

# Tennis club for Down syndrome players following through

**BUDDY UP TENNIS** Inc. is growing fast, with a second program in Cincinnati and more to come.

BY MELISSA KOSSLER DUTTON  
| FOR BUSINESS FIRST

A friendly offer to teach to Will Gibson, now 5, how to play tennis has led to dozens of Central Ohio residents with Down syndrome learning the game and improving their lives.

When Will was 3 years old, instructors at the Wickertree Tennis and Fitness club offered to teach tennis basics to the youngster, who has Down syndrome. While researching techniques and methods, the instructors learned about a tennis program designed for people with the disorder.

They decided to hold a clinic and invited individuals with Down syndrome to attend. They were amazed by the response, said Will's mother, Beth Gibson. At the end of the program, the New Albany mother surveyed the participants.

"One thing was consistent," she recalled. "Everyone was hoping for a program that would meet on a regular basis."

So in late 2008, Gibson partnered with the Columbus tennis club to offer tennis lessons with fitness opportunities. A year later, she formed Buddy Up Tennis Inc. with the mission of providing individuals with Down syndrome an enjoyable and supportive environment where they can learn and play tennis while improving their health and other aspects of their lives.

## MAKING CONNECTIONS

Today, the organization offers year-round lessons to children and young adults with Down syndrome, a genetic disorder that causes physical and mental delays.

Participants respond to the physical and mental challenges of the game, Gibson said. They also experience social and emotional growth from the sport.

"Being part of a team helps them come out of their shell," she said.

The fitness portion of the program helps participants in a variety of ways, she said. The



COURTESY BUDDY UP TENNIS INC.

Buddy Up Tennis was founded by Beth Gibson of New Albany, mother of 12-year-old Keegan, left, and his brother, 5-year-old Will. The boys in July helped take the nonprofit to Cincinnati.

activities typically focus on building core strength, an area where patients are weak.

Improving core strength can improve the athlete's gross motor skills, balance and agility, she said.

The program pairs each athlete with a "buddy," who helps them learn to play the game.

A wide variety of people serve as buddies, including middle school students, college students, professionals who work with Down syndrome patients, tennis enthusiasts and friends and family members of the athletes.

Knowledge about tennis is helpful but not required. The program has tennis professionals who are ready to teach vol-

unteers the basics.

Gibson wants buddies who can make a connection with the players.

"We're looking for people who can really be energetic and fun and engaging with our athletes," she said. "It's more important that they're engaging with the athletes."

Being a buddy is one of the most rewarding things Joe Evans said he has ever done. The New Albany resident cherishes the time he spends on the court.

"It's the best part of the week," said Evans, who played tennis in high school. "It's just an incredible, incredible opportunity."

Evans said he and his wife, Patty, are constantly awed by

the "will and determination" of the athletes.

"They're doing all this with limited abilities but at the same time with boundless abilities," he said.

Many athletes bravely face medical procedures and conditions that make a bad day at work seem insignificant, Evans said.

"They are inspiring," he said. "It's not about anything but a step."

Buddy Up recently helped start a similar program in Cincinnati. Gibson would like to see the model be repeated across the nation.

She also would like to grow the organization financially so that players would be able to participate for free. Currently, Buddy Up charges a small fee for participation.

"I don't ever want the fee to be a burden," she said. "It's my goal to provide our services at no cost to the athletes."

The nonprofit could triple its budget in 2011, she said.

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Joe Evans | Buddy Up participant

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