

A little guy's smile makes winners of us all

Don Quinlan and the staff and volunteers at the Lattof YMCA in Des Plaines, Ill., put on a great tournament for junior players from around the country and Ireland in December. Handball magazine gave you a good sense of their achievement in our last issue. It is always rewarding to go through Keith Thode's excellent photographs, which capture both the action and the smiling contestants as they receive their USHA trophies.

In the past, I have encouraged handball supporters to make an effort to attend a USHA tournament featuring junior players. Believe me, you'll come away from the experience refreshed and rewarded.

Refreshed — because these kids show a wonderful capacity to appreciate many of the little things about the game that older folks might take for granted.

Rewarded — because you'll most likely see the fruits of your own dedication to and support for the game.

If you are a donor to the First Ace program, and I hope you are, be assured that these kids have benefited directly from your generosity. You know the line: Pay it forward.

How much is a child's smile worth? How do we go about putting a dollar figure on a youngster's growing sense of self-worth? What's the price for a child's first strong sense of accomplishment? What's the value to be placed on a little person's emotional and social growth?

I don't know the answers. But I do know this: Our game, in all of its simplicity and intimacy, is a marvelous vector point for a child to experience a joy not particularly available via other athletic pursuits.

To provide a sense of that claim, let me share a story with you from Quinlan's 2009 national juniors tournament.

I like to get involved in the work of our tournaments. Typically, I try to blend in by volunteering to ref games. So that's exactly what I did at Don's tournament. I had missed the first full day of the event but snagged a game early on the second day.

So there I was, looking down at the diminutive players in the court, calling out, "Play ball."

One player quickly mounted a big lead before losing the serve. His opponent, a



Danny Connolly, smiling as usual, with junior mom Amy Ure at the Lattof event.

small youngster, was having a difficult time returning the serve with enough vigor to cause a problem for the server.

But there it was — a shot that caused a sideout. So the little guy is in the service lane. He had a very recognizable service motion — a high bounce, a big windup, a burst of speed into the ball, good contact. But time and time again, the serve was short. He was too new and a bit too small to be successful with every serve. So ... sideout.

Well, that's how the game went. Steady points for one player until a sideout serve, with the little guy coming in to try his serve again. Always short.

The same thing happened in the second game. The little guy, Danny Connolly, played the whole match with total earnestness. He tried and tried and tried again. He tried returning serves that consistently went over his head and outstretched arm. And he tried to serve the ball with all his might. And it was always short.

Guess what? You'd never know from his demeanor that he had just suffered a complete shutout or had failed to execute a good serve.

Failed. That's the wrong word.

Danny Connolly, brand new to the game of handball, tried his heart out to make plays like most of the other kids. And he did indeed show progress as things went along. But he never showed any temper or disappointment. He just kept plugging away.

My refereeing duty was done. But I volunteered to help Danny referee the next match. He was a wonderful student — a

bit shy at first, but he got the hang of it quickly and ended up pretty much doing the entire second game.

Guess what? Danny Connolly later that day became the USHA's youngest volunteer. I started seeing him in line at the tournament control desk to pick up scorecards and a reffing assignment on other days of the tournament.

Later, I checked the tournament results, and for his entire experience, Danny scored one point. One.

But he was never discouraged. To get his one point, he had to make at least one good serve. So he definitely made progress.

But his real accomplishment was in other parts of the game. He learned that he could do what the big folks could do when they were serving as refs. He didn't need to weigh 100 pounds or more to be able to do that. He became a good student of this important part of the game, and I'm sure he will grow to be a very good player. Danny clearly has a good mind for the game.

Watching this youngster over three days at the Lattof Y was a very rewarding experience. We live in such a competitive environment — the "winning is everything" phenomenon — that it warmed my heart to see someone who was totally innocent of that misplaced value. He was having a blast, and he was making a contribution.

Danny Connolly might have been too short and too light to serve a handball with any consistency. But he showed plenty of heart. He also showed incredible maturity and learned some important lessons. He also gave back more than he took.

I know that his family members are very proud of Danny. They have raised and encouraged a fine young man. Surely there were other stories like Danny's at the USHA national juniors. I wish I could have come to know more of those stories.

Danny will continue to make his contribution to our game, as will many of the other kids. And the caring adults in their lives will know that they have made important contributions to them.

I hope you are one of the devoted USHA members who support development of our game by donating to our First Ace program.

What's the price of a child's growing sense of accomplishment?