

Military Service Inspired by Tennis Corps

Amanda Folks, ThanksUSA Development Manager

Who would have thought playing tennis with military veterans would lead a young athlete to the United States Naval Academy? Junior tennis player Ananth Gunupati is heading in that direction, inspired in part by wounded warriors. Gunupati has participated in Tennis Corps, a ThanksUSA program in partnership with the Junior Tennis Champions Center (JTCC) in College Park, Md. Once a week, junior tennis players are paired with disabled veterans to share their skills and learn from each other.

For Gunupati, the experience has been an eye-opener. “I see integrity, discipline and inner strength when I am with the veterans. I have learned from the vets’ stories and what they have been through,” he says. “When I am with the veterans, I get a boost of confidence and am immediately made aware that anything can be achieved with the right mindset.”

And now, as he enters his final year, this high school senior and second-generation American is setting his sights on becoming the first member of his family to serve in uniform as a naval scholar.

That drive also comes from a family legacy of strength and sacrifice. As a

cardiovascular surgeon in India, Gunupati’s grandfather immigrated to the United States in 1967. Eager to gain experience in his career, he earned citizenship a few years later. Gunupati recalls hearing about his grandfather’s experiences in his early years in the U.S. “He always made it a point to tell me how kind America has been to him.”

Gunupati is paying that kindness forward, in part, through Tennis Corps, which is more than a physical rehabilitation program for disabled veterans and a teaching program for junior tennis players. It is a social inclusion program that brings together these two unlikely groups both on and off the court.

When non-profit organizations ThanksUSA and JTCC came together to create Tennis Corps, Gunupati was just the type of young player they were looking for. His commitment and drive helped this unique mentoring program attain its goals. This success has drawn the attention of the USTA, which recently partnered with ThanksUSA to promote Tennis Corps nationwide. After adopting the program at their weekly military clinic at the National Campus, the USTA agreed that the social inclusion and rehabilitation

benefits of Tennis Corps are something that should be shared.

It turned out that these weekly tennis sessions were doing much more than strengthening Gunupati’s teaching and training skills – they were instilling in him an idea that had been planted by his grandfather and cultivated by his experiences growing up near Washington, D.C. Gunupati and Navy retiree Shaun Sabio developed a friendship as they spent time together on the court.

“After serving in the U.S. Navy for over 20 years, there is zero doubt in my mind that Gunupati would be an outstanding addition to the military,” Sabio said. “I would be proud to serve alongside him.”

It will be several months before Gunupati knows if he has been accepted to the Naval Academy. During that time, ThanksUSA and the USTA hope to make the Tennis Corps program a staple in military rehabilitation and tennis communities throughout the United States.

“We have seen so much good come from this program,” says ThanksUSA President & CEO Jon Rosa. “And we are honored to share it.”

In the meantime, Gunupati will continue his studies, grow as an athlete and attend Tennis Corps each week. And the veterans will continue to encourage and cheer for his success. ★



Photo Courtesy of Ananth Gunupati

Learn more about ThanksUSA:
www.ThanksUSA.org

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www.TennisCorps.org