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First Serve dishes sports to kids

By TaMaryn Waters
DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

Chris Evans held his racket tight and bounced a yellow tennis ball against it. Even as other children jumped about the tennis court laughing, 13-year-old Chris concentrated on his serve like a tiger eyeing his next meal.

He positioned his feet along the white perimeter and sliced the cool afternoon air with his serve. The other children craned their necks to see how many times the ball bounced and where it came to rest.

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They softly clapped and shouted praise as Chris returned to the sidelines.

Twice a week, children come out to the Tallahassee Housing Authority to get a dose of basic tennis - and basic life - through the First Serve Tennis Program. The free initiative is designed to expose minority kids to a sport that has few minority athletes.



TaMaryn Waters/
Chris Evans, 13, concentrates on his next serve along with his 10-year-old sister, Indiya Walker, part in the free First Serve Tennis Program, which gives children ages 5 to 14 tips on tennis and c

"You hear basketball. You hear football. But we wanted our kids to be exposed to the not-so-popular sports," said Claudette Cromartie, executive director of the housing authority. "Before, all I did was basketball and football," said Chris, a student at Griffin Middle School.

Last week, he and eight other children graduated to the second of the program's three levels. Now, he plans to take private lessons from one of the program's coaches.

First Serve has four tennis coaches and about 40 children. They're ages 5 to 14, including Chris' 10-year-old sister, Indiya Walker. Most live in the nearby public housing, but the program is open to other children, too. It started about five years ago at the Jake Gaither Community Center and has been at the housing authority for the past two.

"We try to make them feel good about themselves," said Kelly Tucker, who leads the program. "It's rooted in tennis, she said, but it teaches skills for both on and off the court. Kids get tips on setting goals, eating well, proper hygiene and learning to others.

Chris' mother, Angela Hinton, who works as the site manager at the housing authority, admits she was surprised by his zest for tennis. She said he often goes to school talking about what he learned and how much fun he's having.

She remembers telling him one day, "Gol-ly, boy, you must really like tennis!"