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Published: July 29, 2010

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Training the future of tennis

By Whitelaw Reid

Morris decided that youth tennis needed the same thing. So, with some help from former Boar's Head pro Phil Rogers, he did just that. Today, 39 years later, the Jefferson Tennis League is still going strong.

John Morris doesn't mind admitting he was a copycat.

In 1971, Morris saw that there was a league for youth swimmers from Charlottesville-area clubs to compete in called the Jefferson Swim League.

Morris decided that youth tennis needed the same thing. So, with some help from former Boar's Head pro Phil Rogers, he did just that.

Today, 39 years later, the Jefferson Tennis League is still going strong.

"I cheated," said Morris, smiling. "I stole their title."

Recently, the Boar's Head Sports Club, which Morris is helping coach, won its fourth championship in five years. Farmington Country Club took second.

"We had players who were down in matches and never quit, giving it all they had," said George Elias, one of three Boar's Head coaches (the others are Betsy Nugent and Ashley Berrang). "[We] just stressed having fun and giving it your best effort, and I think they just really did a good job of that."

Other clubs in the 10-team league are Charlottesville City, ACAC, University of Virginia, Key West, Fairview, Forest Lakes, Glenmore and Keswick.

Roughly 500 kids, ages 8-18, compete in the JTL, which runs from the second week of June through the first week of August. Farmington pro Patrick Kearns plays a large role in the league, doing a good portion of the organizing and scheduling.

"It's fun because you get to play with your friends and the people are usually pretty good," said 14-year-old Sam Adamson. "It's fun to stay and practice every day.

"It makes up my summer."

Added 15-year-old Fran Clifton: “Our biggest rivalry is with UVa.”

Morris says the JTL, which began with just four clubs, has become even bigger than he imagined.

“Tennis in the ’70s was really popular, and it just grew,” Morris said. “We’re at where we are now because kids wanted the competition, as well as all the drill work and all the lessons and everything.

“It worked out real good.”

One of the cool things about the JTL is its emphasis on sportsmanship and fair play. Each year, the league names recipients of the Roger Flint Spirit Award, named after the former Charlottesville Patrons Tennis Association president. The award recognizes players who “best display good sportmanship, show a love for the game, and is a good team member.”

This year’s winners were Charlie Shepherd (UVa), Kristen Richey (Boar’s Head), Joseph Milbank (Farmington), Amelia Garland (Fairview), Beth Shafer (Forest Lakes), Eric Rebellato (Glenmore) and Robert Shelton (Charlottesville City).

Boar’s Head tournament director and teaching pro Ron Manilla says the Jefferson League’s roots actually trace all the way back to the National Junior Tennis League (NJTL), which was founded by tennis legend Arthur Ashe, a Richmond native, and Sherry Snyder, a UVa graduate for whom the Snyder Tennis Center is named.

“Every kid who has come out of Charlottesville and gone on to be a successful tennis player played Jefferson League tennis,” Manilla said. “As far as tennis in the community, it’s the best thing we do.”

Morris, who has coached at CHS for 22 years — he also spent a year as the coach of the UVa women’s team in 1984-85 — says that a number of the league’s

participants have moved on to make tennis their career, including standouts Berrang, Chris Cabbage, former Monticello girls coach Mike Mountjoy, Susan Nardi, Albemarle girls coach Rich Lindsay, and Howie Fendley.

Morris says his involvement has been very rewarding. He can hardly believe that the league has been in existence for four decades.

“That’s a lot of years, isn’t it?” he said, with a chuckle. “I’m getting old.”

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