

Tennis club, public courts open for play

Penny Coles
The Local

The Niagara-on-the-Lake Tennis Club celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, one that will be far from what was anticipated.

Much of the normal activity of a very social club has been cancelled, including tournaments, skills clinics, and festivities expected to recognize the milestone year.

Board member Rosemary Goodwin says celebrations have been put off until 2021, with a bonus of possibly attracting more members from previous decades.

The much-anticipated 2020 season began at Memorial Park Saturday morning, with members anxious to get out on the courts, says club vice-president Gerry McIlhorne.

Members were expecting to wait until the end of June for town facilities to open, but were happy with the provincial decision to open tennis courts and the out-

door sports facilities.

Working with guidelines established by Tennis Canada and the Ontario Tennis Association, says McIlhorne, the club directors were confident they could open for play safely.

They are restricting the courts to singles only, unless four members from the same household want to play doubles.

And for now, there will be no guests or groups on the courts.

Each player must use their own marked ball, using their feet or racquet to return stray balls.

There is an entrance and exit gate, and all players must keep to physical distancing guidelines — a simple requirement in tennis singles play, says McIlhorne, who was at the courts Saturday to monitor compliance of all guidelines.

Although no date has been set, directors are planning for a phase two of operations, with doubles play

for all, the return of tournaments and events, and availability equipment that is being withheld for now.

The club has grown from 26 members who began playing on courts located on the grounds of the former Niagara District Secondary School, to more than 300 members.

In 1986, following two years of determined efforts and fundraising, the club partnered with the Town to develop the Memorial Park Tennis Centre, with an omni-court surface, "less jarring on bodily joints than traditional asphalt," says Rosemary Goodwin, who has prepared a brief history of the club to mark its 50th celebration.

In 1990, a tennis pavilion was built by club volunteers, with significant support from the Town, writes Goodwin in the club archives, "and continues to be the centre of club social activities."

In 2002, the courts were resurfaced with the same omni-court material, and in the following years, there were several improvements and additions to the pavilion, and with support from the Town and grant funding, in 2012 the current acrylic-coated cushioned asphalt court surfaces were installed.

Since the Province declared the courts could open, "the Town has done a wonderful job preparing the tennis courts, and residents are loving it," says Goodwin.

The nets went up at the public courts in Rye Park Thursday morning, Goodwin says, "and have been in steady use ever since. I expect it's the same at St. Davids and Garrison Village. In the parks, residents tend to arrive by bicycle and play for half an hour, then move on. It ebbs and flows comfortably all day long."

It's a trickier situation at Memorial Park, she adds, with the club organizing 300 adult players on just four courts. "It's a big challenge to structure things such that distancing, hygiene protocols and contact-tracing can be implemented. Players are accustomed to piling in, 16 at a time, with socializing during the crossover times."



Stuart and Sylvia Allen cycled over from their home on Harmony Drive to play tennis on the Rye Park courts Saturday, which saw a steady stream of players throughout the day. (Rosemary Goodwin)

Tennis play will proceed safely under the guidance of club president Wendy Dell, in her fourth and final year as president.

"She is very hard-working and conscientious," says Goodwin, "and working with the support of the club board of directors."

To maintain a safe environment, the club has hired an online booking system, and the restrictions for playing "are similar to what we've become accustomed to in supermarkets."

Online booking "is the only way to avoid having a lot of people show up at the

same time and create crowding situations. The added bonus is the ability to provide contact tracing to health authorities in the event someone is discovered to test positive," says Goodwin.

Players "are panting for tennis," she adds. "So many people have said 'if only we had tennis, then we wouldn't mind all the other deprivations.' But a big part of the joy of tennis is the social interaction and camaraderie. The task for the club's directors is to rein that in, reminding everyone that the pandemic hasn't gone away; the virus is still active in the

community, and we all have to follow the guidelines in order to avoid an outbreak. All those front-line workers whom we were cheering a few weeks ago will be very disappointed if the caseload spikes again. So we're very happy that tennis is back, but it's certainly not back to normal," says Goodwin.

"Of course that's the situation everywhere in Niagara-on-the-Lake," she adds. "Everyone is working out how to make adjustments such that we can have more freedom and activity, while still staying safe and keeping others safe."



Wayne Vent and Patrick MacNeil were on the Memorial Park NOTL Tennis Club courts Saturday morning, where they had no problem physical distancing and following other safety measures set out by the club. (Penny Coles)

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