

Caring For Warriors

by Mark Winters

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Geoff Griffin, the San Diego dynamo who is the Director of Tennis at the Balboa Tennis Club, hosted the inaugural Military Tennis Camp. The “learn tennis” activity for veterans who sustained war injuries, was the first ever event of its kind. It brought together 47 individuals from across the country and was funded by a USTA grant that covered the participants and their companions’ travel, housing and food costs. Seven local pros assisted Griffin, who has worked with Steve Kappes, President of the San Diego District Tennis Association, organizing similar activities for some time. “I have been trained to deal with a lot, but working with those who have been wounded has really been eye-opening,” Griffin said. “The camp ran from Wednesday to Saturday. The whole idea was to introduce them to tennis, and most importantly, make sure they had fun – and they really did.”

Kappes added, “They came from 17 states, (as far away as Maine and Hawaii), and ranged in age from 20 to over 60. Some had been on the battlefields of Afghanistan, as recently as a few months ago, and a few had served in Vietnam. Their injuries were diverse – from double amputees to injuries that couldn’t be seen.

“The feedback we received, from the participants, was extremely positive. In addition, Rear Admiral Forrest Faison, the Commander of Naval Medical Center – San Diego, visited the camp. In a letter to the President of the USTA, he wrote,

“I want you to know what an impressive clinic this is and what a difference it is making in the lives of those who have sacrificed to serve our country. I saw smiles, camaraderie and true happiness amongst the wounded warriors, all of whom have had life changing injuries, but are on the road to recovery with bright futures because of outreach services like this.”

Kappes, a retired Navy Captain, is always looking to expand his efforts to help. That’s why he organized a Family Tennis Day for the annual Spring Fling at Naval Station San Diego. “Over 5,000 military and family members participated in a fun-filled day of sports, and other activities,” he said. “Following a massive Easter egg hunt, (50,000 eggs), 15 mini-tennis courts were set-up on the Astroturf covered football field. Community tennis enthusiasts got kids and their parents involved, using foam and low-compression balls and ‘right-sized’ racquets. For over four hours, balls flew back and forth while everyone discovered how delightful tennis can be, using the modified equipment.”

Camp Pendleton also served as a Kappes staging ground. "A Wounded Warrior Family Tennis Day was held there, and I want to thank Geoff (Griffin) and his teen assistants, who brought a truckload of Balboa Tennis Club's 10 and Under Tennis equipment to the site," he said. "The USTA provided the military outreach T-shirts and baseball caps that we gave away. I knew we had hit the mark when two young girls, who had never held a tennis racquet, wanted to keep rallying with their Wounded Warrior father, despite their mother suggesting that they might want to take a break and ride the ponies that were nearby. The mother eventually picked up a racquet and started playing too."

The Wounded Warrior Program in San Diego, which was initiated in late 2009, has held over 100 clinics for more than 300 veterans. Thanks to the indefatigable Kappes, it has become the model for programs that are being established at other military medical centers and warrior transition units all across the country.

"I want to thank the 60 sponsors and individuals who contributed financially, through in-kind donations, and through sweat equity to make the Military Tennis Camp a reality," Kappes said. "I'm grateful for everyone's commitment to the nation's heroes and to the Wounded Warrior Program. And I would like to offer a special thanks to the people who organized and ran the camp with me – Marla Knox, M.A. Hillier, Spike Lowndes and Joaquin Picazo, along with Geoff (Griffin). Finally, I'd like to offer that all of those who have been involved in San Diego consider it a privilege to be able to help."

Kappes proudly added, "The Military Tennis Camp caught the attention of California Congressman Brian Bilbray, who mentioned it while the House of Representatives was in session on May 31st, so now the activity is part of the Congressional Record."