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## First Serve turns the tennis court into a classroom on life skills

By Kristen Haunss  
Staff Writer

Posted November 30 2004

Fort Lauderdale · Roger Federer, look out. There's a new Andre in tennis.

Although 9-year-old Andre "A.J." Braziel may look up to the world's top-ranked player, with a mischievous grin he admits he could beat Federer. He has speed like Andy Roddick, pizzazz like James Blake and a return much bigger than his pint-sized stature should allow. Still, it is net play that Braziel likes best.

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Finishing 23 volleys on a recent Friday, more than the eight required, A.J. soaked in the cheers from his new friends. Then, hands in the air and a smile on his face, he celebrated.

A.J. was participating in a five-week pilot program at Riverside Park, sponsored by First Serve, a not-for-profit organization that

brings tennis and life skills instruction to inner-city youths. A.J. was one of 30 children taking part in the program and became the pilot program's first "ace."

Established in December 2003 and headquartered in Fort Lauderdale, First Serve Inc. has sanctioned chapters in 27 cities, including Miami, Jacksonville, Orlando, Washington, Houston and Minneapolis. A Fort Lauderdale chapter is scheduled to start in September.

The organization provides curriculum and training to independent tennis education programs. Its mission is to use the sport to teach children how to communicate effectively, manage emotions and demonstrate teamwork. Trey Buchholz, executive director, said the program teaches not only tennis skills but also life skills.

"It's amazing to see the kids. They get it and they understand it," Buchholz said. "We've learned from the experts that lecturing does not work. The whole concept, everything is done in action."

Designed by former members of the Stanford Research Institute,

the free program has three levels -- game, set and match -- designed to be taught over a course of a few years. In the game level, one activity asks participants to work on communication skills. To discuss teamwork, children are asked to determine which tasks would be made easier if done in a group. Other topics discussed include diversity and patience.

There is also a progression system on the court, with children's skills tested as they work their way up from the junior stars level to the master's level. After completing the program, each child is given a new tennis racket and a certificate signed by a tour player. Professional tennis stars Serena Williams, Jim Courier, Roddick and Lindsay Davenport have pledged their support to the program.

"My favorite part is seeing the impact on the kids, really being able to see all of the hard work we've put in behind the scenes have a positive impact on the lives of young people," said Robert Flader, a life skills coach and the director of chapter relations.

The Wheel of First Serve is a favorite of 10-year-old Shyla Corson. Much like the game show, Wheel of Fortune, a player spins a wheel to see how much a letter is worth, then teams work together to spell out different tennis-related phrases.

In a similar exercise on the court, children are divided into teams and told to pick up as many tennis balls as possible. Members of one group are allowed to pick up the balls at the same time, while only one person at a time from the other group is allowed to pick up balls. Buchholz said the kids immediately recognized that teamwork was the key to winning the exercise.

During the five weeks, A.J. said he has learned to "respect others and the environment," and Shyla said she has enjoyed the life skills activities. Both said they have made new friends.

"What's been amazing for me to see in such a short period of time is the drastic change in some of these kids' personalities, behaviors and confidence levels," said Chuck Matsoff, a Life Skills coach for the pilot program and the executive director of TennisPlusYouth Education Foundation, which will teach the First Serve curriculum in Fort Lauderdale. "They are much more self-confident when it comes to meeting people and have confidence in knowing how to behave."

Parents have also been noticing the benefits of the program.

"It's wonderful. She comes home every day talking about how great it is and all of the things she learned: eye contact, hand shaking, ups and downs, and tennis talk," said Cherie Fitzgibbon, whose daughter Rebekah participated. "I think they are teaching a lot of working together and respecting each other and using positive words and uplifting things like that. It has given the children a chance to be aware of their verbal communication skills."

The Fort Lauderdale program will most likely be at George English Park with 40 to 60 children participating. In the next two to three years, Matsoff hopes it will branch out to other parks in Broward County and accommodate 300 to 500 children.

As for A.J., he's just having fun. "He calls himself the 'king of the court,'" his mother, Sonja Braziel, said with a laugh.

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