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Tennis-based Rehabilitation for Wounded, Ill and Injured Service Members: Background, Impact, Lessons Learned, and FAQs

By Steve Kappes, last updated February 2013

Background.

In September 2009, tennis professionals from the Balboa Tennis Club in San Diego approached representatives from Naval Medical Center San Diego (NMCS D) to explore options for establishing a tennis-based rehabilitation program for wounded service members. NMCS D is one of three major military hospitals in the country that has the resources and capacity to treat and care for the most seriously wounded through its world-class Comprehensive Combat and Complex Casualty Care (C5) center. As a result, it treats hundreds of wounded service members from all services every month.

NMCS D already had a sports and recreation-based rehabilitation program for its patients called the Balboa Warrior Athlete Program (BWAP), but tennis was not a part of it. After several meetings, the tennis pros and hospital representatives developed a tennis program for the BWAP that focused primarily on wounded service members who had recently returned from Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, the program is informally known as the "Wounded Warrior Tennis Program", although ill and non-combat injured service members also participate (e.g., those diagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, cancer, orthopedic impairments, etc.). It began in November 2009, and is still going strong.

Twice a month, the hospital transports the service members to Balboa Tennis Club, about one mile away, for 60-90 minute tennis clinics. Typically 10-25 patients attend each session. Several tennis pros and up to a dozen volunteers meet with the patients' Recreational Therapist before each session to be briefed on the patients' capabilities and limitations (although she is careful to maintain patient confidentiality). The range of their injuries is diverse; some use sports wheelchairs furnished by the hospital, and some use upper and/or lower limb prosthetics. Many have no apparent physical disabilities, but are suffering from Traumatic Brain Injuries, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or other illnesses.

Balboa Tennis Club donates the court time (typically 3-5 courts), loans all the necessary tennis equipment, and the pros and volunteers run group and individual clinics tailored to the needs of each patient. After the clinics, the Recreational Therapist de-briefs the pros and volunteers, and offers suggestions for improving future clinics. Once everyone is off the courts, volunteers prepare and serve healthy lunches to everyone involved, and the group spends about an hour eating and socializing.

Impact.

The program is making a positive impact in the lives of the service members. Their Recreational Therapist reported, "We have seen a tremendous growth in the number of patients attending this bi-monthly program. The pros and volunteers are great with the patients. They are able to break down various drills so that everyone feels some sense of success and accomplishment. Several patients have enjoyed playing so much that they have purchased their own racquets and are receiving more personalized instruction from a dedicated volunteer on a weekly basis. "

“Therapeutically, tennis has helped our ill, injured and wounded service members work on eye-hand coordination, balance, endurance, ability to transfer weight, etc. Besides the physical benefits, tennis enables the patients to learn a new sport, promotes socialization, decreases stress and anxiety, and helps with re-integration into the community. I hope it is an activity they will be able to play individually, with friends and family post-discharge.”

The program is also making an impact at the national level. It has been recognized for excellence by the United States Tennis Association (USTA; the governing body of tennis in the U.S.), and the United States Professional Tennis Association (USPTA; the organization of certified, professional tennis instructors). It has been used as the model for similar programs that have been established at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, and at the Charlie Norwood Veterans Administration Hospital in Augusta, Georgia.

Once wounded service members are cleared to leave the major military hospitals, they often move to Army Warrior Transition Units and Marine Corps Wounded Warrior Battalions and Detachments across the country to continue their rehabilitation. Tennis therapy programs, based on the San Diego program, have been established at Army Transition Units at Fort Belvoir, Virginia; Fort Campbell, Kentucky; and Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. The Marine Corps Wounded Warrior Battalion at Camp Pendleton is in the process of starting a tennis program based on the San Diego program at their new state-of-the-art Hope and Care Center, and their Detachment in Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii is running a tennis program for their wounded Marines.

To reach even more wounded, ill, and injured service members and veterans, the San Diego District Tennis Association, in collaboration with Naval Medical Center San Diego and Balboa Tennis Club, held the first national tennis camp for that population from May 16-19, 2012. The United States Olympic Committee provided a \$15,000 grant (funded by the Veterans Administration). Other disabled sports organizations (e.g., Challenged Athletes Foundation’s Operation Rebound, Disabled Sports USA), local community service organizations (e.g., Rotary, VFW), local small businesses, and individual donors followed suit. Over 40 service members and veterans from 17 states participated, along with a dozen of their caregivers. All of their airfare, lodging, meals, local transportation costs, and tennis equipment were covered. The Commander of NMCS D, Rear Admiral Forrest Faison, visited the camp, and in a letter to the President of the USTA, wrote,

“I want you to know what an impressive clinic this is and what a difference it is making in the lives of those who have sacrificed to serve our country. I saw smiles, camaraderie and true happiness amongst the wounded warriors, all of whom have had life changing injuries, but are on the road to recovery with bright futures because of outreach services like this.”

As a result of this success, the San Diego District Tennis Association will be holding a second national camp from June 12-15, 2013. We have received grants from the US Olympic Committee/VA (\$25,000), USTA Serves (\$10,000), and Challenged Athletes Foundation Operation Rebound (\$7500), and are continuing to seek sponsorships from local community support organizations, businesses and individuals so we can again cover all costs for the participants.

Lessons Learned.

1. **The Recreational Therapist is key.** She is intimately familiar with each patient's history, injuries, treatment plan, physical capabilities/limitations, personality, attitude, disposition, and interests. She understands how various injuries impact a person's mobility, ability to process information, learn new skills and follow directions. This is critical information for the tennis pros and volunteers to know in advance in order to run effective clinics. She assigns the patients to groups based on their abilities, and matches the groups to the pros and volunteers who are best suited to work with them. She fully participates in the clinics with the patients, and closely monitors their activities to help them feel at ease, to ensure safety, and to assess their progress.

2. **The program's goals should be well-defined and understood by all.** Some of the pros and volunteers initially focused too much on teaching technical aspects of tennis (grips, stroke mechanics, tactics, etc.). The patients eventually requested activities that involved more movement and games. In the words of one, "I'm not going to be a tennis pro; I just want to have a good time." The Recreational Therapist added, "Most just want to get back to their (emotionally) happy place." Since most patients are in the program for just a few weeks or months before they are discharged from the hospital and leave the area, the goal was changed to give them just enough instruction to be successful with activities that are fun for them, so that they are likely to continue playing once they return to their hometowns. A few patients who have been interested in playing more have returned to the club on their own initiative for extra tips and practice with the volunteers. Although some have become fairly good players, the program's success is measured by how much progress the patients make recovering from their injuries by playing tennis, not just by how much they improve their tennis skills.

3. **Tennis pros and volunteers should be briefed on how to work and communicate with the patients.** It's especially important for the pros and volunteers to understand basic military terminology, the rehabilitation process the patients are going through, and communication "Do's and Don'ts". Several of the pros and volunteers are veterans, and have helped educate the other pros and volunteers about this. In addition, the Recreational Therapist presented a comprehensive briefing to all the pros and volunteers that addressed these and related topics, and she reiterates key points to them before and after each clinic. This knowledge helps the pros and volunteers be more sensitive to the patients, and establish better rapport and trust with them.

4. **Tennis pros and volunteers must be creative, flexible, and patient.** The patients' skills and attitudes can fluctuate from session to session based on their recoveries, additional operations, and new prosthetics to name a few, and there is a wide range of capabilities in every group. In addition, there are always new patients in the group, and that can affect the dynamics. Some patients may be willing to try modified equipment (e.g., foam or low-compression balls and smaller racquets on smaller playing areas), while others might insist on using regular equipment on a full court. Some might not mind changing partners, while others might insist on playing only with a trusted companion. Pros and volunteers should be prepared to use a variety of teaching methods, change activities throughout the clinics if necessary, and not take any patients' frustrations or setbacks personally.

5. **Tennis pros and volunteers must respect the patients' self-esteem and privacy.** Most patients do not want to be perceived or labeled as disabled, and do not want to talk about how they were injured.

They typically want to be treated like everyone else, and want to be challenged within limits. The Recreational Therapist advised the pros and volunteers to refrain from asking the patients specific questions about their injuries, and refrain from offering advice on how to deal with their circumstances. She recommended simple small talk; nothing intrusive. Privacy issues also must be considered when developing public relations material about the program. The hospital's Public Affairs Officer provided helpful guidance and direction in this regard.

Frequently Asked Questions:

How many service members have participated in the program? Over 500 service members have participated in the San Diego program since it was established in November 2009. Some have been in just a few tennis clinics because their stay at NMCS D was relatively brief, and they subsequently left for Warrior Transition Units or their hometowns. Others who have required more extensive treatment and rehabilitation at NMCS D have attended many clinics spanning over a year. There are new patients in every clinic.

Can the service members' families participate in the program? Yes. One of the program's goals is for the service members to want to continue to play tennis outside the clinics and when they return to their hometowns. Getting their families involved is a good way to do that.

How many tennis pros and volunteers participate? Typically four pros and about a dozen volunteers participate in each clinic, although it fluctuates based on the number of patients. Over 10 pros and 30 volunteers have participated in the program since it was established.

What roles do the volunteers have? Those who are accomplished players assist on-court by providing basic instruction, feeding balls, and running simple drills and games. Others assist by picking up balls, providing water and other assistance to the players. Some bring extra chairs and tables for the lunches.

What are the costs associated with the program? The bi-monthly program runs at relatively low cost. The hospital provides transportation for the patients to and from the tennis club. The club donates the court time and loans all the necessary equipment to the patients. The tennis pros volunteer their time, as do the club members. The greatest recurring expense has been for the food for the lunches that are prepared and served by volunteers. Individual donors have been the primary source of funding for the lunches.

What has the tennis community done to support this program? Local tennis clubs have held fundraisers to help pay for the lunches. Dunlop Sports donated several dozen racquets to a group of patients at one point. The San Diego District Tennis Association provides up to \$1000 a year to support the program. The USTA provided complimentary tickets for the patients to attend the Fed Cup in San Diego, and features the program in their national Military Outreach newsletter and on its Facebook page. The USPTA featured the program in their national magazine, which generated interest among pros in other parts of the country to want to start similar programs. The Mercury Insurance Open Women's Professional tennis tournament recognized the program's patients at their "Celebrate Our Heroes" event at La Costa, California in 2011 and 2012.

What could additional funds be used for? Funds could be used to continue to subsidize the post-clinic lunches; purchase a variety of tennis gear for the patients so they could play outside the clinics and when they return to their hometowns; defray the costs of lessons, camps or club memberships for those who want to pursue the sport more seriously; pay for transportation and tickets to local professional tennis events like the Mercury Insurance Open at La Costa, the BNP Paribas Open at Indian Wells, and pay for transportation to the multi-day tennis camp for disabled service members and veterans from around the country.

Additional Resources:

The most information about the San Diego District's Wounded Warrior Tennis clinics and camps can be found in the Wounded Warrior Tennis section of the District's website –

<http://www.sandiegotennis.com> . Please also see:

Naval Medical Center San Diego (NMCS D) - <http://www.med.navy.mil/SITES/NMCS D/Pages/default.aspx>

NMCS D Wounded, Ill, and Injured - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AnyuXeXG8s>

Balboa Warrior Athlete Program - <http://www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmcsd/patients/pages/bwap.aspx>

BWAP Tennis Program - <http://www.10news.com/video/27056741/index.html>

Balboa Tennis Club – <http://www.balboatennis.com/>

USTA Military Outreach – <http://www.usta.com/military>

USTA Military Outreach Facebook - <http://www.facebook.com/USTAMilitaryOutreach>

About the author:

Steve Kappes is a former career Navy Officer (Captain, Ret.), and current USPTA-certified tennis instructor. He co-founded and helps run the NMCS D BWAP “Wounded Warrior” Tennis Program at Balboa Tennis Club. He is currently the President of the San Diego District Tennis Association, and is the Chair of its Military Outreach Committee. He also serves on the Board of Directors of the Southern California Tennis Association, and the San Diego Division of the USPTA. At the national level, he serves on the USTA’s Adaptive Tennis Committee, and is a member of the USTA’s Military Outreach Team. He welcomes inquiries, and can be reached at stevekappes@hotmail.com.