



D.C. DEMILIO

Betsy Wise is flanked by ZENNis student Stephan Menichella, left, and Hugh Stratman, tennis pro and coach at Cathedral Oaks Athletic Club.

ZENNis anyone?

Local coach blends yoga, tennis to produce 'effortless' game

By D.C. DeMilio
Voice Sports Correspondent

ZENNis: If it sounds like something dreamed up in Southern California, that's because it was.

The brainchild of Betsy Wise, ZENNis blends yoga and tennis in a way that those who've tried it say generates "effortless" strokes.

A lifelong player, Wise was teaching at the Cathedral Oaks Athletic Club when she stumbled on to the concept while teaching a children's class.

"They were a bit too excited during one of the clinics to focus on the technical aspects of tennis, so I turned to the forces of creativity," she said.

She asked the children to use their racket or body in any way to hit the ball over the net. One child put her racket between her legs and shook her rear end and another jumped up and down.

But the most remarkable was the child who sat in the lotus position, dropped his racket and chanted "Om." Wise, a yoga practitioner for about 15 years, responded immediately. She began to interject yoga philosophies into her tennis regime, and eventually had the name ZENNis trademarked.

Wise is now fully engrossed in developing ZENNis for kids, high school students, families and adults regardless of their skill level. She said ZENNis demonstrations are lined-up for members of the Cathedral Oaks women's A team, who have won the inter-club tournament for six straight years. Also on tap are demonstrations for the UCSB and Westmont College teams.

The typical ZENNis routine includes 20 minutes of yoga, 30 minutes of tennis drills and 10 minutes of relaxation.

"I feel it will really take off with women because they are more familiar with yoga," Wise said.

"It's all in development but it is very promising," she said. "The focus is on breathing. The kids watch the pros and hear them grunt. They [kids] grunt *after* they hit it;

they don't time their exhale."

Wise has a talented junior tennis player, Stephan Menichella, 11, as a student. Menichella, who attends Waldorf School, won a 10-under junior tournament last year in Orange County, and this year he was runner up in the 91st annual summer tournament in Santa Barbara. He fell to top-seeded Alex Scheinman of Los Angeles, 6-2, 6-1, in the championship game.

Menichella's long-term goals include attending Santa Barbara High and "becoming a pro," he said.

"It [ZENNis] has definitely improved my game by helping me breathe and make better contact with the ball," he said.

Hugh Stratman, Cathedral Oaks tennis professional and Menichella's coach, is optimistic about the approach.

"I think it will really help people's tennis game, to get them calm and stretched out," he said.

Cheri Clampett, a recreational player, also cited her game's improvement.

"I've played off-and-on for about 15 years," she said. "I had a session with her [Wise] and liked everything about it. She's helped me with my forehand and backhand. The experience of hitting the ball becomes effortless."

Wise, a native of the Chicago area, has been playing tennis since she was 10. Raised in an athletic family, Wise and her siblings all played sports, and her uncle was an Olympian at the 1964 Tokyo games in single-person sculls.

Wise played tennis in high school and at Hamilton College in upstate New York. She was captain of the women's team and nominated for All-American honors to a Collegiate Hall of Fame. In her senior year, when she was asked to help coach, and she took over the men's team since the head coach was handling both the men's and women's teams. A spark was lit.

After more than 20 years of playing and teaching Wise is still impassioned.

"On an every-day basis I can still turn the light on," she said. "I can put a smile on someone's face because I'm effective with the teaching process. I've had some students that I've started from scratch and have become really good players."

For additional information on ZENNis visit www.zennis.net.