

All For Love

Women volunteers support Kalamazoo's annual tennis tournament

BY ANDREW DOMINO

“I remember trading recipes with Chrissie Evert's mother,” said Billie Hayward of Vicksburg, the player card committee chair for this year's United States Tennis Association Boys' 18 and 16 Tournament. As a long-time volunteer for the tournament, she's seen famous tennis players in the audience, watched thousands of young athletes on the courts, and made many, many friends.

“A lot of times, you'll sit next to someone and make friends,” she said. “You're sitting there for two or three hours, watching a match. We all share tennis as an interest.”

The tournament is the only event of its kind in west Michigan. Players in two groups, 18 and under and 16 and under, come from around the U.S. to compete over 10 days at Stowe Tennis Stadium at Kalamazoo College. They also use the tennis courts at Western Michigan University, and have indoor courts if the weather is bad. This year, Hayward said, there are 196 players in each round, and even more are expected in next year's tournament.

They compete in singles and doubles matches, often playing multiple times each day. The contests can take players far in their tennis careers — the overall champions each year are automatically entered in the U.S. Open. The 2016 tournament is scheduled for August 5 to 14, though volunteers will be taking part week before any matches begin, Hayward said. The tournament is a place for high school-age players to test their skills, and attract the attention of college coaches hunting for recruits.

To keep up with that many young players, parents and coaches, the USTA needs a team of more than 1,000 volunteers over the two weeks of the tournament, including set-up and the tournament time itself. There are 1,456 people available on the event's volunteer list.

Some won't participate this year because of other commitments, but Hayward said it's rare for someone to leave the list. Many people come back year after year to help make the tournament a reality.

There are three main groups of volunteers: the ones dealing with the games, like ushers, ticket sellers and ball runners; organizers for the annual parties for the players and for their parents; and a group that handles registration for the tournament. They even get local businesses involved. Some of the families stay at Kalamazoo-area hotels, and a local print shop provides lists of the next day's matches, printed the night before. All the help is provided by volunteers, and Hayward said it's because organizers work hard to put people into the right spot.

“We find a position where you can succeed,” she said. “Not only do you feel like you're doing something, you are. You're there for the love of the tournament, and a love of the game.”

The tournament started in Kalamazoo in 1943, and Hayward said she's been involved with tennis and

the tournament for about 40 years, volunteering in different roles. About 80 percent of the volunteers are women, from girls who climb ladders to change the scoreboards to the San Francisco-based photographer who returns to Kalamazoo every year to take pictures of the tournament. Some volunteers are retirees, or women who don't work outside the home, but Hayward said others change their work schedule to spend time at the tournament. Several local businesses also contribute volunteer teams on Saturdays and Sundays.

The tournament is always open to new volunteers, and Hayward said she finds many recruits in the stands.

“I see mom watching, I sit down next to her and say, ‘So, you like tennis?’”

Even with all the volunteer work, Hayward said she has time to enjoy some of the matches. She says better training has made for an increasingly better game.

“The game has improved,” she said. “The young men are more physically fit. Last year at the championship they played a full five-set match. Stamina figured into it — and at the end they put their arms on each other's shoulders.”

To volunteer with the USTA Boys' 18 and 16 National Tournament, visit ustaboys.com.



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