



Successful Mitch n Friends Clinic introduces special needs athletes to tennis

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE – Of all of the events associated with the Edwardsville Futures tennis tournament presented by the EGHM Foundation, there's none that's more anticipated than the Mitch n Friends clinic for special needs players.

The annual event, sponsored by Town and Country Bank, was held Sunday evening at the Edwardsville High School Tennis Center, and was another rousing success. Approximately 12 players, along with 50 volunteers, participated in this year's clinic that helps introduce the game to those with special needs.

"This is a great event," said Futures tournament director Dave Lipe. "This is an event that appeals to a segment of our population that tonight is their night. And we're proud to have it. Mitch (McGinnis, for whom the clinic is named) taught me a lot about different kinds of people, and what they want to do, and what their needs are, and what their interests are. It's been my pleasure to continue to work with Mitchell and Kamali (Mitchell, a long-time participant) and the other many athletes that were out here tonight. It's something I enjoy, we've got a ton of guys and girls from the (Edwardsville High tennis) team. The team's out here tonight having a good time, too."

Which is the main idea of the clinic: Everyone has fun and plays a sport that one can play for life.

"Everyone's having fun, and everyone's learning, and everyone's getting a chance to play," Lipe said. "The motto, the unofficial slogan is 'Tennis, Everyone!' So, the folks that are here tonight aren't going to be here tomorrow night, necessarily, for the kid's clinic, and they're not going to be here for the high performance, they're not going to be for the adult clinic, this is their clinic. So, it's a big deal for these families that are here tonight, and I'm glad that they were here to enjoy it, and have fun. And Mitch n Friends is a great organization; I'm happy to be part of it."

Tournament co-director Kirk Schlueter also enjoys the clinic as well, and was very happy with the turnout.

"An absolutely amazing night," Schlueter said. "I think Mitch n Friends is probably my favorite part of the Futures every year. It's a tremendous continuation of the work we do throughout the year. A huge thanks to Town and Country Bank for sponsoring the event tonight. We had college coaches, pro players, a ton of high school players, and most importantly, the athletes themselves out here. And just a really fun-filled night, perfect weather, and a great day to play tennis."

Schlueter also emphasized the "Tennis, Everyone!" philosophy of the clinic.

“Yeah, absolutely,” Schleuter said. “The philosophy of Mitch n Friends is ‘Tennis, Everyone!’ Tennis is for everyone, and that’s something I think this organization believes, and something we believe in Edwardsville tennis. And so to have a night like this that is tennis for everyone is just really special.”

Kevin McGinnis, Mitch’s dad and a founder of the organization, also agreed that everyone who participated enjoyed themselves very much.

“We’re having a lot of fun, we’ve got a good turnout so far, and we’re excited to do this for, I believe, this is the eighth year we’ve done this in conjunction with the Futures tournament,” McGinnis said, “and a lot of people feel that this is one of the most fun nights of the week. So we really look forward to it.”

The Mitch n Friends organization started in a very simple way.

“Mitchell was the assistant tennis coach for the boys and girls for Dave for six years,” McGinnis said, “and early on, Dave really started working with Mitchell on the side, and helping him with tennis. And then we invited more people with very special needs. Dave called it Mitch n Friends. And then, five years ago was when we got organized, upon the death of my dad, there were some donations, and we rolled them all into Mitch n Friends. And that’s one of the ways we can afford doing nights like this, giving T-shirts and pizza and things like that.”

And having fun is the most important thing.

“That’s the most important to us, is having fun,” McGinnis said. “I can tell the pros that are here, and the high school students that are teaching, and our Mitch n Friends players all have a blast.”

In addition to the members of both the Tigers’ boys and girls tennis teams, five players from the pro tournament – Alex Knight, Alex Brown, Tim Kopinski, Charlie Broom and Matic Spec – served as volunteer coaches for the players. And joining them was George Husack, who’s the head coach at the University of Alabama. Husack has had many players from his Crimson Tide teams who’s helped out, but this was his first time to the clinic.

“This is the first time I’ve been to this tournament; a few of my players have participated and competed in the past,” Husack said, “and they also participated in Mitch n Friends events before.”

Husack is on a recruiting trip, and is in Edwardsville for the Futures before traveling on to Kalamazoo, Mich., for a tournament. And he agreed that the clinic is a great part of the Futures itself.

“It is,” Husack said. “I think Dave does an outstanding job involving the community in this tournament, and this is what it’s about. I always think that it’s about tennis, but it’s really not about tennis, and there’s so much to be learned beyond the game, and being involved in an event like tonight is very special.”

Some of Husack’s former players have been a part of the clinic in the past, and it’s always been a very special part of Alabama tennis.

“Actually, I told Dave there’s a group picture we have in our locker room from this event,” Husack said. “So I’m looking forward to being part of the group picture, hopefully, tonight, and we’ll send it off and replace the current photo in the locker room.”

Husack also emphasized how tennis is a sport that’s fun and enjoyable for all.

“Absolutely,” Husack said. “Tennis allows for that. It’s such an easy game for anyone to play at any level, at any age. Just smacking the ball around is great fun.”

And Husack also thinks the community involvement is very important.

“I just think that the more the community is involved, I mean, I think this is what a tournament should be – it involves everyone,” Husack said. “It’s the best thing, and the players, really, they don’t know how blessed they are to be in a place like this, under the guidance of Dave and his staff, and what he does throughout the year for this whole event.”

As for the future of the Mitch n Friends clinic, it’s very bright indeed.

“I don’t see us stopping anytime soon,” Schlueter said. “Again, I think that this is my favorite event; we have practices throughout the school year that are Mitch n Friends practices, we have this night every Futures. I don’t see this event going anywhere, I see this event continuing to be a highlight of the local tennis scene for years to come still. Every year we have this is a success, and it’s another dream for next year.”

McGinnis also agreed that tennis is a sport that anyone and everyone can play for life.

“This is a lifelong sport for everybody,” McGinnis said. “We tell our daughters who play tennis that, and we tell Mitchell that he can play this game his entire life. You don’t need big pads and a helmet to play tennis. Just a racket and some tennis shoes,” he said with a laugh.

Lipe emphasized that one of the most important things for the clinic was the personalized coaching each player received.

“These were all private lessons,” Lipe said. “These weren’t group lessons, these were private lessons to facilitate the needs of the athlete. That’s one of the key components for this program. I think it’s a great program, I believe in it, and I think the athletes that are here tonight, their families enjoyed it also.”





[Brent Feeney also contributed to this story.](#)