

# Clinic For Special Needs Tennis Players Returns After Two-Year Absence, Edwardsville YMCA Looks To Expand Program

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer  
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EDWARDSVILLE - A longtime Edwardsville Futures tennis tournament staple returned for the first time since 2019 when the popular Mitch 'n Friends clinic was held at the Edwardsville YMCA's Meyer Center on Thursday night.

Once again, the clinic lived up to its slogan of Tennis Everyone, as many special needs players of all ages joined the clinic's namesake, Mitch McGinnis, and his family to enjoy the sport and have a good time with many volunteers from the Edwardsville tennis teams and some of the players from the Futures tournament itself.

The clinic is entering a new era as it enters into a partnership with the Edwardsville Y, where the organization plans to expand the participation of the event into a year-round endeavor.

But the important thing for the evening was that Mitch n Friends was back after a two-year absence, mainly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. And the organizers and players were very glad to be back as well.

"Yeah, it's really great," said Edwardsville Futures marketing direct Kirk Schlueter. "This is our really special part of our tournament, it's one of our favorite nights of the year. Obviously, this year, partnering with the Edwardsville YMCA for the first time, which really makes it special. Big thanks to all the high schoolers who've come out to volunteer tonight, Mark Collins from the Missouri Valley USTA is here; we appreciate their support. And most more than anything, we appreciate the athletes who came out. It's great to have so many outstanding young people here to be part of this clinic."

The YMCA will be taking over the program, and Schlueter thinks that good things are just ahead for Mitch n Friends.

"Yeah, I think so," Schlueter said. "When you think of the YMCA and its organization dedicated to community service, to helping everyone that they can, it's always been there. So, fantastic to be able to work with Paul Abert, the president of the YMCA Board of Trustees to bring Mitch n Friends kind of under their umbrella, a huge shout out to Brandon Bell as well, the CEO of the YMCA, who's just been so wonderful to work with in this entire process."

Bell believes that hosting this year's clinic was a big event in the YMCA's commitment to community service.

"Anytime we can get a chance to collaborate with the community and bring in individuals who might not otherwise use the YMCA," Bell said, "and for us, this is a

new adventure, as we get to endeavor into actually taking over the Mitch 'n Friends program for the community."



Bell saw the clinic as a part of the organization's quest to bring mission-based programs to the YMCA.

"I started here in April of 2021," Bell said, "I moved from another Y to the Edwardsville Y and one of my big initiatives was to bring what we call mission-based programs to the Y. So this will join a number of our free programming we do in the community, like our Parkinson's program and our free summer lunch program and this is just another one of the free programs that we can offer here through the Edwardsville Y."

Bell is looking forward to working with Schlueter and tournament director Dave Lipe, among other people.

"Absolutely," Bell said. "So Dave actually gave us the opportunity to go out to the Futures tournament this morning and actually experience that. What a wonderful event that Dave and his crew bring to Edwardsville. If you haven't checked that out, it's absolutely amazing, the talent that comes here and for us to bring some staff our here and our board chairman, Paul Abert, who is very involved with the futures tournament

and very involved with the Y as our board president. Helping bring those two collaborative initiatives together in partnership with the Futures tournament. Dave, through the high school. our board chair, with everything he does and the Y just makes sense."

Abert also feels that the chance to collaborate with the clinic and the tournament will bring nothing but positive things to the community and program.

"I feel very excited about the opportunity to collaborate," Abert said, "to bring in an amazing program that has a great history, to an organization that can take this program to a whole another level. We want more participants, we'd love to have more programming year round. The YMCA has the facilities to do that."

Abert sees the Mitch n Friends program to keep growing and increase its participation of players in the future.

"I think we'll be able to grow the number of participants," Abert said, "and I think it becomes part of the YMCA's community outreach. And when we can hold programming year-round, especially with the indoor facilities, we're able to do much more of an organized effort for them. And it can be at any level, right? Just participation is key. We hope to expand the program to beyond tennis, hopefully. But tennis first. Tennis Everyone."

Branch manager Natasha Howard was equally excited about the possibilities of the program and was very happy to host this year's clinic.

"I'm excited," Howard said. "We're really excited to have Mitch n Friends here tonight, hanging out with us and playing."

Howard gave similar reasons to why the Y partnered with the program.

"Well, one our our board members is involved with Mitch n Friends," Howard said, "and they brought it to us. I wasn't quite as familiar with it originally, but it's an awesome program. I think it's great that it gives everybody a chance to play tennis and that's exactly what we're about at the Y, is that everybody is able to come and do the things that they love."

Howard also had very high hopes for the success of the evening's festivities.

"Fun," Howard said. "And I hope the participants have fun."

The clinic also fits in extremely well with the mission of the YMCA as well.

"I think the mission of the Y is to give everybody access and serve everyone," Howard said, "regardless of race, culture, gender, class, abilities. It's so important that if you play tennis, play tennis. If you want to do gymnastics, do gymnastics. If you want to come out and hang out in the gym, there are places to do that and everybody is welcome in our space and being able to accommodate that and give everybody the same opportunities is what it's all about."