

'Tennis Everyone': Mitch 'n Friends is Once Again a Touching Edwardsville Features Event

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE – One of the highlights of the week during the Edwardsville Futures tennis tournament is the annual Mitch 'n Friends clinic for special needs players, which is both highly anticipated and well attended.

And the ninth edition of the clinic, held Thursday evening at the Edwardsville Tennis Center, was another huge success, as special needs players teamed up with players from the Edwardsville High boys and girls teams, some of the players from the Futures – and in one case, a reporter – to have a great time playing tennis and having fun.

The clinic was inspired by Mitch McGinnis, a longtime manager for the Tigers' tennis teams, and is also the name of the organization founded by his family that puts on tennis clinics throughout the year.

“One of the founding members of Mitch n Friends, along with the McGinnis family,” said tournament director and Edwardsville head coach Dave Lipe. “Kevin and Sharla and Mitch and a lot of other people were there at the beginning of it. When we talked about Mitch, who is the manager of the boys' and girls' tennis teams for multiple years, multiple seasons, and I learned from Mitch that he wanted to play tennis. So Mitch and I started playing tennis. So he started inviting his friends. So organically, the name and the organization came from Mitchell and his love for playing tennis. And he's just like everyone else, sometimes, he loves it, sometimes, he likes it, and sometimes, he doesn't want to play tennis. So that's just like everyone else.”

The clinic itself was born from the as a part of the futures tournament and has grown steadily since its first clinic in 2011.

“Tonight's another installment. The Futures tournament was actually kind of the birth of Mitch n Friends,” Lipe said, “so to speak, as far as having our big member event every year. And then, Mitch n Friends continues throughout the school year. So that's sort of the point of Mitch n Friends is to continue it throughout the year. We have athletes out here tonight with special needs enjoying our sport. And it's not a once-a-year thing. They're able to enjoy and play it throughout the year. And it's important for fitness, it's important for mental happiness.”

Kevin McGinnis, Mitch's father and the president of the Mitch n Friends organization, thought the attendance for the event would break a record.

“We have a fantastic turnout already,” McGinnis said. “People were here early, and are excited to play. I haven't done a headcount yet, but I think we have more friends here than we've ever had.”

McGinnis started the organization nearly 10 years ago, and is grateful for the donations for the clinic, such as T-shirts and free pizza for all of the participants, and noted the event grows every year.

“People have been generous with their donations to keep things like the T-shirts and the free pizza for this event,” McGinnis said, “and it just keeps growing. The crowd here, the fans, is outstanding. There’s a lot of people here to watch. So yeah, it’s just been an exciting run for the last 10 years or so, seeing the growth of Mitch n Friends.”

It’s a very much looked forward to the event, and it’s become one of the highlights of Futures week. McGinnis is very proud of the event’s legacy.

“Well, I think it is,” McGinnis said. “Everybody looks forward to it, Mitchell looks forward to it. He calls himself famous because he has this event named after him,” he said with a big smile, “and you know, I’ve seen improvement in a lot of the people who come here every year. They’re hitting the ball nicely, Mitchell keeps getting better, and a lot of thanks to Dave, because this was his brainchild, and it’s really grown.”

Mitch himself just likes to play tennis and enjoys being with his friends every year.

“Well, I just like to play tennis,” Mitch said, “and just got back from California, and my grandpa here, and just having fun.”

Mitch, as usual, enjoyed the clinic and thought everything was good.

“I think it looks good,” Mitch said. “I like the DJ. She did a DJ at the popcorn shop.”

The DJ was Elizabeth Gordon, and it was a first for the event to have music during the clinic. During the interview with Mitch, the 1982 Laura Branigan hit, “Gloria,” which became the St. Louis Blues’ theme song during their recent run to the Stanley Cup championship, played in the background.

“Hopefully the Blues will win the next Stanley Cup,” Mitch said, “and the Cubs will win the World Series, and the Bears will win the Super Bowl.”

Mitch always enjoys playing tennis with his friends at the clinic and is already looking forward to next year.

“Yeah, can’t wait for next year,” Mitch said, “because next year is the Summer Olympics in Japan. My dad’s sister lives in Japan, and I just watched the (United States) women win the World Cup. It was kind of exciting. Hopefully, we’ll win the next one.”

And he's also hoping the men's soccer team will win in 2022 as well.

"Hopefully, the men's World Cup will win the trophy," Mitch said.

And Mitch also has his sights set on something else as well.

"Someday, I'll become mayor of Edwardsville," Mitch said with a smile.

One of the participants in the clinic, Andrew Aramowicz of Worden, also enjoyed his time playing in the clinic and enjoys playing tennis itself.

"I like to play because it's real fun," Andrew said. "Exercise. You can hit, and play with your friends."

Andrew also enjoys being with Mitch and became interested in tennis for a very simple reason.

"All my friends have been done with it for a while," Andrew said. Since then, he's enjoyed playing the game, hitting balls with his friends, being around everyone hitting the ball and being with everyone.

"Yes I do," Andrew said. "I like being around my friends."

It's a perfect example of the Mitch n Friends slogan: Tennis Everyone.

"Tennis Everyone," Lipe said. "Everyone's out here playing tennis, no matter what one's special need may be. Everyone is included, everyone is invited to play, and it's tennis for everyone."

With the clinic's 10th anniversary approaching next year, McGinnis hopes to see the event keep growing and attracting more players and participants, a very good legacy to Mitch and the organization that bears his name.

"It is," McGinnis said. "We'll be excited; next year will be 10 years, this event, and one thing we do every year is to try to come up with new colorful T-shirts in different colors."

McGinnis told a story about the colors for this year's T-shirts, both white and pink.

"The story on the T-shirts this year is, Mitchell's sister, Annie, always wanted pink," McGinnis said. "And she knew the girls' team, the volunteers, would like pink. But Mitchell never wanted pink. He said he wouldn't wear pink, it was for girls. So we have

white and pink T-shirts this year, and they're both very colorful, and I think we did another good job of having some colorful T-shirts for the event."

Lipe is also looking to help grow the event and make it better with the 10th anniversary coming up as well.

"I think as Mitch 'n Friends turns 10, becomes double digits old, I think our mission should be to grow it and to improve upon it," Lipe said, "and not to be satisfied with anything. Anything that of which I'm a part of from a leadership perspective, my philosophy makes it better. Improve it, grow it, take it to a new level, and Mitch 'n Friends is obviously no exception."

And Lipe credited Mitch for starting the whole thing nine years ago, inspiring a movement.

"Well, Mitch was the guy," Lipe said. "Mitch was the guy who inspired the movement. He inspired the organization. So, that's where we are."





[Dan Brannan also contributed to this story.](#)