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Back in the game

Baltimore revives the Junior Open Tennis Tournament, a once-thriving contest that had been on hiatus for 30 years

By Arin Gencer

Sun Reporter

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Late yesterday morning in Druid Hill Park, Wayne Collier handed his son tennis gear.

"Here you go, champ," he said to Austin, 8, who was preparing for the day's singles match.

This caught the attention of coach David Owens, who stopped and smiled at Collier.

"Champ' - that's what I like to hear," Owens said. "It's a good way to start."

The Colliers had come for Austin's first tennis tournament. The competition, which took place this weekend under a bright blue sky on the courts near Safety City, marked the revival of the Junior Open Tennis Tournament, a once-thriving annual event held by the city Recreation and Parks Department about three decades ago.

Children ages 8 to 18, from the Baltimore area and beyond, were drawn to the United States Tennis Association-sanctioned event - including several student athletes from a summer tennis camp started by Owens, a theology teacher and tennis coach at St. Frances Academy in Baltimore.

"This was a huge tournament," said Owens, who also organized it with the help of tournament co-director and professional tennis player Michael Fowler. "It had one of the largest draws in the country."

Bringing the event back, he said, was driven by a desire "to increase programming for young people in tennis," he said. "The idea is to get this ... back to the level that it was."

But much like the camp he started more than 10 years ago, he added, "it was about more than just tennis." The young athletes, who come from a mix of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, learn social skills and how to interact, he said.

They were learning on historic ground: The courts where they played were in an area once designated for blacks during the days of Jim Crow; the park was the site of a 1948 integrated match that ended in



arrests.

Owens has also sought to encourage kids to draw from their experiences on the court.

"At the end of the lesson, there has to be some type of assessment," said Owens yesterday morning, as he arranged a table laden with bagels, oranges, bananas and coolers of water for the incoming athletes.

In tennis, that assessment is a match. And for many, the tournament was a first test, and a lesson in the spirit of competition: the art of winning with grace and rising from defeat.

Mark Gonzalgo of northern Baltimore sat in a fold-out chair yesterday afternoon, filming his son's match with Austin Collier, who lives in Laurel. Matthew Gonzalgo, 8, started playing tennis in January, his father said.

"You're trying to find a sport that a kid will enjoy," he said, explaining the choice of tennis. Gonzalgo enjoys the sport himself, he said, which makes it "like a family thing."

This year, the competition was a family affair for many, with parents and younger siblings often accompanying the athletes to their events, monitoring their progress and, at times, coaching them as they played.

"Everybody here has a family behind him," Owens said.

Krista and Elizabeth Jiranek of Hereford warmed up before their singles matches yesterday under the watchful eye of their parents.

"Bend your legs, sweetie," Jean Jiranek said to Elizabeth, 8, who was smoothly hitting balls across the net to her father, Rick. "There you go."

Both Jiranek parents also kept an eye on Krista, 11, who practiced her serve on an adjacent court.

"Good serve, Krista!" her mother said at one point.

"I just like to get motivated and move a lot," said Krista, describing why she likes the sport she has played for about four years.

About 30 children participated in the weekend competition, with 15 playing yesterday, Owens and Fowler said. Owens expects that those numbers will grow next year, when he plans to seek sponsors and hold the tournament in Patterson Park.

For George Campbell, this year's event provided an opportunity for his daughter, Myoni, to see other children of color on the tennis court. While the Williams sisters are encouraging, the Elkridge resident said, he'd like kids to see more such athletes, as they already can in sports such as baseball.

"It would be an image booster," said Campbell, who added that he entered his 10-year-old in the event to "give her that competitive hunger."

"You've got to get out there and get dirty," Campbell said. "The whole reason why you're out here is for you to lose - and then for you to win."

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