

Latham's 'Tennis' is Champ

Published: Saturday, June 20, 2009

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Latham Life

LATHAM—If what Billie Jean King said is true, “a champion is afraid of losing. Everybody else is afraid of winning,” then Joe Clemente is champ at keeping more than 1,500 members on the tennis court at Tri-City Fitness.

“Almost every year we send teams to national competitions where they usually finish among the top teams in the country,” said Clemente, the owner of the largest indoor tennis facility in the country.

The Albany-based women's 3.5 team 'Life is Good' team recently rose to national champions in the United States Tennis Association (USTA) in Tuscan, AZ after defeating tough teams from Northern, Southern California and the Pacific Northwest.

“We also boast one of the largest World Team Tennis franchises in the country with over 100 teams at all levels,” Clemente said. “WWT is owned by Billie Jean King. WWT is a great format consisting of teams made up of both men and women. It is great competition and a great social outing.”

Tri-City Fitness was the first indoor tennis facility in the area that opened four indoor courts in 1969. “I approached the local owners of Tri City and Capitaland Racquet clubs and purchased both facilities,” he said. “We eventually realized that there were not enough tennis players to support two clubs so in 2003 we merged both clubs into our Latham facility.”

Clemente like many others fell in love with tennis during the Jimmy Connors era and wanted to get more involved with the sport. With 24 million players—4.75 million of them frequent—the sport is not quite where it was at its peak in the 1970s, according to USTA, when it had as many as 32 million players. However, it's close to golf and growing despite many more athletic and recreational choices for people these days.

The most prestigious event in tennis, The French Open, finished last week with surprising Swede Robin Soderling besting Fernando Gonzalez in the men's semi-finals. As far as comparing the level of play, there is a big difference Clemente said in the modern game. “Today, the players are faster and stronger and they play a game loaded with complexities and strategies, which were not around 40 years ago,” he said. “Also their equipment allows them to make shots that they were unable to make with wooden racquets.”

An ever evolving sport, tennis once belonged to the privi-

leged classes Clemente said that learned how to play at country clubs. Today, the playing field has been leveled. Thanks to the variety of grassroots programs that allow anyone interested the chance to play.

“The results have been players like the Williams' sisters and Rafael Nadal who is from a small island off the Spanish coast,” he said. “We have seen tremendous growth in the last few years especially in the junior markets. Parents realize that tennis is a sport for life for their children. Tennis has so many advantages for children and adolescents. It provides a great way to stay in shape while teaching respect and self confidence.”

With group and private lessons, fitness clinics, tournaments, junior league and summer camp, there are many opportunities for members to improve their game. Players in clinics meet with a professional on staff to work on the fundamentals.

“We have hundreds of kids in our Junior Program,” Clemente said. “Each kid is hopefully trying to make it into our 'junior elite program.' The elite program consists of junior players that are striving to play at a tournament level and eventually play at the college level.”

Anybody can be a good tennis player if they are willing to practice. Clemente said that it is a game of strokes and like golf the better your strokes the better you play. There are so many different levels of players that Clemente believes that virtually anybody can walk on a court and compete the first day.

“We have senior leagues in which we have people in their 80's show up who have never held a racquet before and within a few weeks they are hooked, playing three times a week,” he said. “All it takes to play is the desire to learn. Anybody can become a great player.”

Tri-City Fitness isn't just about tennis; the gym is open to people who want to be in good shape. The new fitness centers have a weight room with Nautilus second stage circuits and cardiovascular theaters and equipment that include treadmills, Stairmasters, Precor Elipitical Trainers and the Arc Trainer.

The tennis camp runs from June 22 until August 28. Between the ages of five to 17, beginners as well as skilled players are encouraged to join.

More information about Tri-City Fitness, located at 944 New Loudon Road in Latham, visit www.tricitytennis.com or call 785-4311.