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Leading by example Romero earns trip to Washington D.C. for achievements on, off tennis court

Author: SEAN DUFF

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By SEAN DUFF

SeanDuff@coloradoan.com

A Fort Collins youth tennis player has earned a week-long trip to Washington D.C. because of more success off the court than on it.

Gabe Romero, 14, leaves July 22 for the seven-day United States Tennis Association/National Junior Tennis League Tennis Leadership Camp. He was one of two kids selected from the six-state Intermountain section that includes Colorado and one of 40 boys and girls nationally.

Those selected were chosen through an application process that took into consideration their tennis talent, sportsmanship, leadership skills and financial need.

"He's a good kid and certainly deserving of this award," said Dave Boon, director of First Serve Fort Collins.

Romero, who was born in Pueblo but has lived in Fort Collins most of his life, was among a number of kids who joined First Serve Fort Collins when Boon began the program in summer 2005.

"I just started hitting (in 2005), and it was fun," Romero said. "So I stuck with the program."

The goal of First Serve, though, isn't to turn out highly skilled tennis players. It's a program designed to teach young people life skills and healthy habits through tennis.

That's what makes Romero such a perfect fit for the program. He isn't interested in becoming a

high school or college tennis player; asked what sports he played last year as an eighth grader at Lincoln Junior High School, and Romero reels off four: football, basketball, wrestling and track and field. He's spending part of this summer working out in preparation of playing football this fall for Poudre High School and another part playing in the Northside Aztlan Community Center basketball league.

"Tennis is a really good hobby, and I'll probably stick with it my whole life," Romero said. "But I'm going to play football and basketball in high school, and I want to go to (the University of) Miami on a football scholarship."

First Serve and the National Junior Tennis League have helped Romero better himself as a person first and athlete second.

"Gabe has been a real pleasure to have in the First Serve program," Boon said. "He's very respectful, helps out other kids, tries real hard. He's very coachable, has an amiable personality and is a very nice kid."

Boon said it hasn't always been easy. He said Romero let his grades slip some time ago, and they had a meeting to discuss the issue.

"He's working very hard on his grades now," Boon said. "He's a real scholar-athlete. He's working on being a good student first, a good football player second and a good tennis player third."

Said Romero: "I maintain a 3.8 (grade-point average) at Lincoln Junior High while doing all four sports. It keeps me pretty busy and keeps me out of trouble."

Keith Bell, director of diversity and community development for USTA's Intermountain section, said Romero and McKay Novak of Las Vegas were chosen from eight regional nominees.

This will be Romero's second cross-country tennis trip; he went to the 2006 U.S. Open in New York as part of a First Serve contingent. Romero also has attended a Rotary Club International youth leadership conference, serves as a United Way youth volunteer and has received several awards from the Larimer County Boys & Girls Club.

"Gabe's grown into a real leader," Boon said.

Romero said he was looking forward to the Washington trip. He'll play tennis 2-3 hours a day, but there's also time for such things as visits to the Capitol, International Spy Museum and Smithsonian Museum of Natural History and a nightly tour of the Lincoln, Jefferson, Vietnam, Korean and Iwo Jima monuments.

"I think it should be all-around fun," Romero said.

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