support of the community. It takes a village to do what we do, what we all do.” 

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For more information about the USTA’s adaptive tennis program, contact Yasmine Osborn, USTA diversity and inclusion manager, at yasmine.osborn@usta.com. Also, the USTA will be hosting a Free webinar, titled “How to Start & Sustain Adaptive Tennis Programs in Your Community,” September 21 at 2 p.m. To register, go to usta.com/webinars (CEU credits are available).