

Fresh sod lays groundwork for old tradition ahead of Pan Am Games



By Brock Weir

To find your roots, you have to do more than scratch the surface, and landscaping crews will be on hand beginning this week to excavate the north lawn of Hillary House, making it ready for July's Pan Am Games.

Unfortunately, while Aurora was not chosen as a GTA venue of sorts for the landmark event, the Town is set to get a piece of the action just in time for the games.

Hillary House and the Aurora Historical Society recently received a grant from Pan Am's Community Celebrations Fund, a \$2 million pot spread around the Greater Toronto Area to raise awareness of the upcoming games and ramp up excitement.

The society (AHS) is putting their share of the money towards transforming their north lawn back to its original purpose, a traditional grass tennis court where, at the turn of the century, the Aurora Community Tennis Club formed.

“They wanted to put together a list of venues where visitors to the games would have an opportunity to visit on a day-to-day basis in and around the city where they could learn about Canadian culture and heritage,” says Bill Albino of the AHS. “They wanted something that combines heritage and sport, and this is about as early as we know tennis happening in Canada.

“There was a grass court on this lawn from about 1900. It was always a little short, but it was always here.”

Whether it was parallel to Yonge Street or skewed a little bit to keep the court fresh really depends on what time in history you're looking at plans, but the Hillary Family made do and the court became a community hub.

Maintenance of the grass court took a hit midway through the First World War and, afterwards, clay courts were constructed on the flat land behind the National Historic Site, which is now used as a nursery by the Aurora Community Arboretum.

Zander Sod is due on site this week to begin the process of laying down sandy loam in preparation for fresh Kentucky blue grass. Once everything is in place, and the new grass is settled, the revitalized court will host five exhibition games on four dates: July 18, 19, and 25, to coincide with the Pan Am Games, and a further date on August 8 to keep the spirit alive during the Parapan games.

“The court will be done by the end of this month,” says Mr. Albino, noting plans are already underway for a new fence along Hillary House's Yonge Street property line, a restored set of steps leading down from the north side of the porch to the court, along with seating, food service tents, and even an umpire's chair borrowed from Timberlane Athletic Club to make these games an event to remember.

And, in keeping with the spirit of the Aurora Historical Society, many of these exhibition games will be played by figures well known in the tennis world, donning period-inspired tennis apparel and playing with vintage wooden racquets, many of which were left behind by the Hillary Family.

Spectators can then expect a Wimbledon-style experience when they make the trek to Hillary House in July and August, including Pimm's, and an exhibition inside Hillary House charting not only the history of tennis in Canada, but also the sporting prowess of the Hillary Family.

Tennis In Canada: From Early Beginnings to Global Success, opens with a preview for members of the AHS on Wednesday, June 3, from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. It opens to the public on Saturday, June 6 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. coinciding with Hillary House's opening weekend of the season and the launch of their 2015 Discovery Days programming.

