

Road Tennis blazes trail in Aurora as 'accessible' sport heads to schools



In his native Barbados, playing lawn tennis was seen by many as something aspirational. It was considered expensive, as far as sports go, and one that could only be played if you had just the right equipment.

But road tennis, a variation on the game played with paddles and a wooden plank serving as a net, made things significantly more accessible for Lionel Eli, and led him to a future representing the country in the Davis Cup.

A Canadian resident for more than 40 years, Eli has joined forces with local sport supporters, the Town of Aurora, and the York Region District School Board (YRDSB) to bring road tennis into local schools, the wider community, and see it become ubiquitous in this country as road hockey has been for generations.

Community leaders came together at Aurora Heights Public School last Wednesday, August 9, to 'launch' the sport in York Region and Canada. The event was also the launch of the sport within the YRDSB as part of its physical education curriculum in the coming school year.

'This is an exciting day,' said Mayor Tom Mrakas. 'With the popularity of racquet sports, I think this is an amazing thing to have started not only in York Region, but right here in the Town of Aurora. We're pretty excited about it.'

The Mayor, who was joined at the launch by local MPs Tony Van Bynen and Leah Taylor Roy, as well as MPP Dawn Gallagher Murphy, thanked community-builder Ron Kellman, a native of Barbados himself, and Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese, who also serves as President of Sport Aurora, for their work in making the launch a reality.

'We're looking forward to this going globally and for it starting right here in the Town of Aurora, I can't think of a better place to begin this journey.'

But the Canadian journey of road tennis technically began last year when it was demonstrated at the Ontario Sports Hall of Fame's annual gala. Hall of Fame President Mark Gravett, who was present for last week's launch, said getting 500 formally-dressed attendees to set up a makeshift court and give the sport a try was a 'perfect' sight to behold, and even caught the eye of Canadian tennis champ Daniel Nestor.

"It just snowballed," said Gravett. "We had young people at the gala, older people, everybody was playing and that's what kicked off the conversation and that's what led us to York Region. I have to say we're ecstatic that York is basically the pioneer to roll this out across Ontario."

The YRDSB hailed the collaboration and the opportunity to introduce the burgeoning sport into local schools, one he described as "very accessible and inclusive" for students.

This was a theme touched upon by MP Taylor Roy as well.

"As communities and towns, we talk a lot about diversity and inclusivity, and this is a great, fun way to promote that," she said. "This is a sport that is inclusive of all people, of all abilities to a certain extent, and it's a great way to reach over to Barbados, another country where we have so many diplomatic [connections]. It's a great way to do it by playing a game, having some fun, and have cultures come together as well. From the perspective of mental health and physical health and getting people out, there's always something about a new game, something that's different, something that's international that people really latch onto."

Added MPP Dawn Gallagher Murphy, "As the Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Health, I look at this as encouraging and moving people towards the physical and mental wellbeing and that starts with sports and new sports like this so people can get engaged in a very simple but fun way."

There was no better testament to the impact of road tennis, a game which is played very much like the lawn variety but with a splash of table tennis game play thrown in for good measure, than Eli, who helped demonstrate the athletic endeavour with young players.

"I have lived in Canada for 45 years and I grew up playing road tennis in Barbados because it was a sport you could play," he said. "Lawn tennis was considered a very expensive sport, so we played road tennis on the street. I transitioned from road tennis and became a professional tennis player; I played at the US Open, I played at the Davis Cup for Barbados, have two tennis academies in Toronto" this is a sport that can take you to any level that you want once you're involved in racquet sports."

As the initiative's Technical Director of Road Tennis overseeing plans to get the sport in schools, he sees myriad possibilities on the horizon, including having York Region schools compete against each other with the top school "eventually going to Barbados to compete in tennis."

"We have big plans for tennis and we want your help" and it seems as though your help is there."

Councillor Weese agreed, adding it is an "important opportunity" for Aurora and York Region to be at the "front end" of introducing a new sport to Canada.

"Nowhere else has this been developed and it certainly hasn't been included in the schools because we believe that the schools are the best place to start this type of a thing," he said. "The sport seems to be accepted by [Education], so I think it is a big opportunity to grow a sport quickly and we're proud Aurora has been selected to do that."

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