

IF YOU'RE LOOKING FOR TOP-NOTCH TENNIS in Kalamazoo this summer, you don't have to stick to the Kalamazoo College courts.

"The Radisson is our headquarters hotel," said Greg Ayers, president and CEO of tourism boosters Discover Kalamazoo. "The majority of the players stay there for the week."

The United States Tennis Association Boys' 18 and 16 Tournament is held in Kalamazoo August 8 to 14 this year. The majority of the tennis matches played by high school-age competitors will be at Stowe Tennis Stadium at Kalamazoo College, though some will play at courts at Western Michigan University. Volunteers prepare the matches and get the sites ready for players a week before they arrive, but the players themselves are in town for seven days or more. That's seven days when they have to eat, sleep and prepare for their next duel on the court.

The tournament first came to Kalamazoo in 1943, and Kalamazoo College built Stowe Stadium in 1946 to keep the contest in southwest Michigan. It's been there ever since. The college, the city of Kalamazoo, and the USTA work together year after year to keep the tournament in Kalamazoo as it continues to grow; about 200 players are scheduled in each round this year, and more are anticipated for the 2017 tournament. The contests bring players from around the country to compete, and it's also a place for college coaches to scout out new recruits. This year, coaches from

about 65 universities are expected to attend. The tournament's participation is nationwide — according to the USTA website, of the approximately 400 players who participated in 2015, only nine were from Michigan, with only two who could go back to their own homes each night: one from Kalamazoo and one from Portage.

With hundreds of players, coaches, parents, volunteers and officials involved, finding a place for athletes to stay is a must. Ayers said Discover Kalamazoo collects room rates for local hotels and passes them on to the USTA, which helps coordinate the living arrangements for the week players are in town. Most do stay at the Radisson, and the tournament provides a shuttle service from the hotel to the courts at Kalamazoo College and WMU. One night is a party for players at the Radisson, and another evening is a neighborhood picnic hosted by the West Main Neighborhood Association. But the rest of the week is open for the players and their families to explore Kalamazoo — though most of the time they're hanging around the tennis court, even if they aren't playing themselves. Because the players stay near the courts all week, there's no special effort to promote the city's attractions to the USTA competitors or their families. Instead, the USTA tournament is a way to promote Kalamazoo as a great community, Ayers said.

"Our volunteers create an amazing experience for the players," he said. "People across the country know about the USTA in Kalamazoo, we take great pride in that."

The tournament has even made its way into the movies. "Unstrung," a 2007 documentary, followed several teen tennis players as they prepared for their final competition, the tournament in Kalamazoo. The film is available online, and its trailer is on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBVwELy_V9w). It features well-known tennis stars like Andre Agassi and John McEnroe — and, of course, Kalamazoo College.

While "Unstrung" kept the camera on a handful of players in the mid-2000s, a new set of young players comes to Kalamazoo each summer. And there's always an audience for the tournament. Most attendees are local, just coming to watch a few matches during the week, though more than 1,000 volunteers are part of the tournament, both on and off the court. Each year, a "junior clinic" is held for pre-teen tennis enthusiasts at Kalamazoo College.

The USTA Boys' 18 and 16 Tournament has been held in Kalamazoo for more than 70 years. Fans of the game have been excited about it since the inaugural competition. But Ayers says even people just curious about what makes Kalamazoo so active just before students head back

to school can enjoy what they see. "Even if tennis isn't your sport, it's good to support the community," he said.



You can see more of Andrew Domino's writing at www.dominowriting.com