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BLADE PHOTOS BY AMY E. VOIGT

Mariyah Barker scoops up tennis balls and tries to hold all of them while finishing her lesson at Jermain Park.

Addie Cundiff, 11, uses her tennis racquet to collect balls.



Love. Set. Match.



Tennis champion Ethel Parker helps Tatiyana Esmond with her forehand.



James Nauden, 9, is deep in concentration in preparation to hit the ball during a forehand skill-building exercise.



From left, Mariyah Barker, 9, Ava Keith, 10, and Tatiyana Esmond, 8, take a moment to socialize.

Ethel Parker shares decades of experience with city youths during free tennis lessons

By MARISSA MEDANSKY

BLADE STAFF WRITER

As her students jog around the Jermain Park tennis courts, Ethel Parker looks on. "Tennis is a game for life," she says, watching them run.

She would know. Ms. Parker, 72, didn't pick up a racket until her 30s. She's since become an award-winning player, set to depart next year for the National Senior Olympics.

Ms. Parker — quick to laugh and obviously athletic, with well-defined muscles and sporty clothes — also runs her own tennis camp. She says around 30 students, ages 4 to 18, attend the free classes at the park off Monroe Street near Upton Avenue.

She provides the equipment, customized for students of various ages and abilities. Her youngest students, the 4-year-olds, hit soft balls with big foam circles on sticks. Those resemble lollipops more than rackets.

"I try to teach a little bit of fitness," Ms. Parker says, her students now stretching. Five instructors lead the classes, so she's free to supervise and step in when needed.

She emphasizes fundamentals, which players learn through drills and games. Once they master the basics — everything from the best way to serve to the proper names for each part of the court — they graduate to full matches.

Their successes stand on their own. When Ms. Parker competed in the Midwestern Tennis Association championship earlier this month, she brought along Divinity

Price, 15, a star student from the camp. Within her age division, Ms. Parker won both mixed and women's doubles. And young Ms. Price, competing in her first tournament, made the semifinals in her event.

"I want them to follow in her footsteps," says Ms. Parker, beaming.

Poised to join her is Daihon Price, 11, Divinity's younger brother, who's in the process of working out his own athletic aspirations.

"It's either tennis or baseball, but mostly I love tennis," he says. As far as tennis goes, he wants "to be a pro."

It's the first day of camp for Marcus Harrison's three children, but he can already see the benefits.

Tennis, he says, is good for "discipline, camaraderie, and just regular sportsmanship." For growing kids, it's better than just sitting at home and watching cartoons.

Mr. Harrison, like Ms. Parker, knows tennis can be a lifelong sport.

He "grew up on these courts," he says, and as a young person learned the sport with the Ottawa Park Tennis Association.

The tennis community is welcoming, he says. "I could always come back and start playing like I never missed a beat."

As for Ms. Parker, she has no plans to leave anytime soon.

"I'm going to continue to play the game as long as I keep winning," she says, grinning.

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Michael Woods, 7, aims the tennis ball for a serve.



Divinity Price, 15, hits a volley during the tennis camp.



Coach Parker volleys with a student during her tennis camp.



Tennis instructor Gary Daugherty jokes with his campers during Ethel Parker's tennis camp.