

# Local SPORTS

## Tennis Club seeing boom in members ready to play

**Mike Balsom**  
Special to The Local

The Niagara-on-the-Lake Tennis Club has welcomed a record number of new members for this summer. According to president Hugh Dow, about 50 newcomers are ready to swing their racquets at Memorial Park. But as of last Friday's announcement from Premier Doug Ford, they will be waiting a few weeks longer to step onto the courts.

"Late (Friday) night the town advised us that all facilities were being closed, including tennis courts, effective immediately," Dow tells The Local. "We're hoping that by May 20, unless the provincial order is changed or modified by then, that's the date we're kind of working toward for the courts hopefully to be open."

Dow, who took on the president's role last October, isn't all that surprised by the delay. After many conversations with town CAO Marnie Cluckie, the club was ready to get things going soon, albeit in a modified way.

"We were just sort of ramping up, with nothing formal in place," explains Dow. "We normally get things going, depending on weather, in early to mid-May."

Those plans, of course, are now on hold.

With two new courts going in at Memorial Park, this could have been a big year for the club. The courts take the

place of the beach volleyball court near the entrance to the park, which was removed last year. They are currently awaiting final surfacing, known as colour coating, and installation of the posts for the nets.

"We're very excited about that," raves Dow. "It's been quite literally a 10-year dream to have these new courts. It will make us the largest hard court facility in the entire Niagara Region. Some of the other clubs have clay and hard courts, but we'll have six hard courts. It will become a pretty important component of the town's facilities."

The club has already been through a pandemic summer, and has learned how to adjust to the demands of the times.

"We had to put COVID protocols in place," he says of the 2020 season, "and as various protocols changed and were modified we adopted those. But throughout the entire season we had things in place such as separate entry and exit gates, social distancing. Many people wore masks on the court until they started to play. The protocols were observed by everyone."

As anyone who has been involved with or observed the club would know, though, the social aspect of tennis in NOTL is a huge part of the experience. Much of that was missing in 2020, and will most likely continue to fall by the wayside this summer.

Dow, who joined the club in 2011 after moving here from Toronto, had previously



The NOTL Tennis Club is closed until the province and town says it can open for the season. When it does, it will have many new members ready to play, says club president Hugh Dow. (Mike Balsom)

been involved with tennis clubs in the big city. He can't remember another tennis club that has been so socially motivated.

"We're a very socially-oriented club," Dow avers. "The social aspect of it has historically been a very important component of how we operate. We have somewhat of an older demographic, which is obviously a factor. The majority of play, probably 85 to 90 per cent, is doubles play. And as a result our social events have been extremely well-attended."

Traditionally, Monday nights are for the men's league, women's league is on Wednesdays, and mixed doubles matches take place on Fridays. Dow says that this year there are already 75 members who have signed up for Mondays.

"That gives you some idea as to how interested people are in terms of playing together and socializing. It was something that was dramatically missed last year. We discouraged any social gatherings before and after games, and from what I could see virtually everybody adhered to that."

Dow surmises that more than 13 months into the pandemic, the pent-up demand for outdoor activities is what has led to the surge in membership. He guesses that with people still signing up, the club will end up with as many as 300 members.

"We were quite surprised, particularly, with the number of new members who have showed up," Dow says. "Our club professional Shawna MacFarlane has already had over 50 people taking lessons

with her this year. It's an indication of the level of interest, and it's been quite noteworthy, but it all came to a crashing halt (Friday)."

The decision by the province to curtail activities such as tennis and golf has left Dow and the other members of the club's board baffled. He feels often the people who make decisions such as this one don't necessarily have a good understanding of exactly what happens in these athletic endeavours.

A visit to the club's website, though, shows that positive thinking reigns supreme. A list of events begins on May 29 with a club social and a mixed round robin tournament, and even includes the annual Tennis Ball dinner dance on Sept. 17. Dow admits that there may be a bit of a question mark on some of

the early season events.

"We made it clear that these dates are really tentative," he says, "and really depend on our own judgements and obviously what the town and the province have in store for us."

"We have a really strong board this year," Dow continues. "It's a really strong team. We have a lot of things to wrestle with, but I'm really pleased to see how everybody is so involved and really does their part."

Of the delay, the board is resigned to the fact that there's not much they can do about it.

"We're just going to have to accept it," Dow says. "We're looking forward instead of looking back, though, and with the new courts hopefully available we're going to have a good season ahead of us."

## Local HAPPENINGS

### FRIDAY NIGHT TRIVIA "FRIENDS"

April 23 @ 7:30 p.m. - 8 p.m.

Join us this Friday when the Trivia will be all about the show Friends. Gather the gang and get competitive! Join us for a virtual trivia night from the comfort of your couch. Play on your phone, computer or tablet, no app needed just a web browser. All are welcome! Log On To: CROWD.LIVE Enter This Code: ABJWW

## AUTHOR TALKS