

08.22.2023 FEATURED STORY

# Serving it up for a great cause: Joyful tennis tourney benefits Shelter Island Library

By David Brush



Tennis anyone? The Shelter Island Library annual tennis tournament is poised to return.

On Saturday, Aug. 19, Islanders gathered around the Shelter Island School tennis courts to watch 14 teams compete for gift bags, glory, and the continued work of the Shelter Island Public Library.

The soft pop of tennis balls echoed from players' rackets, followed by loud grunts and the occasional burst of applause, which signaled the end of a rally. With three courts in play, allowing six teams to compete at once, there were few dull moments. Many spectators ditched their chairs and blankets to get closer and catch every point.

The Library Tennis Tournament was formalized by Jerry Berner in 1983, but was only held sporadically throughout the years. Six years ago, Chuck and Linda Kraus seized an opportunity to bring it back to raise funds for library-funded community programs. This year, however, was different, since donations were sent directly to the library's upcoming renovation project.

The tournament featured round-robin match play, organized by tennis pro Moussa Drame, who took care of most of the tournament-day logistics. Mr. Drame's goal was to have everybody play against everybody at least once. While women's, mixed, and men's doubles each served as their own categories in the scoring sheet, these categories did not affect match-ups until the semi-final and final games.

"We just want to make it a fun event for everybody," Mr. Drame said.

For most of the tournament, Mr. Drame sat under a large white tent. Scores were self-reported, so teams would declare wins at his table, followed by congratulatory statements and handshakes from their opponents. These moments signified the end of the smack talk that flew between teams on the courts, before turning into clear camaraderie once matches came to an end.

Behind Mr. Drame, under the large tent, stood rows of chairs for spectators as well as a breakfast of bananas, coffee, and bagels courtesy of Stars Café. At 11 a.m., lunch was added to the feast, consisting of wraps, chips, and cookies from The Flying Goat. Joyful chatter could be heard under the tent as spectators and players alike grabbed fuel between the matches.



On the side of the tent, with a small crowd gathered near him, stood competitor Shane Donohue, performing tricks with a wooden sword-like apparatus connected to a ball on a string, called a kendama. Mr. Donohue, while watching one of the ongoing matches, spun the kendama around his wrist and flipped it through the air, before catching its handle and letting the ball land, perfectly balanced on a short wooden pole.

Mr. Donohue and Mr. Schwartz made a formidable team, and put up an impressive record over the course of the day. When asked about their strategy, Mr. Schwartz said, "I thought that being able to lean on Shane would make possible my winning, in a way that otherwise would not have been possible." They both began to chuckle, as a voice sounded from under the tent, saying, "Wow, those kids are good."

That voice was referring to 14-year-old Lukas Hlavacek and his 13-year-old teammate Matteus Langham. These two rising stars were the youngest competitors at the tournament, and didn't know each other before the tournament began. On the day of their first match, they both asked to participate and were subsequently put together by Mr. Drame.

Despite their ages, Lukas and Matteus were not the slightest bit nervous about playing more experienced competitors. "It's really fun to get out here even if we lose a couple," Lukas said. Even though they had just come from a loss, these young teammates showed sportsmanship and perseverance, while keeping their eyes on the tournament's mission. "I think it's great that the library does this," said Lukas.

When it was time for the semi-finals, chatter on the lawn quickly died down, everyone focused on the games about to begin. Each match started with a few warmup serves and rallies, followed by some of the best tennis performances that Shelter Island had to offer. The level of skill on display only improved once the finals arrived, and after the dust finally settled, three teams were declared champions.

The first winners, in the women's category, were Jenny Sullivan and Paola Kusner.



Tournament Director Moussa Drame, center, congratulates the women's champions of the Shelter Island Library Tennis Tournament, Paola Kusner, left, and Jenny Sullivan. (Credit: David Brush)

These women, described by Mr. Drame as "the dream team," were the only women's team to compete in the tournament, and had won last year, as well. While they loved being in a category of their own, they said, both competitors added that their goal was to get more women to join in the years to come. In closing, they also expressed their admiration for the library.

"We love it, and we will always support it," said Ms. Kusner.

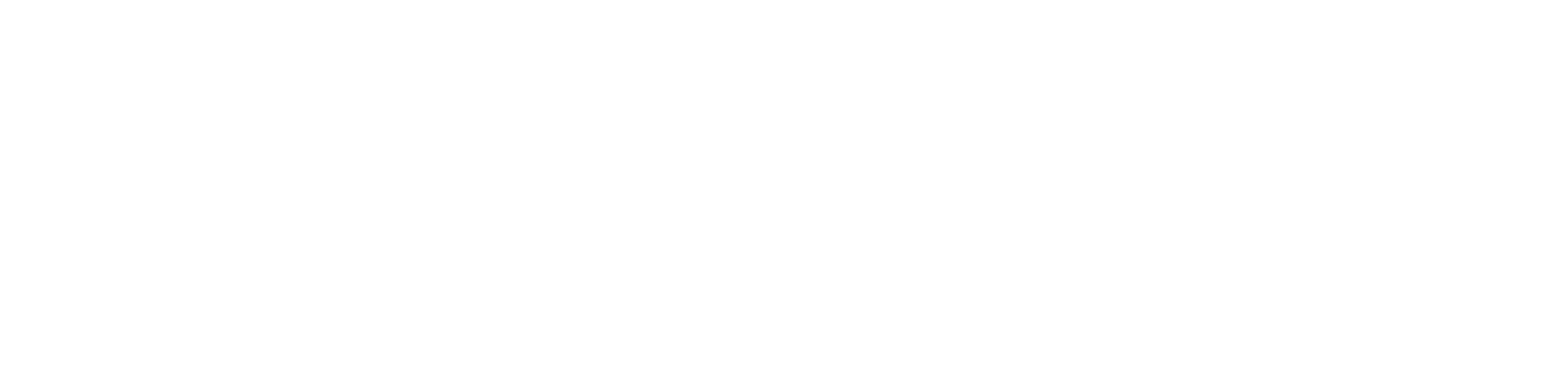
In the men's category, Tim Cairns and Arpan Poddaturi came out on top, despite being their first year playing together.



Mens champs flanking Director Drame, at left, Tim Cairns and Arpan Poddaturi. (Credit: David Brush)

"It's nice to support the library," said Mr. Cairns. Mr. Poddaturi nodded before adding, "It's a great day, a great cause, and a great way to get some exercise."

Finally, in the mixed category, Alex Rappaport and Lisbeth Kaiser were crowned champions.



Mixed doubles champs, from left, Alex Rappaport, Lisbeth Kaiser, Director Drame, Kelly Coles and Richard Coles. (Credit: David Brush)

This duo had been practicing together for a year to prepare for Shelter Island's competition. It was Ms. Kaiser's first time playing in a tennis tournament. "Tennis has always been my favorite pastime, but I had to learn the competitive spirit," she said.

In addition to being a tennis champion, Ms. Kaiser is a best-selling children's author. One of her titles is, "Little People, BIG DREAMS: Treasury: 50 Stories of Brilliant Dreamers."

"We love playing tennis, and absolutely love the library," Ms. Kaiser said.

Each winning player got a gift bag and bragging rights, although the latter reward was never used. Instead, the tournament ended with handshakes, hugs, and lots of laughs. Before their departure, each team also got a T-shirt, with the names of donors written on the back. This exclusive shirt will be given to every person/family who donated \$100 or more to the cause.

While most people simply see libraries as a gateway for finding and reading books, Ms. Kraus and Library Director Terry Lucas believe they have a much greater purpose. For them, the library's ability to foster a sense of community is key.

Ms. Kraus noted that the library is a community base and resource for all Islanders. Ms. Lucas explained that, in order for their mission to be achievable, library events need to remain free or at a very low cost to ensure people of all economic backgrounds are welcome. "It's important for everybody to have equal access to everything we do," she said.

None of this would be possible without the generosity of countless islanders who love what the library stands for. This kindness was displayed in full force throughout the tournament because, even though teams were competing, they were all fighting for the same great cause.

David Brush

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