

TENNIS THANKS THE TROOPS ALL-AMERICAN FAMILY DAY BASH

Junior Tennis Champions Center, College Park, MD

May was Military Appreciation Month where we honor the service and sacrifice of America's military families. Several anniversaries during the month celebrate the different branches, military spouses and children, culminating in Memorial Day when we pay tribute to those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

Since 2012, USPTA has partnered with ThanksUSA through Tennis Thanks the Troops to honor and support military families. And, for the fifth year the Junior Tennis Champions Center (JTCC) in College Park, Maryland, voluntarily hosted an All-American Family Day Bash (May 26) of tournaments and events on Memorial Day weekend. Under the management of Bonnie Vona, USTA MAS, the Bash supports ThanksUSA, the national non-profit providing need-based scholarships and pathways to employment to children and spouses of U.S. military personnel. ThanksUSA also runs a weekly tennis clinic in Maryland for wounded warriors who will be recognized with their own competition at the Bash.

Vesa Ponkka, JTCC's senior director of tennis, is a top international junior coach with a proud military heritage: Both his grandfathers served in the Army of his native Finland; one was killed in action, the other lost a leg during World War II. Asked about the JTCC-supported Bash he says, "It is simply the right thing to do to support military families any way possible".

Ponkka answered more questions for ThanksUSA and challenged tennis enthusiasts across the country: "I will encourage and challenge all the tennis training facilities to become leaders in their community to grow the game of tennis through inspiration and social inclusion."

How does your military background relate to tennis, if at all?

Ponkka: Military mindset is all about service, commitment, discipline, and respect. Those are also the main character attributes that we try to teach our players at the JTCC on a daily basis.

How important is it to recognize military families and why?

Ponkka: Military families deserve everyone's full support and ultimate respect through their service, commitment, and sacrifice. This is the least that we can do here on the home front.

What have the young people in your center taken from these ThanksUSA bashes and honoring military families?

Ponkka: We want our young players to be inspired by these real heroes who demonstrate all the qualities that are important in life. These events give our youngsters a chance to interact with these heroes on the tennis court, and some great learning takes place both ways!

What do you want young people to take from these events at your Center?

Ponkka: I want JTCC to be an example and a leader promoting the right values for young people. Our action statement is: Growing the game of tennis through inspiration and social inclusion. JTCC will be a training center where high-performance tennis players, everyday hackers, Special Olympics athletes, Paralympic athletes, Wheelchair players, and Wounded Warriors are



Veterans receive special recognition at the Thanks USA Adaptive Tennis Tournament at the Bash.

training and spending time in the one facility inspiring, mentoring, and learning from each other on daily basis. I want our youngsters to grow up in this kind of environment understanding, supporting, and promoting real social inclusion. I strongly believe that creating these kinds of informal mentoring relationships on a daily basis will transform the lives of everyone involved in the long run.

How would you describe your commitment and that of your organization to ThanksUSA?

Ponkka: There will be a lot of learning going on through this special weekend event, but this should only be a start of a lifelong journey of becoming a tennis player for wounded veterans. There are so many health benefits associated with being an active tennis player. JTCC wants to be a big part of that learning process on a daily basis, and of course through these special events.

All-American Family Day Bash :
bit.ly/tttaafdb

Tennis Thanks The Troops :
bit.ly/tttmain