

coverstory



HIGH FIVE

Since 1955, the Colorado Tennis Association/USTA Colorado has been more than just the governing body of tennis in our state.

Sure, we run your tennis leagues and answer your NTRP questions. We sanction tournaments and introduce tennis to kids. We help facilities across Colorado resurface their courts and we provide resources to programs who need financial help.

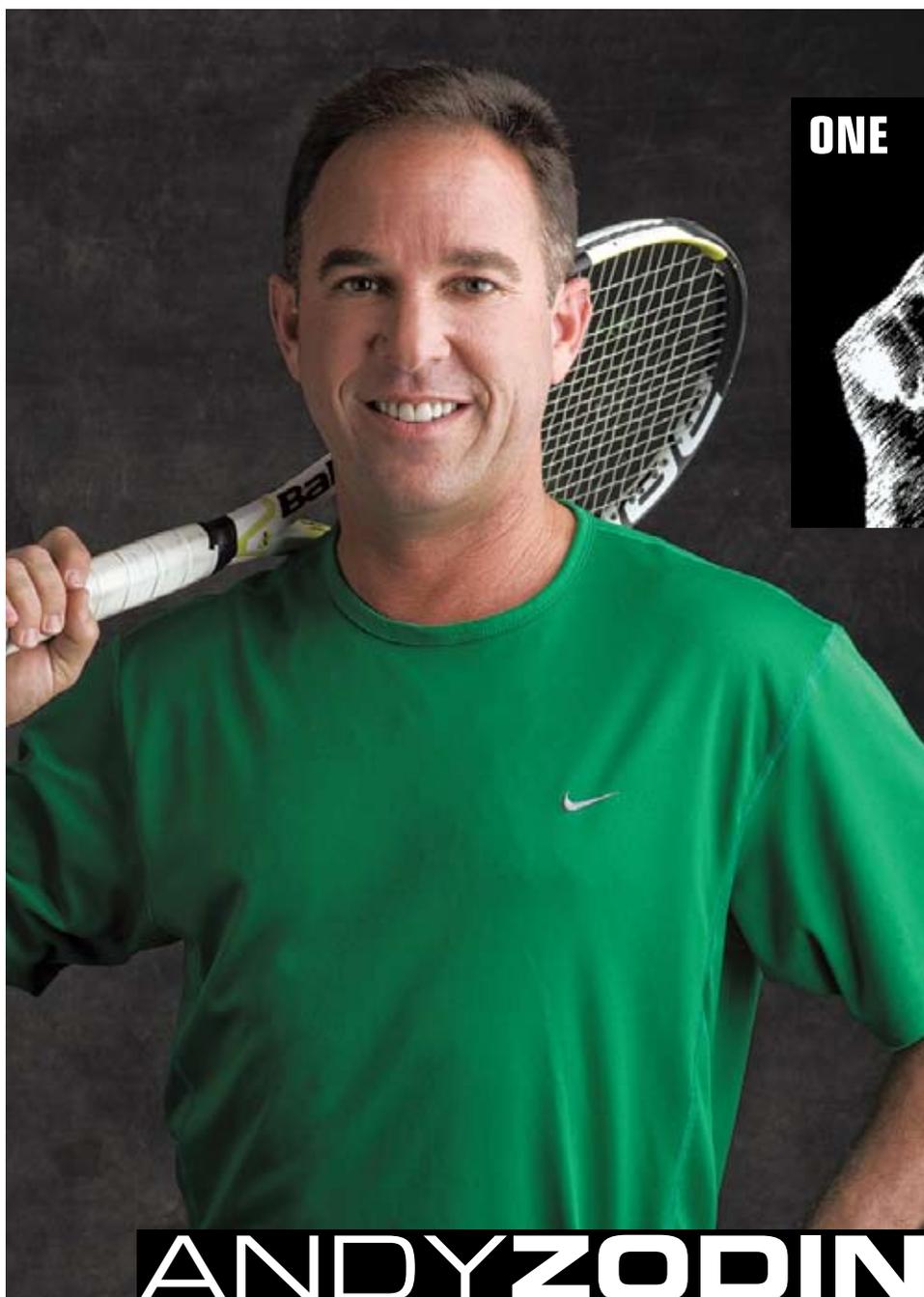
But we are also a group of passionate advocates who believe in the power of tennis to improve health, create opportunity, impart valuable life lessons and transform lives.

We are committed to growing the game across the state, but in order to fulfill our mission and truly make a long-term difference in the communities we serve, we need help.

To succeed, we need the help of other enthusiastic people in the tennis community who believe in the transformative influence of the sport. We need their zeal and their patience, their time and their energy.

Beginning in this issue, we're profiling people in the Colorado tennis community who do more than just play tennis. They are sharing their passion for the sport with others, helping to grow the tennis community. Some you will know, others will be fresh names and faces. But they all deserve a big **HIGHFIVE** for their efforts.

We encourage you to help us recognize others who you think they deserve special recognition. Email Kurt Desautels, COLORADO TENNIS Editor, at EDITOR@COLORADOTENNIS.com with your suggestions.



STORY BY TOM FASANO

Photo courtesy of Andy Zodin

ONE



For the good of tennis in this country, every state needs an Andy Zodin. It doesn't matter if Zodin is talking to a 10-year-old junior player or the legendary Martina Navratilova, he treats them as if they'd just won Wimbledon.

That's the beauty of having a man such as Zodin as a major mouthpiece for the sport of tennis in Colorado. Just call him Colorado's Voice of Tennis.

Zodin, 48, has only been a resident of Colorado for the past eight years after moving here from Houston, but he's already created a buzz from tennis fans throughout the state with his weekly radio show "In The Tennis Zone" every Sunday from 6-8 p.m. starting in mid-February through late September on Mile High Sports Radio, AM 1510 in Denver.

"We have Federer and we have Nadal and that's all good," Zodin said. "But tennis has to have guys and women who get in the trenches and create excitement where there wouldn't otherwise be excitement and make people feel important and make people feel recognized whether it's a kid going off to play Division I college tennis or a kid trying to win a tournament in the Special Olympics."

It's all about attracting a following, and Zodin certainly has done that.

"I want to make sure the guys that run the City Open and run the State Open come on the radio and talk to me about those endeavors, talk about the players who are coming out and help get sponsors for their events," Zodin said.

Zodin, a former walk-on tennis player for the University of Texas who lives in Lakewood, will be starting his third year of "In The Tennis Zone," in February.

The man loves to talk anything tennis. He's not the in-your-face sports talk radio host who seems to be the norm these days.

No, Zodin's smooth delivery and gracious approach on the air makes listeners want to come back for more tennis talk that hits on Colorado tennis all the way up to the professional ranks.

"It's pro tennis. It's college tennis. It's high school," Zodin said. "It's USTA Adult League tennis. It's everything in between. I try not to leave anything out. I just try and make sure the programming is entertaining, that it's relevant and recent and not too stale."

Zodin, who also does a football talk show on AM 1510 during the football season from 10 a.m.-noon Saturdays called, "In The Red Zone," with former Colorado Buffs and Denver Broncos linebacker Jashon Sykes, loves what he does and it shows.

When Zodin's not talking on the radio, he's the director of tennis at Green Gables Country Club in Lakewood and Lakeshore Athletic Club in Broomfield. He's been playing the sport most of his life, and can still serve more than 100 mph. Zodin, who is ranked in the top five in the 45s division in the state and plays in a 5.0 league, started taking tennis lessons in Dallas when he was 11. He has also been the assistant boys tennis coach at Mullen High School in Denver for the past four years.

How Zodin got his start on Denver radio is quite interesting.

"I was actually doing a little indoor teaching over at The Point Athletic Club, and I noticed that they had just gotten a bundle of Mile High Sports magazines delivered," Zodin said. "I was always considered in Houston to be what they kind of ended up referring to as the treadmill magazine writer like the ones that you pick up on your way going to a treadmill in a gym. I think it was Houston Health and Fitness, and I wrote tennis for them."

Zodin wanted to do the same thing for Mile High Sports magazine, and when he met with them it was shifted into a possible radio gig.

"I always watch (ESPN's) Mike and Mike in the Morning, and I always kind of thought it would be fun to do that," Zodin said. "I had other people say, 'You should have been a sportscaster.' I've always been wanting to kind of make some sort of a difference with respect to the tennis community wherever I was living, and I thought this was an opportunity to give people a lot of recognition that they don't normally get. I had a feeling that this would be pretty different and pretty well received, so I gave it a whirl and started to go on air."

The only radio background Zodin had was when he was occasionally asked to be a guest on a radio talk show to talk a little tennis, or driving in the car and being a regular caller on certain topics.

"As far as any kind of professional training or anything like that, this was going to be a from the hip can you do it kind of thing," Zodin said.

Zodin's wife, Sarah Zodin, a 4.5-rated player who also guests about once a month on the show and goes by the name of NTRP Queen, was a little leery about her new husband getting into the radio business simply because he had to find his own sponsors in order to put on the show.

"I was on the hook for a certain amount of money every week, but then I got all the advertising revenue," he said. "That evolved into more of a revenue share where I wasn't on the hook for any money anymore, and we would do a 50 percent split. I do have to make sure that there is an advertising base there to pay for that time. Pretty soon it became pretty clear that having the only tennis talk radio show was beneficial to the station and I like doing it. My wife is involved as well, so it's good for the two of us to be able to kind of do something together."





Photo courtesy of Middle Park Golf Team

KATE WALKER

STORY BY KATIE NEWELL

As is often true in life, true friends sometimes know us better than we know ourselves. So goes the story of tennis enthusiast Kate Walker, a Connecticut native who purchased a condo in Fraser strictly for an investment in the early 90s.

"I was just going to have some fun for the summer, but my co-workers were already saying their goodbyes," recalls Kate.

Those who had met her in Fraser before her move there knew it, too. She just belonged in the small Colorado town – a place where skiing, hiking and soaking in the beauty of the mountains were second nature to her.

Also second nature to Kate is tennis, who began playing tennis at the age of six with her parents in her hometown of New Canaan. Playing in the shadows of the young tennis elite and surrounded by nationally-ranked juniors, Kate became a great player, but unlike many of her teammates, she never burned out. After playing in high school, and then at Colby College in Maine, Kate's love of the sport only seemed to grow from all the competition. Perhaps more importantly, she always appreciated it for what it was – a sport that people of all ages could enjoy for life. She also discovered that it was a way for her to personally reach out and connect with others – especially teenagers.

Working with young people – both on and off the courts – has become Kate's passion. A school counselor by trade, Kate appreciates both the opportunities and difficulties faced by those growing up in small, tourist towns like Fraser.

"Many of the families run restaurants and ski shops and work in the evenings, so it is a challenge to get them to sports," she said.

While she also admits that having just two outdoor courts makes running programs difficult, she focuses on the opportunities, not the limitations. Fraser, population 927, offers an NJTL (see related story, page 15) program, occasional tournaments, and lessons for all ages, although she says her 5-8 year-olds find themselves on the courts the most often, using the QuickStart Tennis format. For the teens, most of the competition is limited to playing one another, but in a way she feels that's the beauty of it all. She's growing the sport of tennis in Fraser and hoping that grant money will eventually help her community build more courts, but for now she's treating tennis like a hobby. And there's true beauty in that.

"The kids root for one another, and share in each other's successes. It's playing the sport – just for fun!"

Besides being the high school counselor, Kate coaches the Middle Park High School Golf Team, which often consists of past tennis students.

"I'll tell them to chip the ball like they approached their drop shot," she jokes.

Because the high school has a total student body of 420, there are not enough kids to form a tennis team. Most of the kids get pulled to the sports like football and baseball eventually. But Kate knows that tennis has its place in the wonderful town of Fraser and she's glad to be able to give the residents the skills to enjoy the sport she's loved as long as she can remember.

"In a way, it's perfect," she admits, knowing the other extreme she witnessed with the competitive juniors in her childhood. "Tennis here is just for fun. It's a lifelong sport and I can encourage and connect with people through it." 🎾

ZODIN, CONTINUED

Sarah said Andy had to convince her that the show would work in the beginning.

"I think he had to fight me a little bit to keep it going at first. It was something where he was paying for air time at first, and I wasn't really excited about that," she said. "But to see what he's done with it. I've been playing some adult league tennis, and I'll have my opponents say, 'Oh my gosh, your husband does so much for the sport.' Did I think it would take off to the extent that it has?"

Sarah didn't think so because she said she tends to be a pessimist where her husband is the optimist.

"It's been real fun just to have him include me as part of his ride," Sarah said.

Zodin said there's definitely been a learning curve involved when it comes to the radio business.

"But I think from the feedback that I'm getting I'm pretty well received, and I've had tremendous support from USTA Colorado," he said. "The guests that I've been able to get have also added a lot toward the credibility for sure."

Zodin's biggest get was all-time great "Rocket" Rod Laver in the last show of the second season on Sept. 20. He's also interviewed superstars such as the aforementioned Navratilova, Billie Jean King, Rocket Rod Laver, Jim Courier, Brad Gilbert and Tony Trabert.

When Zodin was a teenager in Dallas, he was a ball boy during a Rod Laver match.

"Back when they had the WCT Finals in Dallas, I was a 13- or 14-year-old kid. I was a pretty good little junior player running around Dallas," Zodin recalled. "I was little and I was quick. I was ball-boy material, man. I was a ball boy for Laver versus Borg. I was ball boy for Ashe."

Zodin, who made a lot of contacts and knows a lot of people in the upper circles of tennis from his days in Dallas, Houston and Austin, strives to make the show the best he can and to be as diverse as he can in his tennis coverage.

"The goals are to be something that the tennis community is very proud of and has a very consistent following, and to promote and give recognition to people in the sport that don't





Photo courtesy of the Venner family

RAVEN CHAVEZ-MALTBY

STORY BY KURT DESAUTELS

STARS junior coach Raven Chavez-Maltby (far right) and lead coach Emily Venner stand across the net from their students during a workout this summer.

ZODIN, CONTINUED

necessarily get it as much as they should and to sort of blend coverage," said Zodin, who started with a one-hour show which has been increased to two hours. "I like the fact that in one segment I may be talking about Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal, and in the next segment I'm talking about two 10-and-under girls that live in Denver. People get a chance to feel like they're sort of thrown in the mix with the best players of the sport in one program."

Zodin's achievement that he said he's most proud of in 2009 was running the Tennis with the Stars event on Aug. 29 at Gates Tennis Center to benefit the Colorado Youth Tennis Foundation.

"We went from 28 players in 2008 to 85 players in 2009 and raised a significant amount of money for Colorado Youth Tennis Foundation," Zodin said. "Our headliners were Owen Davidson, Jeff Salzenstein, Scott Humphries and Cory Ross were the ones that played the professional exhibition at Gates that night. We had Mayor (John) Hickenlooper playing, the district attorney Mitch Morrissey, we had Jake Schroeder, the lead singer from Opie Gone Bad, Jim Benemann from Channel 4 News and Christine Chang from Channel 7 News all as the celebrities participating, as well as a real good cross section of good adult and junior players and pros from around town."

Respect is a word that belongs in the same sentence with Zodin, whether it's respecting the sport of tennis or the guests he has on his radio show.

"He has a very charming personality period. He has tremendous amount of respect for people," Sarah Zodin said. "He knows his guests. You can sit and have a conversation with him, and he'll tell you about a match in 2003 that he watched at the U.S. Open between Rafael Nadal and somebody when Rafael Nadal was not a big name. He has a memory that is just phenomenal, and he's very gracious and he's very respectful. You can tell his respect for the game, and the accomplishments of the people in the game. It's all about that one word, and that is respect."

Colorado's Voice of Tennis certainly has earned it. 🙌

Raven Chavez-Maltby wasn't born with a racquet in his hand, but it might be hard to convince you otherwise. The 12-year-old 7th grader at Holmes Middle School in Colorado Springs has spent the last four summers attending the STARS summer camp at Memorial Park Tennis Center, and this year he was given the chance to become a Junior Coach – an opportunity to allow him to mentor and teach the younger kids who are new to the program.

"It's really awesome," says Raven, whose enthusiasm seems to spill out of him in buckets. "So far, I'm just teaching forehands and backhands and how to hold the racquet, but it makes me feel really good to be able to teach the littler kids how to play tennis."

Raven's father, Jeffrey Maltby, has seen a tremendous difference in his son's confidence and determination. "Raven gets better every year," Jeffrey says. "But now that he has the chance to help the little ones learn tennis, I can really see how much he's maturing. He's very determined, and I'm very grateful and appreciative of what the program has given him."

All this might not have been possible, were it not for Penny Young, who conducted a tennis demonstration at Raven's school, Helen Hunt Elementary, nearly four years ago. Ever since, he's been hooked. "It's an awesome sport!" he says.

STARS Tennis teaches low-income youth basic tennis skills in a fun atmosphere, using drills to teach sportsmanship, mutual respect, and how to work hard and have fun. The players have a blast, become empowered with a lifelong skill, and have a racquet and fun memories to keep.

It was Penny's son, Matt, who started the program 14 years ago, when he himself was just a 14-year-old freshman at Cheyenne Mountain High School. He wanted to do something to share his love of the sport, so he took it upon himself to mentor as many kids as he could find who were interested in playing tennis. That first year, Matt had one student. Soon the word spread, and more kids from the surrounding neighborhoods wanted to play. The next summer, there were so many kids, Matt recruited his brother Brad, and fellow Cheyenne Mountain teammates to help him coach. Today, the program incorporates 50 players, and nearly 30 coaches (boys and girls) from Cheyenne Mountain, Air Academy, Palmer, Colorado Springs School, Lewis Palmer, Doherty and Pine Creek schools.

"The coaches – all students themselves – make all the decisions: they write grant applications and thank-you notes, organize the schedule and instruction, make all the arrangements (for court time, racquets, balls, etc.) and bring refreshments," says Brad. "Matt started this tradition, it's a culture of students being in charge."

This is the first year that STARS has offered a Junior Coach program, whereby former and current students of the program get the opportunity to help mentor and coach the incoming groups.

Most of the kids who attend the Sunday program, which runs May through August, live near the park. According to Jeffrey Maltby, it's an area that sees a lot of single-parent households. "Most of these kids have just their mom, or their dad, at home. I bet 60-70% of these kids wouldn't be involved in tennis at all if it weren't for STARS."

The coaches volunteer to participate in STARS because they all love tennis and have fun sharing their sport. "It's great community service and a way to give back to the community," says Brad. "The real reward, though, has been seeing the joy, pride and absolute fun the kids experience. Our biggest reward can't be measured."

The coaches become mentors and role models for their players, gain important insight into a different world, and have fun, meaningful memories to keep.

Raven has every intention of returning next summer, improving his game and taking a more active role in STARS. In a few years, he plans to become a lead coach.

"I think it's great. It'll be really fun." 🙌



Eric Larson, Physical Education Coordinator for Denver Public Schools, watches Swansea Elementary students participating in a recent physical education class.

ERIC LARSON

STORY AND PHOTO BY DENNIS HUSPENI

For Eric Larson, a summer activity as a child blossomed into a lifelong love of tennis. Now the children of the Denver Public Schools are reaping the benefits of Larson's passion for the game. Larson, physical education coordinator for the district, has worked hard in his seven years in that position to put a racquet in as many elementary and middle school students' hands as possible.

"Most schools have no access to tennis courts," Larson said. "That, coupled with the cost, can discourage some from teaching it."

So Larson tapped into the resources offered by USTA Colorado. He got PE teachers into free workshops on how to teach tennis. He started building a cache of USTA-donated racquets, portable nets and balls for teachers to check out for tennis units.

"Tennis fits into our fitness standards. It also fits into our skills standards," he said. "It can become a lifetime sport and lifetime activity – all of which fit into our physical education standards."

Larson started playing at 8-years-old when his parents signed him up for a parks and recreation program at Berkeley Park in northwest Denver.

"My parents introduced me to tennis and it just grew into a lifelong love," he said.

All three of Larson's children played tennis for Wheat Ridge High school – his son is still a student there. And to this day, Larson and his three children – his daughters are now 27 and 20 – still play doubles matches together.

Before becoming the district coordinator, he was the PE teacher for 17 years at Montclair Elementary.

"As a teacher, I always included tennis as one of the units I taught," Larson said. "I made sure each kid had a racquet and a ball."

Though the tennis courts were across the street from the school, Larson would teach the students "mini games" on the blacktop. The school's Parent Teacher Association bought the racquets, used by children as young as kindergarten and first grade.

"The kids loved it. They all were busy because they each had a racquet," he said.

With the USTA's help, Larson is trying to spread that love of the game to as many of the districts' 75,269 students as possible. Though the program started small, he estimates almost half of the districts' 102 elementary and middle schools now offer tennis.

Robin Nehls, the PE teacher for Swansea Elementary, said she took the workshop a couple of years ago and has used the districts' equipment for a summer recreation program. She hopes to introduce a tennis unit soon.

"There was one boy from the program I saw recently, who is now in middle school," Nehls said. "He is still really excited about tennis."

Introducing tennis to young children helps break down the inaccurate stereotype that the sport is only for the wealthy, says Larson.

"We have a pretty diverse population and not a lot of kids get a chance to experience tennis," Larson said. "Some kids, if they didn't play with a racquet in physical education, might never to get a chance to experience it." 🌀

A fixture in the Boulder tennis community for more than a decade, Sue Burke possesses an infectious laugh and an unrivaled passion for tennis that just can't be contained.

Sue grew up in the township of Cherry Hill in southern New Jersey, not far from the Philadelphia border. She learned to play tennis by hitting countless balls against the walls of her school with a racquet she bought from the local department store. But her tennis career might have never gotten off the ground if the custodians at Cherry Hill East High School had discovered her secret. When winter came, Sue would surreptitiously unlock one of the school's windows, only to return later that night, open the window, and crawl inside. The heated spaces inside the school – and more importantly the vast expanse of wall space – would become her training ground during the long cold winters.

"I grew up with relatively little money," Sue recalls. "We didn't have enough to hire a coach, or to afford lessons at an indoor club, so I just made the best of it."

Sue parlayed those self-directed training sessions to a spot on the Rutgers tennis team, and later to the women's pro tour, both as a player and a coach. But her lengthy tennis career only tells part of Sue's remarkable story.

Six years ago, Sue was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS), a debilitating neurological disease that affects the central nervous system.

"My first thought," recall Sue, "was, oh my God, what if I can never hit a volley again?"

She says she "ran away" from the disease, competing in marathons and pushing her body as far as she could, just to prove that it was still working and to raise money for college scholarships for youth affected by MS. It's been six years since she was diagnosed, but Sue continues to defy the effects of the disease. While MS has presented some physical challenges, it has done nothing to dampen her determination to help introduce others to tennis.

"Billie Jean is an inspiration to me. She challenged me by asking, 'What legacy will you leave?' I try to live up to that challenge every day, by sharing my passion for tennis, especially with kids."

Growing up without a lot of resources or support, Sue faced self-esteem issues at tournaments – she had to play one high school state tournament match with broken strings – feeling as though she didn't belong in the sport. "It's hard to feel good about yourself when you come with the wrong equipment and clothing, and your opponent shows up with six racquets and fancy outfits."

A few years back, Sue met with Reebok, who had been a personal sponsor of hers for many years. Her goal was to encourage the company to launch the Denver Reebok Urban Youth Tennis Academy, which provides disadvantaged children (7-18) from Denver's inner city with the opportunity to receive high performance training for competitive tennis. Up to 56 players are selected for the program annually in mid-September through tryouts at Denver's City Park. In addition to training, players receive clothing, equipment support, and supplemental entry fees. Players are encouraged to play in local tournaments, high school and USTA sanctioned events with the hope that some players will have the opportunity to obtain collegiate tennis scholarships.

Sue recognizes that she still has the physical capabilities to raise money through various athletic endeavors, as well as continue to be a role model to the many kids she works with.

"Tennis maintains those neurological pathways that allow me to continue to move around and be athletic," Sue says. "I think I can still be a role model through my work ethic and my determination, so that's what I'll continue to do."

Sue's efforts to help open doors for kids in underserved communities earned her a USPTA Industry Excellence Award in 2007. In addition to helping raise funds and introduce tennis to hundreds of disadvantaged kids through the Boys and Girls Clubs of Metro Denver, I Have A Dream Foundation of Boulder and the Open Door Youth Gang Alternative program, she helped to create the tennis curriculum for the 9Health Fair in the Classroom, which reach dozens of local communities and schools across the state.

Today, Sue spends her time running her company, Fitness Innovation and Tennis (F.I.T.), which takes a whole body approach to the athlete. She's also on the Colorado Governor's Council for Physical Fitness, helping to promote the many health benefits of tennis.

She's also been instrumental in helping to raise the necessary funds to build Colorado's first permanent QuickStart facility at El Dorado K-8 School in Superior. Sue and Lisa Christie, her partner in F.I.T., have been working to reconfigure the two dilapidated courts at the school to include four 18x36-foot QuickStart courts, as well as one full-size court painted with 60-foot lines (for the older kids). Construction will begin in the next few weeks, and will likely be finished before the winter.

Sue and Lisa's idea was to start a comprehensive tennis program for the Boulder Valley School District and the surrounding area.

"Kids are specialized so early," Sue says, "tennis doesn't get all the natural athletes."

Lots of times, she explains, athletically gifted kids gravitate toward team sports so that they can be with their friends.

"We need a collaborative effort to introduce kids to tennis by growing the base and increasing the talent pool," explains Sue. "Talent deserves opportunity, and this project will hopefully help us develop players' competitive skills, the on-court instincts and game sense."

Beyond physical talent, Sue doesn't want to see tennis lose out on some of these athletes because of demographics.

"Tennis shouldn't be a game limited by affordability or accessibility," she says. "It creates friendships and offers benefits and opportunities that last you a lifetime." 🌀



SUE BURKE

STORY AND PHOTO BY KURT DESAUTELS

You typically need high-speed film to capture Sue Burke, who never seems to slow down despite being diagnosed with MS six years ago. Whether she's coaching, running her business or raising money for grassroots tennis programs, Sue exhibits a passion for growing the game that few others can match.