

Net Gain

Charleston's Courting Kids tennis program serves up life lessons for on and off the court — HELEN MITTERNIGHT



Volunteer coach Ebony Fields shows a child correct form as part of the Delores Jackson Courting Kids Program. Tennis pro Nicole Melichar (right) high fives a young player during the Tennis in the City event, held annually during the Volvo Car Open.

Most years since 2001 during the Volvo Car Open, celebrity athletes such as Serena Williams, Darija Jurak, Abigail Spears, and Nicole Melichar have taken time out from the competition to head downtown to hit, feed balls, and offer encouragement to about 100 kids for the Tennis in the City mini clinic. For some youth, it's their first exposure to the sport, organizer Nancy Heinz says. "You have kids who maybe don't have a passion for anything, and they try it and get connected to it."

Ana-Lei Kalawe remembers her first clinic, fondly. "I was amazed there were other women out there playing at such a high level," she says. "It changed the way I viewed tennis."

While the clinic was a highlight for the now 19-year-old Morgan State University freshman, tennis became a year-round commitment because of the Delores Jackson Courting Kids Program. Kalawe is studying biology and chemistry, thanks to a tennis scholarship she says she might never have received without the

lessons she learned through Courting Kids. "It taught me that the main thing is patience. Nothing is going to come the next day. You have to be really determined. I've had off days and bad days, and I wanted to quit, but I just stuck with it."

That persistence is a hallmark of the program's namesake. In 1992, Delores Jackson wondered how she could introduce at-risk kids to the sport she loved. Her boss at the Charleston Recreation Department Tennis Center told her there wasn't money to start a program, but she was welcome to raise the funds. Jackson recalls writing so many letters that the director complained about the postage, but she made one last-ditch pitch to area supermarkets. "All of them sent me \$10 gift certificates," she says. "Then Harris Teeter called and said they had given out all their money already, but they had sent it along to their parent company. I figured that was it. But the next thing I know, Mayor Joe Riley is calling me to say I just got a grant from the Paul Newman Foundation for \$12,000.

That's how the program started."

Jackson, now retired, says the first year of the Delores Jackson Courting Kids Program, hundreds of children showed up to learn about tennis from volunteer tennis pros and "balls were flying everywhere." When the then Family Circle Cup moved to Charleston, it partnered with Courting Kids to offer the Tennis in the City clinic to encourage children to play the sport and introduce them to role models for success.

Now, the city budgets for Courting Kids, and hundreds of children and youth, ages five to 17, play tennis three out of four seasons, says Peggy Bohne, who runs the program. The players are still learning lessons on the court that are just as valuable once the match is over.

"You have to call your lines and be fair and honest," Bohne says. "It's an individual sport so there's no one else to blame. You have to figure out a way to win that match and be nice doing it. And you go shake the person's hand when you're done with a match and say, 'Good game.' There's a lot to learn from tennis."