

June 27, 2007
Section: SPORTS

First Serve youths to get Bush thrill
14 program members will work at tourney Friday
Chris Umpierre

Some of the youths in her after-school program live in stressful environments. Some of them don't have father or mother figures. Some of them live in foster homes.

"We had one kid who took a knife to his hand," said Andrea Nelson, a Lee County Community Tennis Association **First Serve** instructor. "We have a kid whose 14-year-old brother is in jail. The father is on drugs. The mother is on drugs. ... We hate to say they're disadvantaged. They just need role models."

First Serve, an after-school and summer program that combines academic tutoring with tennis instruction, provides direction and life skills to youths. The program's Lee County chapter will give 14 of its members a thrill Friday at the Bush Florida Open, a national junior tennis tournament based at The Landings Tennis Club in Fort Myers.

The **First Serve** participants, who are ages 8-15, will be ball boys and girls for the Bush Open's singles and doubles championship matches. The youths trained Tuesday at J. Colin English Elementary School in North Fort Myers for their upcoming duties.

"The kids are very excited," Nelson said. "What's amazing is that Friday is a big day for field trips (for **First Serve**). There's a group going to the Naples Zoo this Friday. So a lot of these kids passed up going to the Naples Zoo to do this."

The **First Serve** members will get shorts and T-shirts, as well as a complimentary breakfast.

Asia Shepherd, 9, said that going to the Zoo wasn't an option.

"Because I really love tennis. I've been doing it for three years," she said.

But the **First Serve** program is about a lot more than tennis.

A not-for-profit organization based in Fort Lauderdale and with 22 chapters throughout the United States, **First Serve** empowers youths with the skills, values and experience they need to be responsible, productive and successful in life. The program deals with subjects such as obesity, nutrition, conflict resolution and social etiquette.

"We teach them to always look a person in their eyes when you're talking to them, to be respectful," said Nelson, who runs the program with her husband Charles on a full-time volunteer basis.

The Nelsons have seen children change drastically through **First Serve**. They've seen juvenile terrors morph into "yes sir, no sir" young adults.

"They're like my parents," Cheyenne Schmidt, 9, said of the Nelsons. "I see them three days a week. They teach us a lot."

HOW LOCALS FARED

Fort Myers' Michael Wardell is the lone Southwest Floridian still alive in the Open's main draw. The unseeded Wardell stunned No. 7 John Collins of Bowie, Md., 6-2, 6-2 in the boys' 16s division Tuesday. He will play No. 2 Harry Seaborn of North Salem, N.Y., in the quarterfinals at 10 this morning.

Naples' Peter Rispoli and Jonathan Drew lost in the boys' 18s main draw Tuesday. No. 10 Rispoli fell to No. 2 Steven Williams of Manlius, N.Y., 6-3, 7-5 and the unseeded Drew lost to No. 1 Ryan Kim of Miami 6-3, 6-0.

Naples' Chelsea Preeg, the top seed in the girls' 18s, bounced back with a win in the consolation bracket after being upset in the main draw Monday. Preeg beat Sally Wilkey of Vero Beach 6-1, 6-2 to advance to the consolation quarterfinals.

SPONSORS NEEDED

A Lee County **First Serve** squad is seeking help to fund its upcoming trip to the USTA Junior Team Tennis League regionals in Lakeland. It will cost about \$5,000. Call the Lee County Community Tennis Association, 565-5300.

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