



East County resident inspires Wounded Warrior Tennis Camp award

 BJ Coleman  Wed June 04, 2014 07:30pm



Sgt. Lam Le was a promising athlete and scholar when he graduated from high school, moving immediately to enlist in the United States Marine Corps in 2008, with a desire to serve his patriotic duty protecting the country. He was set for deployment with the 1st Maintenance Battalion, based out of Camp Pendleton, when he was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, a bone cancer that took one of his legs, and then took his life on May 5.

Le, a resident of Rancho San Diego, served with the Wounded Warrior Balboa Battalion during his treatment until he was medically retired from the Corps two years ago. Tennis became his favorite rehabilitation sport. Steve Kappes, a 24-year veteran of career Navy service and certified tennis instructor, 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 met Le while working with medical staffers from the Balboa Warrior Athlete Program at the Naval Medical Center San Diego (NMCS) to develop a tennis clinic for patients.

The Wounded Warrior Tennis Program began in 2009 as an offering to injured, recovering service members, focusing on recently combat-wounded troops from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, with half-day lessons and luncheons scheduled twice monthly.

“San Diego’s is the only tennis organization in the country that does this,” said Kappes, calling this a “signature program.” of the local group, which has served as a model for 11 other tennis rehabilitation programs at military hospitals and military transition units around the United States.

Kappes was impressed with Le's upbeat attitude and personal warmth as he engaged tennis with a passion, to improve his quality of life. Le helped inspire an offshoot of the ongoing local tennis clinic, a yearly tennis camp drawing participants from throughout the country to the only national tennis camp for injured, ill and wounded military service members and veterans. The Wounded Warrior Tennis Camp was hosted here from May 19 - 25 for the third gathering of this annual national tennis-instruction event. Le had won the first tournament and played in both earlier camps. The Friday night banquet concluding formal event ceremonies was also site of presentation of the first Sgt. Lam Le Inspiration Award to the tennis camper who most inspired his fellow players.

That first-ever award was given to James Akaka, who hails from Honolulu, Hawaii, and prefers to be known as "Kimo." He received a plaque bearing his name and date of the award, and his name was engraved on the perpetual award that will be housed on display at the Balboa Tennis Club. Kimo stood out among the 55 campers of the "3rd Annual National Wounded Warrior Tennis Camp," for his determination and his open friendliness. Kimo, a former Navy Seal, suffered a stroke and "flat-lined" for 15 minutes. He can no longer speak, but he communicates with gestures and he played tennis from a wheelchair.

The event is supported locally, with the San Diego District Tennis Association providing tennis players and instructors for lessons and friendly competition. The instructional portions of the camp took place for four hours on each of four days, with no more than six campers per court receiving tennis lessons. The majority of participants were straight beginners at tennis, according to Kappes. They finished out the week playing points, in a friendly round-robin tournament, competing in three divisions, one reserved for those using wheelchairs. Drawn from all four branches of military service, the campers ranged in age from 21 to 77, coming from 20 states including Alaska, Florida, and New York. Kappes congratulated the gathered group members, saying "Thank you for being such good sports, and being willing to try something new."

Le's widow, Holly Anne Macarenas, helped present the award to Kimo, saying to the assembled campers, "The one thing that stands out the most is love. Le and I were taken in like family here. And the experience of playing tennis made him a happy man." Of the newly minted award inspired by her husband, she declared, "This recognizes those who live out their lives genuinely, fearlessly, fully."

The camp was hosted by the San Diego District Tennis Association, NMCSA, the Balboa Tennis Club, and was made possible by the San Diego business community, support organizations, and generous individuals. Volunteer coordinator Cara Beltran, who has played tennis for many years, said of being involved, "This was extremely rewarding, to participate in benefiting so many people, especially the heroes of our nation, paying them back a little. Everyone rallied together, and the volunteers were very appreciated."

The DoubleTree Hotel on Hotel Circle South hosted the campers. All expenses were paid, including airfare, lodging, meals, local transportation, tennis equipment, social events, and incidental expenses. The total cost per camper or caregiver ran around \$1650. San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer issued an official proclamation of May 23, 2014 as "Wounded Warrior Tennis Day." Anthony George, the

mayor's community representative, said, "Having everyone come to San Diego all expenses paid is great. It's what San Diego is all about."

Free drop-in tennis clinics are offered in San Diego every Monday from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. on the tennis courts at NMCSD. Participation in the expanded program is 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://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.