

Mitch and Friends Benefit helps introduce tennis to special needs athletes

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
August 9 2017 5:49 AM





EDWARDSVILLE — One of the biggest features of the Edwardsville Futures tennis tournament is its commitment to community involvement. One of the ways it does that is with the annual Mitch and Friends night, where those with special needs play with volunteers and the pro players in the tournament.

The seventh annual Mitch and Friends night, this year presented by the Bob Emig Foundation, was held on Sunday night at the Edwardsville High School Tennis Center, and definitely was the most successful yet. An estimated 75 participants turned out have fun and play the game with four of the players involved in this year's tournament and members of the EHS boys' and girls' tennis teams.

“Everybody had a good time,” said Tournament Director Dave Lipe said that night. “The music was going, there was a lot of energy, we had pizza, we had hats, we had T-shirts, all this was free for the athletes. Our community involvement game has to be on point for us to survive, and it's a big part of what we are and who we are, and this is one of the ways we give back to the community, in involving a bunch of athletes who have special needs, and who at times have had limited opportunities. And tonight is our big celebration night, but we have Mitch and Friends throughout the year, and that's an important thing.

“That's a piece of this, not just a one night thing,” Lipe continued, “where it's 'OK, good bye, see you next year,' but throughout the year, we have Mitch and Friends, and that's the goal, is to provide an opportunity for people to play tennis year round, not just once.”







Another goal of Mitch and Friends is to give anyone with any kind of special need—physical, mental or emotional—the chance to play the sport.

“We don't differentiate by need, we don't classify by need,” Lipe said. “If an individual has a special need, we accommodate him or her. It could be emotional, physical, psychological, it doesn't matter to us. We want to do what we can to work with the athlete, and give him or her a chance to enjoy this game in his or her own way.”

The presenting sponsor of the night, the Bob Emig Foundation, was named for the late sportswriter of the old Metro-East Journal, and fits within its goals of getting kids involved in sports.

“I'm so privileged and honored, actually, that our foundation can be involved with this program,” said Aaron Emig, founder and president, and Bob Emig's son. “Most people don't know who my dad was, but he was a big believer of giving any kid, no matter what level they were or whatever, an equal opportunity to participate in sports. We're so grateful that we were invited to participate, being the presenting sponsor.

“And I know my dad's looking over us, and he'd be crying actually,” Emig also said with a laugh.”

At the Metro-East Journal, Emig was a part of a great staff that over the years included long-time sports editor Arnold Irish, Mart Koivastik, and current Los Angeles Times sports editor and prominent pundit Bill Plaschke, among others. What some may not realize is when he got started as a sportswriter.

“It's kind of amazing that, my dad was a pretty humble person,” Aaron Emig said, “I don't know if you know anyone who, as a junior in high school (Belleville Althoff Catholic) that was writing for a professional newspaper. But he started that when he was at Althoff. . .and he continued that until March of 1979, when they closed down, two months before I was born. And yeah, I get all kinds of stories and feedback about my dad, and it was great.

“My dad was just a very humble person,” Emig continued, “but his big thing was about just getting kids involved in sports, because he felt that was a very fundamental thing of growing in life, leadership skills, teamwork and everything like that.”

Coming out to help support the effort was Carter Rethwisch, who's known in the area as The Cardinal Cowboy, a very prominent Cardinal fan who's best known for his tireless charity work around St. Louis.

“This is a great event, we're helping a lot of great people, a lot of kids with special abilities I like to say, that really impact a lot of us,” Rethwisch said. “They want to contribute too, so here we go. We're gonna help them learn how to play a little tennis.”

Rethwisch enjoys his time working with the kids in his various projects, and knows that the foundation is a positive force in the area.

“Being involved with them, you get to see what they're doing to help kids,” Rethwisch said. “You know, a lot of times, these kids, they just want to be able to do the same thing the other kids do, And so, when they get to come out and hit tennis balls like the other kids do, and they're getting trained by some of the best tennis players in the world, it's really impacting for them. Most of these kids, they just want to act like regular kids, contributing and playing regular sports that everyone else gets to, so here, they really get to do that.”

The turnout for this year's event was perhaps the best it's every been, and the proverbial good time was had by all.

“It's been really awesome,” said tournament marketing director Kirk Schlueter. “I think is maybe one of the largest nights we've ever had, which is so great, because we we need a lot of support to make that happen. I really have to say thank you to the Bob Emig Foundation, which is our presenting sponsor. Aaron Emig was here, he brought the

Cardinal Cowboy along, and it's so great to see that. And so much great local support. You want support for everything, but when it's an event like this, I think local support means so much.”

The enthusiasm of the participants is a big part of the proceedings as well.

“I love seeing a bunch of smiles, I love seeing a bunch of happy faces,” Schlueter said. “There's one young man over here, who every time he hits a good shot, he holds his arms up and goes 'BOOM!' And I love seeing that. I love that enthusiasm. I think it's so great for these kids to get a chance to play some tennis and have some fun. And every time I see them having fun, it's just really, really special.”

For the players involved in the tournament, it's a chance to give back to the communities they play in.

“I think it's great for the community,” said pro player Farris Gossea, a recent University of Illinois graduate from Cardiff, Wales, currently on the pro circuit. “We try our best as players to kind of give back to the community, and help everyone in the tournament, so I think it's really nice for everyone who came out today to show support for the tournament and everyone who helps make it happen.”

And the positive lessons gleaned from being involved in sports aren't lost on the participants. Rethwisch, who had a promising baseball career cut short after an accident that left him in a coma, is glad to help with any organization that promotes these goals.

“As always, I'm just trying to bring attention to good organizations that are helping contribute,” Rethwisch said. “Most people know my story on how I survived. I believe I survived my coma because I played baseball, and so any sports, I believe, help kids to have that ability to learn the confidence, the ambition, the drive, the hard working skills to be able to accomplish just about anything they set their mind to. And if they'll just keep working at it, my belief is they'll get there, and sports, I think, really helps that for most of the kids.”





