

Through COVID-19, Asheville Tennis finds new approach to deliver access and equality to underserved communities

By Olivia Maddox

On a mountaintop southeast of Asheville, four 8-9-year-olds bat a tennis ball back and forth over a portable net with more enthusiasm than finesse. The children, who live in neighboring houses, have been inseparable playmates for years. And while they don't need any encouragement to entertain themselves outdoors, the pals are having fun playing tennis—a game new to them. “We're not focusing on the rules yet,” said Heather Sellers, the mother of one of them. “But hitting the ball helps with their hand-eye coordination and gross motor skill development.” Right now, the four play on an overgrown dirt court constructed by residents who lived on the mountain years ago. Sellers said they hope to play on a real court with friends in the future.

The youngsters might never have discovered tennis if not for COVID-19.

Coronavirus strikes a hard blow

As COVID-19 raced unchecked across the nation, North Carolina officials issued a statewide stay-at-home order in late March 2020, to be followed later by a three-phase, gradual lifting of restrictions. About the same time it showed up on the state's radar, Jeff Joyce, president of the Asheville Tennis Association (ATA), was preparing as usual for a year that would become anything but that.

“We were getting the tennis courts ready for our April 1 opening,” Joyce said. “We had several clinics scheduled and had budgeted to give every child who participated a free racquet and balls.” However, plans were put on hold indefinitely when the City of Asheville suspended outside groups from holding programs at its facilities, including the Aston Park Tennis Center.

As North Carolinians isolated, Joyce canceled and rescheduled events one after the other. By early summer, ATA made the hard call to scratch its full slate of programs, including clinics for all ages, socials, programs for the underserved and the Asheville Open Tennis Championships, the latter for the first time since World War II. Additionally, the U.S. Tennis Association North Carolina suspended leagues, sidelining 1,200 Asheville players who signed up for spring competition.

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“This has been a tough year, to say the least,” Joyce said. “With the global pandemic, social unrest and the economic crisis, we lacked any semblance of normalcy.” As a result, ATA's mission to promote and grow tennis for the first half of 2020 was nil.

The North Carolina Tennis Association (NCTA), the umbrella for community tennis associations like Asheville, saw the same scenario playing out across the state. In response, it rolled out an innovative game-changer that moved tennis from public courts to private homes. The Try Tennis Toolkit, which

includes a mini-net, four rackets, balls and game instructions, was designed to provide families with a way to learn and play the game at home. Additionally, the toolkits were conceived as a fundraiser for community tennis associations to sell to the public.

ATA ups its ground game

While the fundraiser looked good on paper, ATA board members felt there was a better alternative than benefitting its own coffers. Asheville's economy—heavily reliant on the hospitality and tourism industries—was particularly hard hit, the unemployment rate soaring near record levels. “With so many people out of work, asking them to spend \$150 for a tennis kit wasn't realistic,” Joyce said. “Instead, we decided to take the sport to Asheville's minority and low-income neighborhoods.”

ATA co-vice president Kate Hurley suggested finding sponsors to purchase the toolkits, then donating them to families in areas with limited or no access to tennis courts and gear. With the Asheville Open cancelled, Hurley, who also co-chairs the tournament, first approached Brian Elston Law, the Open's presenting sponsor, about diverting his funds to underwrite the toolkits. “Brian jumped at it,” Hurley said of Elston, the firm's owner and an avid tennis player. When combined with an anonymous donation and contributions received earlier in the year, ATA had the more than \$9,000 needed to purchase 75 toolkits. Joyce lobbied hard to receive the state's first shipment of toolkits and set up an assembly and distribution center in his garage.



ATA reached out to more than a dozen nonprofit organizations and government agencies in Asheville and Buncombe County to identify and select recipients. In addition, toolkits were given to Special Olympics and ACEing Autism families, Asheville Housing Authority, Asheville Parks and Recreation Rec N Roll, and Buncombe County Sheriff's Office.

“Delivering the toolkits and seeing the happiness they brought is a stark reminder to how fortunate we are,” Joyce said of the distribution, which started in early August. “This project gives ATA a way to grow the sport of tennis in a different and inventive way.”

Hurley echoed Joyce's position: “Jeff's leadership from day one has been to serve the underserved.” Joyce, who retired from the Asheville Department of Parks and Recreation, said throughout his career here and in other cities he's seen a common need to provide something of value. “We serve a lot of people who have a tremendous need,” he said. “As long as I'm here, we'll continue to do that.”

Big shoes to fill on and off court

This charge became even more vital with the 2019 passing of Lewis Isaac, described as a “true hero” for his many decades of community service. Isaac championed more than a dozen Asheville organizations

with a lifelong dedication to improving life for those in need. He was also a natural athlete who excelled at several sports. A fixture on the local tennis scene, he taught low-income kids at clinics, held ATA leadership positions and rubbed shoulders with top players at Asheville-hosted, back-to-back U.S. Fed Cups. With overwhelming community support, the City of Asheville named court No. 1—Isaac’s favorite—at the Aston Park Tennis Center in his memory.

To further honor Isaac’s legacy and raise awareness, ATA established a Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee to ensure everyone has the same opportunity to enjoy tennis and promote equality in play. In another key move, board members banded together to attend Building Bridges, a nine-week educational program to understand and combat racism in Asheville. “For us, it was a springboard to address social justice,” Hurley said. “The sessions weren’t always easy, but the experience really opened our eyes to see systemic racism in nearly every sector of society.”

Joyce and Hurley agree that those efforts in 2019 positioned ATA to address racial injustice issues that surged to the forefront during 2020. Voicing its commitment to equal opportunity in sport and society, ATA has pledged to put free racquets in the hands of children, support local African-American-owned businesses and stand with all people of color along the path toward social justice.

To this end, ATA partnered with Rec N Roll, Asheville Parks and Recreation's mobile initiative, to run tennis clinics this fall for youth in public housing areas and low-income neighborhoods. Parking lots doubled as courts for clinics, which used the Try Tennis Toolkits. Those attending learned fundamentals of the game and took home a free racquet and balls. The mutually beneficial partnership between ATA and Parks and Recreation was further strengthened as both organizations adapted to delivering programs during the pandemic.

Playing it forward

“We put 100-125 racquets in the hands of kids we wouldn’t have reached otherwise,” Joyce said. “While we’ve been frustrated by the continued restrictions caused by COVID-19, we feel incredibly fortunate to have found a way to put tennis in the forefront of our community.”

He describes one young man who attended three sessions. “He was the first one there and the last one to leave,” said Joyce, who made a surprise visit to the boy’s home to give him a toolkit. “He just lit up,” Joyce recalls. “This lets us know why we’re in this business.”

Long stigmatized as a “country club” sport, ATA is determined to show tennis can be enjoyed by everyone and for a low cost. Heather Sellers can attest: She discovered a new sport for her son and his friends after seeing a flyer for the Try Tennis Toolkit. And she’s grateful to the benefactors who wanted to share their love of tennis. “Because the toolkit is portable, I took it on a group camping trip with other families,” Sellers said. “A lot of the children had never picked up a racket before, but, thanks to the toolkit, now they have.”



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