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Summer Smash tennis tourney gives kids a chance to compete

The first-annual event is designed to provide more opportunities for local tennis players



Ian Terry / The Herald

Snohomish's Jess Layton (left) returns a serve during a doubles match at the Snohomish Summer Smash tennis tournament at Snohomish High School on Friday, July 24.

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SNOHOMISH — Kraig Norris' love of tennis was born out of watching his son Kincaid play. Kincaid started taking lessons at eight years old and started competing in tournaments at 11.

Kraig has enjoyed watching his son play so much, that he decided to give a little back to the sport and give others an opportunity to love the game the way he and his son have.

Norris, along with help from Snohomish High School boys and girls tennis coach Dick Jansen, established the Snohomish Summer Smash tennis tournament, which began Friday on the Panthers' home courts and will conclude on Saturday.

Feeling that many local high school tennis players weren't getting enough opportunities to play competitively in the summer, Kraig Norris created the tournament with the idea of appealing to kids that don't compete in United State Tennis Association summer tournaments. All high school players, including those that regularly compete in USTA tournaments, are welcome, but the focus was on giving kids that don't normally compete a chance to play.

“My enjoyment watching (Kincaid) play led me to want create an opportunity for more kids to have a competitive environment,” Kraig Norris said. “I'm definitely not doing this for him. He plays a dozen tournaments during the summer, so he doesn't need this, but I think there are other kids that do need to be involved competitively and so I kind of geared this towards them.”

The elder Norris and Jansen started planning the first-annual event earlier this summer. Over 40 players signed up to compete in the tournament, which has two division for boys singles, two divisions for girls singles and one boys and one girls doubles division.

Kincaid Norris took a break from competing in USTA tournaments this weekend to compete in his father's tournament. He is the top-ranked singles player in the tournament, but he sees the value for all of its competitors.

“It really is immeasurable how great it is,” Kincaid Norris said. “Match play is really essential in getting better. If you don't have that then you are missing a big opportunity to really learn and grow and stuff like that.”

Kincaid Norris, who will be a junior at Snohomish this year, has had plenty of chances to compete in matches. Others competing this weekend haven't. Perhaps the best example of the type of player Kraig Norris was trying to appeal to is Chandler Irving. Irving will be a freshman at Snohomish this year and until Friday he had never played in a competitive tennis match.

“As a coach, you want your kids to be like Kincaid, but for those who can't (compete in a lot of tournaments) being exposed to this kind of environment is invaluable for them,” Jansen said.

Irving lost his opening round match in the boys silver division, but was eager to keep playing and learning.

“It was really fun,” Irving said. “I felt like I got a lot better.”

Though Irving hadn't ever competed in an actual match before, it didn't take him long to see the benefits.

“I think it's really important because you get multiple times to play in a short amount of time, so you can really build your skills,” Irving said. “It's not all (against) the same person, so you have different advantages and disadvantages with other people.”

In putting the tournament together, Kraig Norris admits the biggest challenge was getting the word out.

“It's been a real eye-opening experience,” Norris said. “I have to admit I did anticipate numbers probably double of what we have. We did get a late push, so for the most part I'm happy with our turnout for most of the divisions.”

The numbers are the lowest in the girls singles divisions. The girls silver division has just five competitors and they are all from Snohomish. There are just four competitors in the girls gold division, though they are all from different schools.

Norris admits he isn't sure how to grow the girls divisions, but hopes to see those numbers improve next year — as he does for all of the divisions.

“For the first year I think it was a good turnout and next year I'm fully expecting to have the numbers I was looking for this year,” Norris said.

Norris can count on one person to be back next year. Irving gave his endorsement at the end of his day on Friday.

“It's like nothing I've ever done before,” he said. “It's a new experience and it's awesome.”

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