

Recovery's never a spectator sport

Tennis helps group bond for support

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The 50 members of a group called Tennis for Life believe that playing tennis every Sunday has been a factor in their recovery from breast cancer.



The Tennis for Life support group meets weekly at the Ridgewood Racquet Club.

Listen to Maritza Dallas and you might become a believer "I had been so tired after treatment, so exhausted, but the people in Tennis for Life wanted me to be active and happy," said Dallas, 42, a Fort Lee resident who underwent chemotherapy and a bi-lateral mastectomy in 2007. "These meetings make me emotionally strong and I've even improved my tennis game." She also dropped 12 pounds. Tennis for Life meets for one hour on the courts followed by an hour of sisterhood, consciousness-raising and sharing news about this wretched disease. The women gather around a table and talk about their illness, their condition, their treatment and how they're bearing up. "Bonding with these women is a feeling like no other because we all know the blow to our psyche that cancer and its treatment cause," said Peggy Saslow, a member of Tennis for Life for its

entire 10-year existence. "Being part of the group helps us deal with it."

Want to play?

Tennis for Life meets at 1 p.m. Sundays at the Ridgewood Racquet Club, 249 Ackerman Ave., Ridgewood. Newcomers are welcome. There are no dues and never a fee for court time. Instead, TFL operates strictly on donations and an annual fundraiser. Recently, it received a \$1,000 grant from the U.S. Tennis Association to help defray the costs of court rentals and to pay a tennis pro to help members improve their game. More information is available on the group's Web site, tennisforlife.org, or by calling Kathleen Sullivan at 201-934-7595.



Alexis Johnson takes aim for a shot.

For Saslow, who is 86, and whose condition was diagnosed in 1981, Tennis for Life is where she can speak

directly with other women whose cancers have resulted in mastectomy. "It is absolutely crushing," she said of the surgery to remove a cancerous breast. "Not everyone can understand this. But a woman understands and can never forget." During this second hour of a Tennis for Life meeting, the room can fall into complete silence as it did recently when a new member – a kerchief covering her head – discussed her treatment and her son, who was sitting with her. The boy was shy, about 10 years old and clung to his mother's side. She recalled her reaction, and his, to her cancer diagnosis, and leaned over to stroke his cheek.

At other times, the conversation becomes lively as members discuss their oncologists or news of the effectiveness of one drug or another. The talk is not grim; these women are fighters.

Before a meeting, Anne Emmons of Washington Township said, "I think I'm a good role model for

new members. I've survived three cancers." She dealt with breast cancer in 1986, ovarian cancer in 1990 and a recurrence of breast cancer in 2000 that resulted in mastectomy and reconstructive surgery.

"It's rewarding for those of us who've been members for a while to be able to help new people with tennis and with dealing with cancer," said Emmons, who joined in 2001.

On the courts, new members quickly learn that the tennis part of the meeting isn't just a matter of gently lobbing the ball back and forth. They play to win.

"Hey, they're killing us!" Kathleen Sullivan, the president of the group, yelled to her doubles partner, Debbie Henry, and soon Sullivan's and Henry's returns grew stronger and more accurate.

Newcomers are told that apologies are never necessary after a bad service return. The idea may not be to win the U.S. Open but to get out on the court and move around with

determination.

"We have fun, but tennis also is good for improving upper body mobility, which is so important after surgery," Sullivan said. Additionally, exercise can help relieve weight gain, stress and leg pain that come with various cancer medications.

"A lot of members found that tennis and talk can help restore some quality of life," Sullivan said. "Tennis definitely makes you feel younger and stronger."

The American Cancer Society estimates 6,440 people in New Jersey will be newly diagnosed with breast cancer this year. Of these, about 774 will be in Bergen County, 298 in Passaic, 329 in Hudson and 409 in Morris.

"Just hitting the ball is therapy," Dallas said. "It makes me feel strong."

Joanne English Rollieson was more specific. "I see that yellow ball and I see a cancer cell," she said. "When I lift my racket and hit the ball, I have a sense that I'm smashing that cell and releasing the bad toxins from my body."