

First Serves is an Ace!

SPTC's after-school program saves youth from a street life of drugs and violence

By Barbara Long



Florida's St. Petersburg Tennis Center (SPTC) boasts a Walk of Fame that immortalizes the numerous tennis legends who once graced its courts. Built in 1928, SPTC was home to the U.S. National Junior Championships for many years as well as the site of major professional tournaments that attracted the world's greatest players. In fact, Christ Evert won her first pro tournament at SPTC. Yet even an illustrious tennis center such as SPTC can lose its competitive edge and face extinction.

At the start of the millennium, SPTC was very much an endangered species. This city-operated tennis center was hardly being used, so the city council proposed razing the facility to stop further financial bleeding. The proposal rallied local tennis supporters who wanted to preserve the historic tennis facility. They formed the Tennis Foundation of St. Petersburg and convinced the city to let the newly formed nonprofit run the center and offer programs to benefit the Bartlett Park community.

Enter the First Serve pilot that provides after-school programs for inner-city youth, ages 5 to 18, with access to adult mentors, tutors, computers, and the lifetime sport of tennis in a team format. First Serve was a vision of tennis friends Arthur Ashe and Butch Buchholz, who wanted to improve the lives of inner-city children. It evolved into a collaborative effort among the United States Tennis Association (USTA), USA Tennis Florida Section, the State of Florida, and various sponsors and then into a separate entity at the end of 2003. First Serve is currently active in a dozen Florida communities and several sites in other states.

In 2001, the program's inaugural year, SPTC was selected as a First Serve site and received USTA grant money. Rick Crockett was hired as Director of Coaching and the First Serve Program. Crockett, whose resume includes nearly two decades of coaching at Saddlebrook Tennis Academy, describes his career move to SPTC as the best he ever made. "The children are all here because they want to be; they aren't being pushed. Whereas at elite tennis academies, a lot of children are being pushed."

Jim Courier - Tennis Life Magazine
SPTC First Serve started with just six children, but quickly expanded to nearly 100 students within three months. Last year First Serve provided educational and athletic opportunities to 170 young people, and is continuing to grow in its third year. From 3:00 to 6:00 p.m. each weekday, program participants go to SPTC for homework assistance and tutorial help. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, the First Serve students learn tennis provided they keep up their school grades. All First Serve participants must bring their report card to the tennis center so the educational director and volunteer tutors can monitor their academic progress.



The focused efforts and success of several participants motivated the SPTC to add an Elite First Serve program for serious tournament-level players. The original First Serve Tennis program acts as a feed into this newer fee-based program, which is conducted by skilled teaching pros who are committed to developing tennis players. In turn, students in the Elite program must be committed to intense training on and off the court.

Complementing its youth programs, SPTC offers adult leagues, clinics, and lessons. The facility generates revenue from one of its programs, annual passes, daily court fees, and donations. For the past two years USTA grants have helped with staff and programming expenses, and SPTC has applied for an educational grant from the national tennis organization for 2003. The City of St. Petersburg also is subsidizing the tennis center, gradually reducing the total amount each year. Last November, city residents voted to extend the foundation's lease for up to 20 years so that it could solicit more grant monies.

Indeed, the center has a new lease on life. Just two years ago many of the children came to SPTC dressed in street clothes rather than tennis attire. Now about 40 young people in the Elite First Serve group compete in tennis tournaments around the Tampa Bay area and prepare for possible college scholarships. "The ultimate goal is to put kids in college," Crockett said about First Serve.

Although the program hasn't been in existence long enough to realize its ultimate goal, First Serve has attracted deserving kudos from city officials and tennis pros. St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Baker says, "It's a great asset for the city and it's a great opportunity for the kids all kids." His young children attend the tennis summer camp at SPTC.

Jim Courier, former tennis professional and winner of four Grand Slams, is particularly impressed with what his long-time friend Crockett has accomplished. After spending some time with the children at SPTC, Courier called his promoter Tim Stallard to help with a First Serve fundraising event. For the past three years Stallard and Courier have organized the "Grand Slam Jam" in Austin, Texas, which raises money for the Hope Foundation for cancer research.

On March 22, Courier and Stallard will present the "Suncoast Tennis Shootout." This star-studded tennis fundraiser will feature a morning clinic for the children at SPTC, and along with Courier, appearances by top pro players Andy Roddick, James Blake, Jennifer Capriati, and Monica Seles. In the evening a tennis exhibition will be held at the St. Pete Times Forum in Tampa.

The Tennis Foundation of St. Petersburg and First Serve saved SPTC from extinction. In return, the tennis center is saving young people from a street life of drugs and violence. That service is an awesome ace many tennis organizations would love to hit!

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