



# Diversity Day Clinic At Edwardsville Futures Celebrates Diversity, Kids From Area Partners Participate, Honors Whirlwind Johnson

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer  
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EDWARDSVILLE - The Edwardsville Futures presented by The EGHM Foundation held its first-ever Diversity Day clinic on Wednesday at Liberty Middle School's courts, and the day was a rousing success, with kids from various organizations getting the chance to play with various pros and college players, along with special guest coach Bobby Johnson, the grandson of famed pioneer Dr. Robert "Whirlwind" Johnson.

The organizations who had players involved were the East St. Louis Tennis Association, the Net Rushers Tennis Association of St. Louis, St. Louis City Tennis and the Triple A Breakpoint Tennis and Life Skills Academy of St. Louis. and all participants enjoyed themselves tremendously during the two-hour clinic.

"I'm going to start with the kids that are here today," said Futures tournament director and Edwardsville High tennis coach Dave Lipe. "The kids are having a blast. You can hear in the background how many different kids, how many different ages. I love to see all these different faces out here on the court. I'm proud to work with the four groups, four major tennis associations and organizations that brought kids over here today. I want to thank those four entities for bringing kids over and supporting with pros. I want to thank all the pros that are here today, all the coaches that are here today from those organizations. I want to thank Brent Gruno, who's the tennis director at Sunset Tennis Center in South County, a beta club, and thank Brent for coming over today and put in a lot of effort,

"And I want to thank Kweisi Kenyatte of the University of Illinois for being out here today," Lipe continued. "I think the kids were probably most thrilled to see him, more thrilled to see him than anybody else. Kweisi is a fantastic player, a great guy, and he's incredibly gracious here today, talking with adults, talking with kids. Everybody wants a little piece of Q today, and he's a fantastic, fantastic guy for doing what he's doing. The kids are having fun, and they're learning. We've got great instructors out here, real pros out here, and some people want instruction, some people want to hit, and everybody's having a good time."

The presence of Johnson was also a big plus for the clinic.

"One of the other big stars out here today is obviously Bobby Johnson," Lipe said, "the grandson of Dr. Robert Walter Johnson, representing the Whirlwind Johnson Foundation. Bobby's graciously came all the way out here from his home in Maryland to continue his grandfather's legacy of inclusion and opportunities. And we're glad we are proud to partner with him and the Whirlwind Johnson Foundation as well. All of this is orchestrated through School District 7, Dr. Cornelius Smith is our associate superintendent and diversity director, and Dr. Smith has played a key role in this, along

with Dr. (Steve) Stuart, principal at the high school. We've had Katie Stuart (the Illinois 112th District state representative) out here; state representative Stuart came out because she supports this day, and this tournament wholly."

Stuart thought it was great to see so many of the kids playing tennis and enjoying themselves tremendously.

"I think it's great," Stuart said. "It's great to see so many young kids coming out, and Dave Lipe did a great job putting this whole thing together, and I'm just really happy to be able to see it."

In addition to the legacy of Whirlwind Johnson, Stuart also feels it's very important to keep the legacies of great African-American players such as Althea Gibson and Arthur Ashe, the first two African-American players to win championships at Wimbledon, alive and well.

"Yeah, of course, it's important," Stuart said. "I would love to see the diversity grow in the sport, not just here locally, but nationwide. I would love to start seeing that happening."

For younger players to have role models such as Venus and Serena Williams and Coco Gauff, along with male players such as Frenchman Yannick Noah and Mal Washington of the United States, is very important.

"I think it's important," Stuart said. "I grew up watching tennis, and I'll age myself here," she said with a laugh, "but back in the 80s, in the Bjorn Borgs, the Jimmy Connors, and all of that stuff. Old enough to remember Ashe, having been to Ashe Stadium to see the U.S. Open (in Flushing Meadow, N.Y.). Like I said, it's such a great, lifelong sport, and it's something you can play. I was just playing tennis with my mom, who's in her seventies, and it's just really important to get more people involved, to keep it going, not just to get people into the professional level, but just to that recreational lifelong."

The current group of African-American players who are moving up the ladder in the pro ranks indeed help give the younger players role models to look up to.

"Yeah, exactly, it does," Stuart said. "Representation matters when you're a little kid, and you see 'oh, that could be me,' because I see what I could potentially be me as an adult out doing something. It does make you feel that I could go reach all that, and I could try to do that. So yeah, it's super important that we have that going on. This is a great first step, and like I said, Dave did an amazing job getting this all put together, and all the groups that are bringing kids today, it's just great to see everybody coming out and enjoying this."

Also coming out to support the clinic and hit for a time was Edwardsville High athletic director Alex Fox.

"It's just going great," Fox said. "It's just outstanding to have another event to connect to the futures that just brings out people to play tennis and enjoy themselves."

Fox was with one of the Tigers' players hitting a few balls on the court.

"Trying, trying to hit a few balls," Fox said with a smile and laugh. "Successful on a few, not so successful on others, but having a good time."

Which was exactly one of the points of the clinic itself. And Fox also thought that the legacy of Dr. Johnson and his coaching of both Gibson and Ashe was very important as well.

"It is, and you know, I learned about this from coach Lipe," Fox said, "who I have to give all the credit to. Coach Lipe is a tennis historian, and he brought things to my attention I had no idea, so it's exciting that he's able to tie this to the Futures, make it part of the overall event, and to teach people some of the history of the game of tennis."

Fox also agreed that the current group of African-American players can serve as role models to the younger generations and encourage them to enjoy success in the game.

"Absolutely," Fox said. "It's just a game that's expanding. I think it's a game that people can play, anybody's able to play, it's a lifetime sport, so it's an opportunity to get more people playing the game of tennis, and of course, it will continue to grow. There's plenty of people playing tennis that someone could look up to. The key is getting people introduced to the sport, and finding some enjoyment, and then getting them out there to do it."

It's a great first step to encourage younger people to take up tennis, and hopefully enjoy for their entire lives.

"Absolutely," Fox said. "Hopefully, it's something they find, it's something they enjoy, and they continue to do it, whether it be at any level, whether it's just recreational, high school or whatever. It's just another opportunity for kids to do something positive."

"I just want to thank all the sponsors of the Futures," Fox continued, "who helped make this come together, and of course, coach Lipe for all his efforts in putting this all together, and all the guests that come out to help. We appreciate folks coming out and helping us put on the clinic."

Net Rushers Tennis Association, was one of the organizations who participated in the clinic. The organization was founded in 1988 to introduce children to the sport all over the St. Louis area, providing training, academic counseling and character development.

"it's amazing, wonderful," said Mary Owens-Hudson, who serves as a vice-president and coordinator of tennis development. "I just appreciate having our players hit with the pros. They didn't think they would be able to do that this soon. Some of our players have only been playing three or four years, yet they are at that ability to hit and keep a rally going with some of our pros, and I really appreciate this opportunity for us."

The Net Rushers are a non-profit organization that involves more diverse individuals to become involved in tennis, and its mission is to make the sport more attainable and affordable to younger players.

"Initially, my sister started the program," Owens-Hudson said. "because she noticed that the opportunities for the African-American players was limited. So she had this passion for tennis, she loved playing, competing, getting involved and she wanted to make sure everybody had the same opportunity. So she said 'let's make it available to them. They may not choose it as their sport, but at least give them the opportunity to know the game.'"

Owens-Hudson's sister offered free tennis lessons to the community, which continues today during June and July, with more advanced lessons for promising players at the Frontenac Racquet Club each September through April at low cost to the families. The Net Rushers have fund raisers each year to raise money for the organization and its mission.

Owens-Hudson also agreed that the current players can serve as role models as well to aspiring young players.

"Oh, yes," Owens-Hudson said. "Of course, all the young ladies love Coco. They love Serena; those are the two main ones. But they do have role models. And of course, those that are really, really interested, they do their research of those who played prior to them. And they know, and they watch their game, and they may go live and pull up a video and watch somebody like Noah, or watch Arthur Ashe play, because they're interested in the type of game they had, as opposed to the type of game they're playing now. Those are really interesting. They are here today, present, but they're also go back to the past and watch the players of the past."

It's very possible that the clinic could produce a future Grand Slam champion, and the potential is surely there for that to happen.



"I see nothing but the future,' Owens-Hudson said, "because we have one young lady who isn't here today, Mia. She is in Chicago now, and she is hitting out of the same camp that Sloane Stephens in Chicago. And so, those are her aspirations; she would love to do that. And we have one or two students that make that high level that perhaps could get there. You never know, you just have to try, and keep trying, and if you don't make it, you don't. But at least try."

Lipe also thanked Michelle Motley and Source Juicery in Edwardsville for offering cold-press juices, water and healthy snacks for the players, and presenting sponsor McConnell and Associates for their help, along with other sponsors such as the Iskarous Family, Bev George Realty, Edwardsville Family Dentists, ToeHoerman Law Firm, Pfund Construction Company, Hoffman Law, the Gori Law Firm, Goshen Coffee and GCS Federal Credit Union.

