



Mike Szostak



Pilot tennis program has taken off for school kids

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Raymond Santos, center, follows through yesterday during a game of knockout, in which youngsters take turns trying to return the ball successfully. If not, they are knocked out of the game.

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PROVIDENCE — Before she picked up a tennis racket for the first time last fall, Joely Barrios was intimidated by some of the students in the karate class she was taking.

“I used to be scared to spar with taller people. Now I’m not afraid of anybody,” she said, quietly but confidently.

No, the 12-year-old seventh grader at the Gilbert Stuart Middle School doesn’t swing a racket when she

practices karate. She approaches the challenge with confidence gained from playing tennis in a pilot program launched 18 months ago by the Providence After School Alliance (PASA) and the U.S. Tennis Association.

“Now I’m confident on my tests in school, and I’m confident in any sport,” she said.

Barrios is one of the poster girls for PASA tennis. She has attended about 100 sessions, according to Patrick Duhon, deputy director of PASA, and she has received a scholarship from USTA New England to attend a Nike Tennis Camp at Stonehill College next week.

Another star is Kimberly Urena, 14, a student at Roger Williams Middle School. She is in Washington, D.C., this week for the annual USTA/National Junior Tennis League Tennis Leadership Camp. She is one of 40 youngsters from around the nation selected for the expenses-paid trip. Criteria included tennis talent, sportsmanship, leadership skills and financial need. Campers will receive up to three hours of tennis instruction daily, visit popular D.C. destinations like The Capitol and Smithsonian Museum of Natural History and attend a Washington Kastles World Team Tennis Match.

“It’s going to be a real eye-opener for her,” said Doug Chapman, a community tennis coordinator for USTA New England and with Duhon a driving force behind the PASA-USTA partnership.

“The bottom line is we’re giving kids an opportunity they wouldn’t get otherwise, and kids are making the most of it. That’s what’s rewarding,” Chapman said.

PASA and the USTA rolled out their joint pilot program with great fanfare. Jane Brown Grimes, USTA president, came to town in March 2007 and spoke of her desire to see tennis grow in popularity among urban youth. Leaders of Rhode Island’s community tennis associations agreed to provide the coaching. Kids picked up undersized rackets and knew what to do with them: whack brightly colored foam balls. Mayor David Cicilline, who champions PASA, even took a few swings.

Nobody knew if the program would succeed, not with basketball reigning as the inner-city game and soccer and flag football sports staples, but the early returns are encouraging. According to Hillary Salmons, PASA executive director, 1,800 of the 5,000 middle-school children in Providence participate in PASA, which offers sports, arts and learning programs in AfterZone locations on the East Side and in the North End, Olneyville, West End and Lower South Providence. To the surprise of many, about 250 kids have tried tennis, and 170, or 68 percent, have stayed with it.

“The initial challenge was most of these kids never played tennis and many had never seen it. Mention tennis, and they know Arthur Ashe and Venus and Serena Williams, and that’s about it,” Duhon said.

PASA tennis players outnumber PASA basketball players now.

“I used to play basketball. Now I play tennis,” Barrios said. “I thought it was really hard, but then I started playing, and it got easier and I started liking it a lot. Now I play at home and practice. I try to remember the scoring and watch it on TV. I like Venus Williams and Serena Williams. And John McEnroe and Jim Courier.”

More on McEnroe and Courier later.

During the school year, kids play tennis with shortened rackets (21, 23 and 25 inches long), foam balls and lower nets. The ball is easy to hit, and kids love it. Joanne Macksoud of the Blackstone Valley

Community Tennis Association and Sandy Sweet of the South Country Community Tennis Association provide the instructors, each certified by the Professional Tennis Registry and a graduate of the USTA recreational coach's workshop.

"Kids are coming back to be with the staff, and they're bringing their friends who are beginners," Macksoud said.

She works with kids in Pawtucket and Cumberland, and said teaching the Providence kids "is more rewarding because these kids don't have the opportunity to hold a tennis racket. The opportunity they're getting never would have happened without PASA and the USTA."

The Providence program moved outdoors this summer. Beginners play on Mondays and Wednesdays at Roger Williams Park. Better players desiring more intense sessions show up on Tuesdays and Thursdays at Nathan Bishop Middle School on the East Side. More intense is relative. The session that occurred yesterday would never be mistaken for a two-hour hit at the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy.

"It's fun," Macksoud said. "If it's hot, we got shade. We got water. When it's too hot, we play games with the racket and ball. Even if you're just bouncing the ball in the shade, it's hand-eye coordination, and it's still a part of tennis."

PASA's summer schedule ends next week. Jennifer DuClos, program manager, deemed it a success and said of the tennis staff: "These guys are fabulous!"

The PASA tennis youngsters have done more than play tennis. Last winter a group of them toured the International Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport and saw an exhibit the HOF staff had put together for Black History Month. In addition, a group attended the McEnroe-Courier exhibition match at the Ryan Center at the University of Rhode Island and got to hit with the Hall of Famers. And a group watched the Campbell's Hall of Fame Tennis Championships two weeks ago.

"That was cool. We saw a player hit with a double-handed racket. I tried a jump serve, but I couldn't do it," Barrios said, referring to the unusual racket being promoted by the doubles team of Brian and Dann Battisone.

Where is all this heading? The USTA grant supporting the PASA program expires in January 2010, and Duhon said he and Salmons are working on other sources of funding. Chapman would like to see more outdoor courts available in the fall and spring, but understands the need for high-school teams to use them. Macksoud is convinced staff continuity is critical to the program's success.

And Joely Barrios?

"My dad said he's really proud of me for getting a scholarship to go the Stonehill College tennis camp. My whole family is proud of me," she said.

Her father Pedro lives in Venezuela. She lives in Providence with her mother Geovanny Ramos, her grandmother Mercedes Sanchez and her brothers Ibrahim and Mohammed. An older married brother lives in Canada.

Buoyed by tennis, Barrios has long-term plans.

"I'd like to go to Classical and play tennis," she said, "and then go to college and play tennis."

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