When Damian Wright enlisted in the Marine Corps in 2009, he knew he was treading the right path for his future.

“That was my identity,” Wright said. “All my hard work, the sweat, the pain and the joy came from the Marines.”

But for Wright, treading that path would prove to be more challenging than expected.

Flash forward 10 years and you won’t find Wright in a Marine field uniform, but on the tennis court. Wright is now one of the head coaches for Tennis Corps, a sports therapy inclusion program that brings veterans and junior champion tennis players together on and off the court. As a leg amputee from his Marine Corps service, Wright knows firsthand the importance of physical determination, mental strength and resilience.

Founded in 2018 by ThanksUSA, a non-profit organization that provides higher education scholarships for military families, Tennis Corps meets every week at the Junior Tennis Champions Center in College Park, Md.

By inviting veterans and junior players to share their love for the game, Tennis Corps helps to overcome physical, emotional and social barriers. “It’s so much more than a rehabilitation program for our veterans and a teaching program for the junior champs,” ThanksUSA President and CEO Jon Rosa said. “It’s an opportunity for two unlikely groups to build friendships, share experiences and overcome barriers.”

ThanksUSA national spokesperson and Tennis Corps ambassador Frances Tiafoe finds inspiration through the program.

“We want our young players to be inspired by these real heroes who demonstrate all the qualities that are important in life,” said Vesa Ponkka, Senior Director of Tennis, adding that Tennis Corps is the most inspirational program at JTCC. “I strongly believe that creating these kinds of informal mentoring relationships will transform the lives of everyone involved.”

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“We want to share the joy of this program with veterans and youth everywhere,” Rosa said. “And to continue to bring people together through tennis.”

For Wright, there’s no place he’d rather be.

“I didn’t actually want to start playing tennis again,” Wright said. “When I stopped in 2009, I was at a good place in my career. I stopped because I forgot the importance of why I played tennis in the first place, which was to have fun. So, in December of 2018 my wife dragged me onto the courts and I haven’t left since.”

Like Wright, we all tread paths that are unexpected and challenging. Through Tennis Corps, veterans and youth tennis players are trailblazing a new path of physical and mental rehabilitation. And tennis is better because of it.

ThanksUSA is currently seeking partnerships within the tennis industry to join us in sharing this inspirational program. If you’re interested in learning more about the Tennis Corps, or in bringing the program to your community, please contact Jean Pletchette at jeanpletchette@thanksusa.org.

ThanksUSA CHANGING LIVES THROUGH TENNIS CORPS

Amanda Folks, ThanksUSA Development Manager