



Wounded Warriors find healing through tennis programs

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by B.J. Coleman

(Mission Valley News, San Diego, CA) – Soldiers and veterans from around the country will arrive at the DoubleTree hotel in Mission Valley next month to take part in the third annual Wounded Warrior Tennis Camp, from May 19 to 25. The weeklong gathering is the only national tennis camp for injured, ill and wounded military service members and veterans.

The yearly camp is an offshoot of an ongoing local tennis clinic, the Wounded Warrior Tennis Program, which began in 2009 as an athletic rehabilitation option of the Balboa Warrior Athlete Program at the Naval Medical Center San Diego (NMCSDD). NMCSDD is one of three major military hospitals in the country with the resources and capacity to provide treatment for the most seriously wounded troops at its world-class Comprehensive Combat and Complex Casualty Care (C5) center. Each month, NMCSDD treats hundreds of wounded patients from all military services.

The warrior-camper tennis training and play will be assisted by volunteers at the nearby Balboa Tennis Club in Balboa Park. The event is supported locally by the San Diego District Tennis Association, which provides tennis players and instructors for lessons and friendly competition. The instructional portions of the camp will take place for four hours on each of four days, with no more than six campers per court receiving tennis lessons.

The adaptive tennis program, first of its kind, was the inspiration of co-founder Steve Kappes, a 24-year veteran of career Navy service and certified tennis instructor, who is also President of the San Diego District Tennis Association and Chairman of its Military Outreach Committee. Kappes and other members of the Balboa Tennis Club worked with medical staffers at NMCS D to develop the tennis clinic for patients.

Initially the project focused on recently combat-wounded troops from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, with half-day lessons and luncheons scheduled twice monthly. The program has since been expanded to weekly sessions and is offered to military service personnel and veterans with any service- connected disability, including illnesses and non-combat-related conditions and injuries, spanning such varied medical problems as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and traumatic brain injuries. The Wounded Warrior Tennis Program has served as a model for 11 other tennis rehabilitation programs at military hospitals and military transition units around the United States.

“San Diego’s is the only tennis organization in the country that does this,” says Kappes, calling this a “signature program” of the local group.

The Wounded Warrior Tennis Camp sprang from that rehabilitation program, as a once-yearly event open to similarly recovering learner-players from throughout the United States. In planning for the first Wounded Warrior Tennis Camp in 2012, event committee members believed the project could be deemed successful if 10 to 15 applicants expressed interest. More than 40 applications came back from applicants in 17 states. The United States Olympic Committee kicked off fundraising for that initial gathering, with a \$15,000 grant that was funded by the Veterans Administration. This year’s application process concluded on March 31, and the committee expected over 75 campers to be selected for the camp, coming from 26 states.

injuries, wounded warriors and their families experience added financial challenges as well. All event-associated costs will be covered for tennis campers and their caregivers,

including airfare, lodging, meals, local transportation, tennis equipment, social events and incidental expenses. The total cost per camper or caregiver runs around \$1650. Grants partially funding the 2014 camp have been provided by the United States Tennis Association and Disabled American Veterans. The organizing committee is also requesting individual monetary and in-kind donations through Tennis Lovers for Charity. Sponsorship opportunities are available for organizations and businesses too — contact volunteer coordinator Cara Beltran at (760) 271-5019 or carabeltransd@gmail.com for more information.

Recreational therapists report that therapeutic benefits from the tennis program include improvements in eye-hand coordination, balance, endurance and ability to transfer weight. On the psychosocial side of recovery, tennis enhances learning capabilities by teaching the patients a new sport, promotes socialization, decreases stress and anxiety, and helps with re-integration into the community.

Tennis clinics for patients are offered in San Diego every Monday from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. on the tennis courts at NMCSO. Participation in free tennis clinics can be scheduled at the Balboa Tennis Club by contacting the San Diego Tennis Association, with this program open to any wounded, ill, or injured service member, veteran or family member, and tennis novices are welcome.

More information on the program activities can be found at [facebook.com/sdwoundedwarriorstennis](https://www.facebook.com/sdwoundedwarriorstennis). The San Diego District Tennis Association is located at the Balboa Park Tennis Club facilities, 2221 Morley Field Drive, and can be contacted at (619) 299-8647 or www.sandiegotennis.com.