

## CATS satiates tennis lovers' cravings

BY WHITEY REID | Posted: Saturday, July 20, 2013 9:48 pm

Jeff Heatwole was totally frustrated.

An avid tennis player, he couldn't find people in Charlottesville to play singles with on a consistent basis.

So Heatwole decided to start a ladder, figuring he could maybe scare up eight to 10 people.

The next thing Heatwole knew, he had 30.

In the seven years since, over 320 players have participated in Charlottesville Area Tennis Singles, better known as CATS.

Currently, the group has over 100 active players.

Heatwole, a University of Virginia alum, admits he underestimated the market.

"I found out there was all this pent-up demand," he said.

There's no doubt about that.

CATS, entering its eighth year of existence, has become one of the preeminent rec tennis leagues in Charlottesville, joining the likes of the ABC Tennis Club and the Charlottesville-Albemarle Tennis League (CHATL).

The best part about CATS? It's free.

That's something that hard-core players like John Goodrich take full advantage of.

"The way I describe CATS is that it's all-you-can-eat tennis," Goodrich said.

League matches are played on public courts throughout Charlottesville, with Pen Park, Piedmont Virginia Community College and the Snyder Tennis Center representing some of the hot spots.

Players in the league are grouped into divisions on the website and are then responsible for their own scheduling and submitting results.

Heatwole, who knows a thing or two about web design -- he has a masters degree in operations research from Stanford -- has one of the more sophisticated rec league websites that you'll probably ever come across.

Divisions are broken down by skill level. They range from players with USTA ratings of 3.5 and below to ones with ratings of 4.5 and above.

The website maintains standings, all-time rankings and even has a Hall of Fame.

“We try and structure it so whether you’re successful or not successful, you end up being with people of similar ability,” Heatwole said, “so you’re kind of playing close matches and you get to play a lot of different folks.”

That’s what Goodrich says was often an issue for him before CATS came along.

“I tended to get in a rut playing the same folks over and over again...it’s great to play different styles of games,” Goodrich said.

“The great thing about CATS is that you have pretty much a whole rainbow of different styles. You’ve got people who are human backboards that will return every single shot you can imagine, people with drop shots like Bobby Sandell who will just absolutely make you groan, people who hit with a lot of pace, and everything in between.”

John Pedersen, an original CATS member who now serves as the organization’s membership director, describes matches as “competitive but friendly.”

The 69-year-old, whose appearance belies his age, believes he is one of the oldest players in CATS, if not the oldest.

“I find that I can get to a lot more balls if I let them bounce twice,” Pedersen joked. “But I still enjoy it a lot.”

Pedersen doesn’t mind admitting that his 121 losses are more than anybody in CATS history. But on the flip side, his 58 wins rank fairly high.

One of Pedersen’s goals is to beat Sandell, a player known for his vicious drop shot that can leave opponents gasping for air after just a few games.

“I’m going to get him,” said Pedersen, smiling. “I feel it. I’ve come close. I’ll get him one week.”

The league has a number of women who play. Often times, they play against men.

“It’s really enabled me to play with a lot of different people,” said Anita Impagliazzo, a member for about five years, “and I’ve made some great friends. It’s been a great way to play.”

Peter Welch, an original CATS member, has used the league as a vehicle to form teams that compete against others in Charlottesville such as Boar’s Head Sports Club and the ACAC. Welch’s CATS teams also play in USTA tournaments.

“We’ve been kind of the upstarts because the USTA club leagues have been sort of dominated over the years by the local country clubs,” Welch said. “We don’t have any home courts. We just play on the public courts -- and we’ve done really well.”

Heatwole says playing for Welch’s teams has been a nice bonus.

“That’s been a big thing for me,” he said, “because being part of a team, when you’re an old guy, is just really a fun thing. That’s been huge.”

Chris Hays enjoys the fact that as a CATS member he is part of an ever-changing public community.

“People are just coming from all over,” Hays said. “and you get exposed to some really great players.”

Aravind Hande had never picked up a racquet before moving to the United States from India in 1990.

However, he quickly learned the sport and now has 160 wins, the most in CATS history.

“Before I joined, I didn’t have a way of [finding] players,” said the 47-year-old Hande, a 4.5 level player who is now a member of the CATS board of directors. “Once I joined CATS, it was easy to find people at my skill level.”

Heatwole, a former teacher at Madison County High School who now works as a program manager for an environmental consulting firm, says running the CATS website isn’t as much of a hassle as it used to be.

Back in 2006, he had to enter everyone’s scores manually. Now, after several series of tweaks, players are able to do so themselves.

“I built it so it doesn’t matter if there’s 20 people or 200 people,” he said. “It works the same no matter what. I’m pretty happy with it right now.”

While Heatwole says the growth of CATS has been nice, he says it’s not something he ever concerns himself with.

“I’m totally happy if we have 30 people who are passionate about tennis and who are getting something out of it versus 300 people who just have their names on there and aren’t really [active],” he said.

“I don’t care how many people there are as long as they’re getting something out of it.”

#### **\*CATS INFO BOX\***

**What:** A tennis league for singles players

**Who:** Players of various ages and skill levels

**Where:**

Public courts throughout Charlottesville

**Cost:** Free

**Website:** <http://cats.cvilletennis.org>