

## TENNIS LETS HIM SERVE HIS STUDENTS

MAUREEN KELLY Staff writer

He has come a long way from retrieving tennis balls from the weeds that surrounded Alexander Street Park in Cohoes.

As a young boy, Bill Ciejka spent most of his free time shooting hoops or playing pick-up basketball at the neighborhood Park. He also chased stray tennis balls.

Today, Ciejka hits more balls than he chases as the head tennis pro and General Manager of the Tri-City Fitness Club in Latham.

But, tennis hasn't always been the sport of choice for the 31-year old Ciejka. He was a standout baseball player at Catholic Central High School and Hudson Valley Community College.

Now Ciejka has put baseball behind him and has worked at the Club for over 10 years being named General Manager in September of 1999.

"A lot of people tell me I've got the greatest job in the world and I do," said Ciejka, whose daily duties include six hours of instruction.

"Hey, I get to wear shorts and hit a ball all day."

Ciejka got the bug to try his hand at tennis after he and his father were visiting Central Park in Schenectady in 1988. Ciejka, then a CCHS junior, caught a glimpse of an OTB Tournament being played.

"That really motivated me," said Ciejka. "Before that I thought tennis wasn't so physical of a sport, but after watching that tournament, I realized it was a great sport and a very physical sport.

"Tennis is so much more individualistic (than baseball). There's nothing better than playing someone better than you and trying to figure out what you have to do to beat them."

After graduating from Hudson Valley in 1993, Ciejka had no definitive plans to further his education, but, while playing tennis in Albany's Washington Park one day, that all changed.

On the next court to Ciejka was Saint Rose tennis coach Stewart Curtis.

Curtis and Ciejka ended up hitting balls.

Two days later Ciejka enrolled at St. Rose and went on to play No. 2 singles and No. 1 doubles.

Ciejka considers himself an advanced player, but not exceptional and a better instructor than a player.

"I'm self-taught, so that helps me when I teach," said Ciejka, who won many area tournaments including the Tri-City Open in 1991. "I understand my clientele. People don't like the traditional lessons. They can be boring. I want to work them and keep them motivated."

Ciejka would like to take some credit in helping to develop women's tennis in the area.

"I like to help (women) beginners get up and running," said Ciejka, who also serves as the Wolferts Roost Country Club's tennis pro during the summer months. "It's especially rewarding to see them get into competitive levels like U.S.T.A."

Ciejka was Marilyn Leslie's first coach when she picked up a racket for the first time 10 years ago.

"I just think he's wonderful," said Leslie, a Clifton Park resident who has become a very competitive player at the club. "I just love his drills and his feedback. He taught me so much and he has such a nice way with new students."

Ciejka first began teaching youths. Among some of the talented players he instructed are Columbia High School's Jen Daigle, now at Providence College and Shaker's Ashley Jordan and Holy Names' Liz Clemente, both at St.

Michael's College.

"I've worked with a lot of people with a lot of talent," Ciejka said. "I'm very fortunate to have great members here (at Tri-City) and a great staff to work with."

Ciejka is sure to coach a few more youngsters.

He and his wife Kristin have a nine-month old daughter Gabrielle and are expecting another baby in June.

"I've already put a racket in her hand," said Ciejka of his daughter.

