



Wounded Warrior Tennis Program organizers celebrate volunteers and supporters

 [BJ Coleman](#)  Wed November 25, 2015 06:36pm

How can anyone say a proper “thank you” for participation in supporting a program that is itself a tangible way of thanking veterans for their military service? The lead organizers of the local Wounded Warrior Tennis programs did so with a Holiday Appreciation Party for volunteers and contributors who have assisted with the organization’s annual Wounded Warrior Tennis Camp. The celebration was held on Nov. 14, at the Coronado Golf Club, featuring a buffet dinner, brief updates on the group’s rehabilitative tennis programs, and music and dancing after the presentations.

Next year’s camp will be the fifth, and the event will run from May 15-21. The Wounded Warrior Tennis Camp is open to military veterans and their caregivers from throughout the United States. All expenses are paid for the campers, including air fare, lodging, meals, local transportation, tennis equipment, social events, and incidental expenses. The total cost per camper or caregiver runs around \$1650.

The yearly camp is an offshoot of a unique and highly effective ongoing sports rehabilitation program in San Diego. 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 began the Holiday Appreciation Party’s presentations.

“This started in a fairly innocuous way six years ago,” he said in describing the history of the programs. “And we’ve come a long way since then.”

Kappes stated that local tennis association wanted to promote the growth of tennis and reach out to wounded, ill and injured military service members and veterans. Kappes and other members of the Balboa Tennis Club worked with medical staffers from the Balboa Warrior Athlete Program at the Naval Medical Center San Diego (NMCS D) 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.

A key figure in developing the tennis rehabilitation program here was longtime East County resident Mary Alice "MA" Hillier. She was a professional tennis player until a devastating car accident shattered her kneecap and put her in a coma for two weeks. She later translated her athletic training and skills as a recreational therapist with the city of San Diego. She worked with a variety of disabled populations during 25 years in that position.

Hillier plays tennis recreationally now, and she serves as Wounded Warrior Tennis Camp Coordinator for the annual weeklong event.

"She helps put it all together," Kappes said.

Her duties in the role include all transportation and logistics for the campers. Finding the best airfares has been a challenging task, she disclosed. But the hardest thing according to Hillier, is choosing which camp applicants will be accepted. In the camp's first year during 2012, all those who applied were accepted. For last year's fourth camp, a total of 115 applications were submitted, and 65 spots were available. The organizers expect to have sufficient funding for 50 campers for the 2016 camp in May.

The Wounded Warrior Tennis programs have racked up impressive numbers in service. Over 700 participants have come from active duty, reservists, veterans, National Guard, caregivers and military family members. The youngest have been in their 20s, and the oldest has been a 91-year-old World War II veteran from Arizona, who learned to play tennis from a wheelchair. Campers have come from 35 states and Puerto Rico. Over 300 weekly San Diego tennis clinics have been held and are still going strong year-round.

The tennis camp 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 take place for four hours on each of four days, with no more than six campers per court receiving tennis lessons. Many are straight beginners at tennis.

"How can we tell I what we're doing is successful?" Kappes asked. He read testimonials from campers and noted the programs have produced "lots of success stories along the way."

And another way of gauging accomplishment is by the recognition these rehabilitative tennis programs have received. On Nov. 7, while the U.S. Tennis Association gathered in San Diego for the organization's yearly convention, the association selected five honorees for community service awards. San Diego's Wounded Warrior Tennis Program was given the 2015 Adaptive Tennis Community Service Award. Local government officials have taken notice too. San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer issued an official proclamation of May 23, 2014 as "Wounded Warrior Tennis Day."

The free drop-in tennis clinics have expanded and are now offered in San Diego every Tuesday from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Participation in the program has focused on patients at NMCSD and the Veterans Administration Medical Center in La Jolla, and is also open to any wounded, ill, or injured service member, veteran or family member, with tennis novices welcome. More information on program activities can be found at [facebook.com/ sdwoundedwarriorstennis](https://facebook.com/sdwoundedwarriorstennis). Donations to support the San Diego Wounded Warriors Tennis Program can be made through "Tennis Lovers for Charity." 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.

See more at: <http://www.eccalifornian.com/article/wounded-warrior-tennis-program-organizers-celebrate-volunteers-and-supporters#sthash.fGIRQgFZ.dpuf>