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TENNIS. A NEW REALITY.



Wounded Warriors armed with racquets for rehab

by Jill Phipps, USPTA staff writer

November 2010 -- As injured service members return from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, communities across the nation are helping these local heroes rebuild their lives.

With tennis professionals in their court, some California-based veterans have discovered that a racquet is a good tool for both rehabilitation and lifelong recreation.

The San Diego tennis community and the local military hospital have joined forces to sponsor the "Wounded Warriors" tennis program.



Wounded Warriors join forces with San Diego teaching pros.

Members of the United States Professional Tennis Association, with help from experienced club players, are offering free tennis clinics twice a month at Balboa Tennis Club in San Diego.

Geoff Griffin, USPTA Professional and tennis director at Balboa Tennis Club, started the Wounded Warriors program in conjunction with Naval Medical Center San Diego in November 2009.

One year later, Wounded Warriors tennis is still changing lives. "Therapists tell me that what we are doing is helping the soldiers a lot," Griffin said. "We are told to be tough but kind. We teach them the sport, make it fun and try and kick their butts a little. That's what they need."

Steve Kappes, USPTA Professional and retired naval officer, said the program "has hit its stride and has a bright future." He cited "the strong partnerships that have developed between the USPTA pros, the Naval Medical Center and the local tennis community, and the positive impact it's having among the injured service members."

"Geoff and the Balboa Tennis Club donate the court time, provide loaner racquets and the teaching equipment (ball carts, balls, hoppers, etc.)," Kappes said. Also, about a dozen club members are core volunteers who assist both on and off court.

Naval Medical Center San Diego, located just half a mile from the club, provides participants with bus transportation from the hospital and sports wheelchairs for those who need them.

Volunteers from the Armed Services YMCA serve free lunches after the clinics, made possible by individual donations, and local caterers also have contributed some lunches, Kappes said. "Club members bring extra tables and chairs so everyone can eat lunch together under shade trees near the courts and get to know each other better."

The sessions frequently draw between 20 and 30 men and women - and an occasional therapy dog - from not only the Navy, but the Marine Corps, Army and Air Force. They receive instruction and participate in game-based drills using a variety of equipment, including transition balls.

In addition to Griffin and Kappes, USPTA Professionals Dennis Stojewa, Jayner Foronda and Shelley Susman also have been helping, as well as applicant Justin Grove.

"As a pro, these clinics really test one's creativity since the range of injuries is diverse," Kappes said. "Many players have been in extreme combat situations and have had multiple surgeries. Some have lost limbs and use chairs or prostheses, but others are dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injuries, which are not as easy for the pros to recognize. What's amazing to me are the players' positive attitudes and determination to succeed. They are an inspiration to the pros, the club members and each other."

Tennis is one of more than 20 wide-ranging sports and fitness activities that the Naval Medical

Center offers patients through its Balboa Wounded Athlete Program, including swimming, spinning, salsa dancing, rock climbing, golf and yoga.

Several of the tennis students have gotten hooked on the game, buying racquets, taking additional lessons from volunteers and playing on their own.

Marla Knox, a recreation therapist for the Balboa Wounded Athlete Program, said tennis has become one of the more popular - and effective - forms of sports-related therapy.

"The pros and volunteers are great with the patients. They are able to break down various drills so that everyone feels some sense of success and accomplishment," Knox said. Tennis has helped the players with eye-hand coordination, balance, endurance and ability to transfer weight, which has meant improvement at tasks such as standing up from a wheelchair.

In a thank-you e-mail to the tennis pros and volunteers, Knox wrote that she was glad to see one Wounded Warrior stand up for a short time on his prosthetics and hit the ball. "He was at first apprehensive, but he gained more and more confidence with each ball he hit.

"Tennis promotes socialization, decreases stress and anxiety, and helps with reintegration into the community," the therapist said. "I hope it is an activity they will continue to play individually, with friends and family, post-discharge."

Kappes shared "one of the most compelling and inspiring comments" he has received from a service member. That Wounded Warrior said: "I'm really enjoying learning to play tennis. I'm usually in a constant state of pain, but when I'm on the court with all of you, all the pain goes away."

"It is extremely rewarding," Kappes said. "I completed my Navy career in 2008 after 24 years of service, and this is one small way of giving back to those who have made significant sacrifices and continue to serve."

Many members of the Balboa Tennis Club also have contributed, Griffin said, and the USTA donated 80 tickets for the Warriors to attend the Fed Cup in November.

Two other San Diego facilities have responded in the program's time of need. Carmel Valley Tennis Club and the Pacific Athletic Club held events that raised thousands of dollars and helped the program "get back in the black" with the lunches for the Warrior clinics, Griffin said. USPTA Pros who helped with the Pacific Athletic Club fundraiser included Tom Shea, Debbie Ouye, Jeff Williams, John Chanfreau, Leo Bravo and Jim Ault.

"I hope this will inspire other USPTA pros around the country to come up with ideas of their own," Griffin said. "A hundred little efforts like ours can become a massive USPTA effort."

For information on starting a Wounded Warriors program, e-mail Geoff Griffin at griffintennis@msn.com. Those who would like to join the San Diego effort may make tax-deductible donations toward the lunches provided for clinic participants. Checks may be made out to Armed Services YMCA Recreational Therapy and sent to: Marla Knox, Health and Wellness Department, Naval Medical Center San Diego, 34800 Bob Wilson Drive, San Diego, CA 92134-7105. Or e-mail Steve Kappes at stevekappes@hotmail.com for assistance.

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