

Getting the swing of it



LUKAS
EGGEN

Commentary

It was my big moment.

A point where I would feel like the greatest tennis player who ever lived.

A gentle lob seemed to hang forever in the air. I rushed to the net, took aim and smashed the ball for a winner. I tried to act calm, but I couldn't help but give a small fist pump of satisfaction.

Yes, I was playing doubles. And yes, both of my opponents were high school girls.

No, that didn't make the moment any less glorious.

Taking part in open tennis play at Dallas High School on June 22 was a lesson in frustration and triumph.

A vast majority of the people there fell mainly into two camps: older adults or high school students — many of whom were on the tennis team.

Not exactly my dream scenario.

But Thomas Gniadecki, the third-place finisher at the OSA 5A state tennis tournament, was there.

I hoped that his skills would transmit over to me. That I would be turned into a good player and would sneak up on people during



LUKAS EGGEN/Itemizer-Observer

Open tennis play at Dallas High School on June 22 helped Lukas improve ... slightly.

the Fourth of July Tennis Tournament, ninja style.

Unfortunately, I have yet to perfect passing knowledge through psychic links.

As players warmed up, things seemed to go OK. Thomas kept complimenting my "skills" at a rate that seemed suspiciously high ... but I let it pass. Maybe I really was discovering a hidden natural talent. Could tennis have been my true calling all along? Had I chosen the wrong path in life?

Then, we started playing for real.

I assumed Thomas would essentially be my personal coach. I soon realized once organizers assigned each of us a number that my opponents — and playing partner — would be random.

Uh oh.

At first I decided to be preemptive and apologize for the atrocity that she was about to witness.

To my surprise ... it wasn't a complete disaster. My first

couple hits landed in.

Then I tried to serve. One serve went into the net. Another went long. And, possibly the most embarrassing, was one that nearly hit my playing partner in the back.

I'm no expert, but I'm pretty sure injuring your partner is a bad thing.

Game two saw me join forces with one of the older players against Thomas and his playing partner.

When it was Thomas' turn to serve things didn't exactly

go well for me. His first serve rocketed past me. His next serve to me I decided I was going to hit a rocket back at him. I took a giant swing and ... whiffed. His last serve to me I returned, but was clearly sailing out. Thomas played it anyway. Through it all, the "nice try" and "good effort" compliments came my way.

I received similar compliments during my brief baseball career as a young child when, I, for some reason,

thought I had to swing at every pitch thrown to me.

It also didn't help that, having seen Thomas play competitive tennis, I also knew he was serving at far less than full effort.

By contrast, my serves continued to land everywhere but in. Finally, Thomas suggested perhaps I just try hitting it lightly over the net instead of going for a full serve — the equivalent of someone telling me to shoot granny style in basketball because my shot couldn't reach the hoop.

The next game, things began to turn. Paired with another older player, I felt a burst of energy. I moved around the court like Rafa Nadal. My forehands were on target — or at least more on target than before. And, thanks to a tip of where to make contact with the ball on my serves, my serves landed in! They may not be fast, but at least my playing partner was no longer in danger of a sneak attack.

By our final round, I was more confident than ever. And it was during this round that I had the shot heard round the world.

By the end of our nearly two hours of playing, I was spent, physically. But it was fun. And, most importantly, I felt confident that I won't make a complete joke of myself this weekend. Get ready tennis world. A new star has been born.

Mini: Mini-Marathon a unique event

Continued from Page 11A

"There are already lots of activities going on. It's a fairly simple race. The distance is reasonable, which makes it nice, too."

The run, scheduled for 11:30 a.m. on Monday, leads runners on a 2.6-mile course from Monmouth City Hall to downtown Independence along the Grand Parade route.

With thousands of spectators lining the streets, taking part in the mini-marathon is truly a magical moment, Cable said, especially for those new to running.

"In my experience, the majority of the people are really kind of novice runners," Cable said. "That's part of the fun. For someone who maybe is not as confident in their ability, the little bit of extra encouragement goes a long ways, I'm sure. It makes it more special, helps

motivate people and gives them confidence to do it and helps them feel that much better to achieve something like this for everybody to witness."

The weather in Polk County can be unpredictable, but in case of hotter temperatures, Cable said — while the race will also have plenty of water at the start and finish — taking other precautions, like wearing hats, will also help.

For first-time runners, Cable also suggests having a plan for post-race.

"It's a one-way course so you either have to plan on ending up in Independence or have other arrangements in mind to get back to (Monmouth)," Cable said.

Registration for the mini-marathon is available online at www.eclectic0edgeracing.com/Monmouth_Mini_Marathon.html.

Day of race registration will be available on Monday from 8 to 10:30 a.m. near the start line.

No matter if this is your first time lacing up your shoes or you're a veteran runner, the Monmouth-Independence Mini-Marathon remains a pillar of the area's Fourth of July celebration, Cable said.

Cable was there for the first race.

Now, he's excited to see what new memories the run can bring.

"It's so unique," Cable said. "As opposed to some other races where you're running by yourself and there isn't that crowd support, the cheering from the crowd makes this so much more fun. This is just a good, traditional activity that has been part of the tradition of Western Days."



LUKAS EGGEN/Itemizer-Observer file

The Monmouth-Independence Mini-Marathon attracts a large group of runners.

Olympics: Group hopes to draw in new volunteers

Continued from Page 11A

The Polk County section doesn't boast the numbers of other areas in the state, but smaller groups do have their advantages.

Jim Ezell moved to Polk County from Corvallis about a year ago with his wife, Anne. Together, they participated in Special Olympics in Benton County.

The difference has been night and day.

"Corvallis is a little more competitive," Jim said. "They have at least 40 coming out for bocce ball. Here, it's a handful. Corvallis is a little more strict. Here, it's more family oriented. It's like how it was when I first started in 1991 when it was a lot of fun."

Wimer said she hopes to see an increase in participation numbers over the next few years. But with increased numbers comes a greater need for volunteers.

You don't need a deep background in sports to help out.

"Really the opportunities are endless," Kluser said. "If people want to help out, we'll find a way for them to. Some of it is just coming to prac-



LUKAS EGGEN/Itemizer-Observer

Special Olympics gives its athletes a chance to compete and make friends with people across the state.

tices and being a fan in the stands — being someone cheering them on. The athletes appreciate that, and they love having people come watch them and follow them through competitions."

For those who do volunteer, the experience can affect them in ways they never

imagined and be as beneficial to them as to the athletes they are helping.

"It's a great opportunity for anybody to get involved," Kluser said. "I believe we get impacted more than we impact other people's lives. It's a life-changing experience for everybody involved."

Watson: Touched people's lives in a positive manner

Continued from Page 11A

"While we are grateful for the community support and concern, we would appreciate some space to grieve and make necessary arrangements at this time."

A celebration of life service will be Friday at 7 p.m. at Panther Stadium.

A gofundme to help pay for funeral costs has been set up at www.gofundme.com/2bk4y2k.

"This is not something any of us plan to do," Hedrick said. "It's more terrible when you're a parent burying a child. To think your son is going to go into his junior year and all of a sudden you're planning a funeral, nobody talks about this. Any help would be very much appreciated."

Central High School had counseling

services available Monday morning and at the vigil on Tuesday. The Central Health and Wellness center, located at 1601 Monmouth St., Independence, will also have additional counseling services available during business hours.

The cause of Watson's drowning was not known as of press time, but his loss affected all those whom he touched.

"I'm still kind of numb," Hedrick said. "I received a call from the local police on Sunday and they asked me to notify the family. I've been coaching for 31 years now. I've never lost a player. I've had players lose dads or moms, but never a player. It was heartbreaking to knock on someone's door and tell them their son died in an accident. ... He was taken way too soon."

Car wash to raise money for Cody Watson memorial

Itemizer-Observer staff report

INDEPENDENCE — A fundraiser car wash will be held Saturday from 8 a.m. to noon. The car wash will be held at First

Baptist Church, 1505 Monmouth St., Independence.

All money raised during the car wash will go toward Cody Watson's memorial.

Visit our website, www.polkio.com for local news, sports and community events.