

## Tennis, everyone: Sportsmen's Center in Dorchester stays on point, bringing the game to city kids of all races

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Mateus Washington, a seventh grader at Latin Academy, hits a backhand at the Sportsmen's Tennis and Enrichment Center. MATTHEW J LEE/GLOBE STAFF

It's a long haul, one not necessarily measured in miles, from the corner of Blue Hill Avenue and Westview Street in Dorchester to London's quaint Wimbledon Village, where on Monday the elegant All England Lawn and

Tennis Cub begins its renowned two-week tennis tournament, a.k.a. The Championships.

The Sportsmen's Tennis and Enrichment Center, tucked into that worn intersection of Blue Hill and Westview, decidedly lacks Wimbledon's lush, manicured turf, the Rolls-Royces and Land Rovers in its parking lot, its trademark strawberries and cream.

But from its humble beginnings 60 years ago amid the broken bottles and tattered nets at Carter Playground, Sportsmen's to this day continues to serve up its own unique offerings: tennis courts filled year-round with city kids of all colors and dreams, welcomed through the door no matter what their financial means.

There are but two requirements for a kid to get into Sportsmen's: 1. Players must be at least 2 years old; 2. They must be able to hold a racket. Once meeting those stringent standards, the kids determine their own course, be it eventually to a lifetime spent in hacker's paradise, perhaps a college scholarship, or even to aspire to a seed at Wimbledon, where the last Black male to win the singles title was Arthur Ashe in 1975.

Sportsmen's principal aim, though, has never been to turn city kids into Grand Slam contenders. Its mission from Day 1 has been to provide them with a sense of community, a chance to take up a sport that might

otherwise be beyond their socioeconomic reach, and prevent them from slipping into the perilous habits of city streets.

“The child found on the tennis court,” reminded Mildred Jones, among Sportsmen’s first players in the 1960s and still an active [and founding] board member, “will be seldom found in the criminal court.”



An undated photo of youngsters gathered at the Sportsmen’s Center for some tennis.SPORTSMEN’S TENNIS

Sportsmen’s has had its challenges, dating as far back to the ’50s, when it initially seemed but an idealistic whim of its founder, Jim Smith. Despite years of indifference and unfulfilled promises at City Hall, the

irrepressible Smith persevered, with wife Gloria at his side, and with a willing chronicler and loyal advocate in Bud Collins, the Globe's nationally acclaimed tennis writer and broadcast analyst.

The Smiths had the vision and determination. Collins had the pen. Kids in Roxbury, Dorchester, Jamaica Plain, and all across the city had the need. Finally, on a Saturday morning in 1961, seven kids gathered for free lessons in the city-owned Cabot Street gym for what was officially Day 1 in Sportsmen's history.

"Our efforts were aimed at all kids," Smith, who died in 1997, once said. "Not just Blacks."



The Globe's Bud Collins (right), who was an early champion of Sportsmen's, is shown in 1977 with tennis great Arthur Ashe (center).SPORTSMEN'S TENNIS CENTER

By the late '60s, with participation increasing, old courts were refurbished and new ones built at the edge of Harambee Park along Blue Hill Avenue, and finally, in the spring of 1973, the steel-sided Sportsmen's opened as the first Black-owned tennis club in the country.

The building itself, and the near-Herculean accomplishment it represented, surely would have garnered greater attention had the city in the '70s not been in the throes of racial discord sparked by federally mandated school busing.

Nearly a half-century later, a visitor to Sportsmen's on a summer's day would find such disharmony unthinkable after seeing kids of all colors swing their rackets, share laughs, revel in shared triumphs, and commiserate in mis-hit balls sent rocketing two courts wide.

## **A working financial model**

Sportsmen's courts, 14 in total, are a mosaic of races and ethnicities, all of which seems notable to absolutely none of the players.

"It puts a lie to the experience we are having in this country," noted Andy Crane, 74, a retired attorney and the Sportsmen's tournament director for over a decade. "To me, it's so clear; you get a bunch of kids of different backgrounds and you put them together with a common purpose, and all of a sudden race just doesn't make any difference at all."

Toni Wiley, Sportsmen's CEO the last 13 years, grew up in the neighborhood. She could see the club from her front porch.

Yet even though she was a four-sport athlete as a METCO student at Newton North High School, she paid little attention to all the hubbub in and around the tennis center down the street.

“METCO is an interesting social experiment,” said Wiley, who spent her undergraduate days at Northeastern. “It's a great academic success. I think, socially, it has its challenges. So I never really felt that connected to the community at home — and probably that's why I never found my way to Sportsmen's.”



Sportsmen's tournament director Andy Crane is happy to lend a racket to 16-year-old Liban Mohamed. MATTHEW J LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Wiley also was never a tennis player, but soon took it up, intrigued to learn the sport through the eyes of a beginner, better to understand what challenges kids might face when first picking up a racket.

“What I lack in skill,” she said, chuckling, “I make up for with determination and brute strength.”

Wiley initially came aboard in a volunteer role, advising the club how to shore up its struggling finances, prior to being named CEO in 2008. Under her direction, Sportsmen’s now is in the thick of a \$9 million

capital campaign, with Phase 1 of the buildout targeted to break ground in the next few months.

The Klarman Family Foundation, noted Wiley, has been a very generous “seven-figure” contributor to the campaign. Expansion eventually will add indoor and outdoor courts, more classroom space for health and wellness initiatives, and the Bud Collins Welcome Center.



Sportsmen's CEO Toni Wiley grew up in the neighborhood. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Collins, who died in March 2016, would be thrilled to know that the Collins name will be remembered in perpetuity at Sportsmen's. In the early years, it was Collins who cajoled the likes of Ashe and Rod Laver to participate in some of Sportsmen's fund-raising events.

“Bud wanted to see kids learning to be their best, giving it their all on the court,” said Wiley, “and using Sportsmen’s as a path to college and beyond.”

Fund-raising, noted Wiley, is always an issue for any nonprofit. The club’s founders hoped that a combination of adult membership fees, originally \$35 a year, along with court rentals and philanthropy would generate the funds needed for kids to play and learn for free.

The model has worked to the extent that it covers baseline operating costs, and membership (now \$350 per year) has increased by 120, up to 325, over recent months. Wiley attributes the jump to the COVID-19 pandemic, people eager to play a sport with social distancing built into the rulebook.

“There is nothing more challenging than relying 100 percent on philanthropy, which can change with the wind,” said Wiley. “So by knowing that we at least have enough of a baseline of adult membership that allows us to keep the lights on, it allows us to focus our philanthropy on direct service — funding the programs that are providing academic support, social-emotional wellness, field trips, all the things we need rather than to try to find philanthropy.”

## **Coaches are needed**

Sportsmen's serves some 5,000 city youth and 1,000 adults each year, according to the club, be it through direct tennis initiatives or its sundry community programs.

Beyond the ever-present financial issues, said Wiley, the greatest challenge today, in part due to the pandemic, is finding enough qualified coaches to staff the ambitious summer schedule. The club locked its doors for some three months in 2020, as mandated by the state's COVID orders, and had to limit its overall level of activity for additional months. Some of the coaches disappeared.

"Which is kind of amazing," said Wiley. "We have five coaches who moved out of state. So we are struggling to find people who have interest in this career, which can be a very lucrative and healthy career."

Joe Taylor, 79, remains on the job at Sportsmen's, where he's coached since the start of the '90s. He has taught all the boys and girls, all colors, all ages, all aptitudes, all abilities.

"Now, when I say 'all of 'em,' " qualified Taylor, "my cutoff these days is 5 years old. The 4-year-olds, you know, their attention span can be a little short."



Joe Taylor has coached at Sportsmen's for more than 20 years. MATTHEW J LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Taylor, who grew up in the city, was in his early 30s when he first played tennis.

“There was a stigma to tennis when I was a kid,” he said, thinking back to the '40s and '50s. “We had football and basketball ... and tennis was, I guess you'd say, kind of a light sport, a sissy sport.”

Taylor was initially drawn to it, he recalled, because there was an attractive woman watching tennis as he waited to get into a basketball game at an adjacent court at Washington Park (now Malcolm X Park).

“I get over there, some of my friends were playing tennis, and they put a racket in my hand,” he recalled. “I hit the ball around, and you know, I liked it! I fell in love with it that summer.”

For the decades he’s coached at Sportsmen’s, Taylor has witnessed a gradual change in the racial mix, from predominantly Black and white at the start to a blend today of Black, white, Asian, and Latino kids. By his eye, participation is evenly split between boys and girls, a change from a slight majority on the boys’ side back in the ’90s.



Ezequiel Pichardo, 12, works on his backhand at Sportsmen's. MATTHEW J LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Over the next two weeks, the world's tennis eye again will be fixed on Wimbledon, a welcome sight after play was canceled last year amid the pandemic. The revered Championships, which date to 1877, remain the sport's glamour event, filling the iconic Center Court with fans (per COVID limitations) and attracting viewers worldwide. As grass plots go, it remains a love-in, Yasgur's farm with precision mowing and white lines.

Meanwhile, down at the corner of Blue Hill Ave and Westview Street, tennis likewise will continue each day at the tidy, clean, efficient

Sportsmen's. The city's little gem continues to shine, its mission proud yet understated, and racial harmony its bowl of strawberries and cream.