



Mitch-N-Friends Clinic Is Another Rousing Success As Part Of Futures

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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EDWARDSVILLE - One of the highlights of the Edwardsville Futures Tennis Tournament, presented by the EGHM Foundation, is the annual Mitch-N-Friends clinic,

where special needs players come out and simply have fun playing and learning about the game of tennis in a fun and encouraging atmosphere.

The 10th annual clinic was held at the Edwardsville YMCA Meyer Center tennis courts and it was another rousing success and many special needs players of all ages came out and enjoyed playing the game with the clinic's namesake, Mitch McGinnis, whose family has been a longtime staple of Edwardsville tennis.

"I'm feeling great," said Kevin McGinnis, who's Mitch's dad and the main organizer of the annual festivities. "We have a great turnout tonight, I see several new players, which I'm really excited about it. It's nice. We have some of our regular players, but I see five or six new players, which we love it when new people, new folks have the passion to play tennis and come out and want to play tennis with us."

The combination of new and old players certainly fits the event's slogan: Tennis Everyone.

"Tennis Everyone," McGinnis said. "That's a slogan, I think Dave Lipe (the tournament director and head coach for both the Edwardsville High School tennis teams) came up with that two or three years ago and put it on the back of our shirts and I love it. The traditional is 'tennis, anyone?' Well, we're Tennis Everyone. We want everyone, no

matter what their situation is, disability or their strength, we want them to come out and play tennis with us."



Just the opportunity to see the players go out, give their all and have fun playing the sport is enough to warm anyone's heart.

"I think the Mitch-N-Friends players are having a great time," McGinnis said, "and there's a lot of great tennis going on. The volunteers we get from the community, they love it as well. We have some regulars in the Edwardsville tennis community out here that are helping, Edwardsville teachers and a lot of volunteers. Everyone's really enjoying it tonight, I can tell."

The plan is for McGinnis to keep things going for as long as he can with the clinic. And it's now an official part of the Edwardsville YMCA, thanks to a partnership between the Y and McGinnis and his old organization.

"We'll be back next year, for sure, McGinnis said. "And as I mentioned earlier, Mitch-N-Friends is now an official program within the Edwardsville YMCA. We meet once a month on the third Thursday of the month. We started last year and we'll start it again this September and have it once a month here at the Y."

The partnership has been going extremely well from the get-go and McGinnis is very proud about the way things have gone in the partnership.

"It was a huge success last year," McGinnis said. "We had 10 or 12 or 15 Mitch-N-Friends players almost every month. So we are completely happy and really excited about the direction it's taking."

The head staffers at the Meyer Center couldn't agree more about the positive direction Mitch-N-Friends is taking and are hoping that the program will hit new heights in the future.

Meyer Center branch director Natasha Howard said: "We had a great turnout, everybody had a great time, it was a little bit hot, but I think everybody had a great night."

The clinic fits in very well with the partnership between the two organizations and the Tennis Everyone slogan.

"Absolutely," Howard said. "And being able to bring more tennis to everyone and everyone having access for tennis, great."

Howard sees the Y and the Meyer Center's role in the monthly clinics as a positive one, providing a safe environment for the players to be able to learn about and play the game.

"I think the organization's role is to host it and provide some support," Howard said, "make sure everyone has a great, happy and safe time."

Howard felt great about the Meyer Center hosting another successful clinic for the players.

"Awesome," Howard said very enthusiastically. "And I'm looking forward to next month's with them, when we get to do it again and it's just growing and bringing more people in and having a great time."

The first year of the partnership between the Edwardsville Y and Mitch-N-Friends was a very successful one, indeed, and Howard is looking forward to year two.

"Yes, absolutely," Howard said. "We're looking forward to year two and we're hoping to kind of expand on that and keep growing."

Howard agreed that seeing the growth of the program was tremendous and also enjoyed watching the players give their all and having fun.

"Yes, I think they gave our staffers a run for their money," Howard said with a laugh. "Kept them busy So I think they were out giving themselves good times."

Which is the main idea in the first place.

"Yes, it is," Howard said with a warm smile. "Absolutely. So glad to see keeping the staff busy, and hustling. We're looking forward to next month."

Paul Abert, the longtime treasurer and executive committee member for the Futures and past president of the board of directors for the Edwardsville YMCA, also helped with the clinic and felt it was another big success.

"I feel really excited about it," Abert said. "We've had a great turnout. It's one of my favorite parts of the entire week, is to be able to bring out this group of young men and women to come experience tennis in a very friendly and open format. It's a great partnership with the Edwardsville Futures tournament. Dave Lipe, Brandon Bell with the YMCA, it's an exciting partnership that's just going to continue to grow."

Abert also agreed that the partnership fits in with the Tennis Everyone slogan as well.

"Tennis Everyone," Abert said with a smile. "It's on our shirts and you know, it's really meant to be that way. It's about getting together, it's about camaraderie, it's about exercise, mental and physical health, it obviously fits with the Y, it fits with what Dave Lipe coaches with his team and what these players are really fighting for every day."

Abert also saw the opportunity to bring the two organizations - Mitch-N-Friends and the Edwardsville YMCA - into a very health and solid partnership that will only continue to grow and expand.

"It was an opportunity to bring two really great organizations who do really good work together," Abert said, "and that's what we achieved tonight."

The monthly clinics have also been a big success as well.

"Right," Abert said. "With Kevin McGinnis and the board, we were able to take Mitch-N-Friends to a certain level. By partnering with the YMCA, it's taking it to now an ongoing event year-round and we're really excited about that."

It's definitely a great feeling all-around, not just for Abert but both organizations as well.

"Yes it is," Abert said. "I'm happy to be part of it."

As for the star of the show itself, Mitch McGinnis always looks forward to his special day, but also had some other things on his mind as well.

"Yeah," Mitch said. "But my favorite day will be, I'm going to Mt. Rushmore for the first time."

Mitch's trip to Mt. Rushmore in Keystone, S.D. is set for August and September, which he's very much looking forward to.

"But I kind of wish I could go to Costa Rica with dad," Mitch said with a smile, "because I love the beach."

All upcoming trips aside, Mitch truly does love being with the other players and playing the game with them.

"It's good," Mitch said. And he also loves the fact that his family hosts the players who are participating in the tournament as well. This year, it was University of Illinois player Gabriellus Guzauskas and the pair grew close, as Guzauskas stayed with the McGinnis family for five days.

"It's kind of like my brothers," Mitch said.

Mitch does insist that when the players have dinner with him and his family, that they wear a shirt at the table. With all that having been said, Mitch always looks forward to hosting the players.

The clinic that bears Mitch's name will always be an important and highly-anticipated part of Futures Week.

