

Jack Cheetham Award: Irene Tennis Development Programme

The Project: A Tennis Development Project by Irene Country Club (ICC) through Irene Middle School (IMS).

1. **Concept:** Members of the Tennis Section of Irene Country Club contribute their time and skills, using the facilities of the Club so that children from Irene Middle School (formerly Irene Farm School) can learn to play tennis and interact with children and adults from more advantaged societies. (Irene Middle School does not have the resources to achieve this without outside assistance.)
This successful, sustainable and practical programme which has been running for nearly 10 years, is recognised as a model for other tennis clubs.
2. **Vision:** To provide opportunities for the children of IMS to:
 - (a) learn to play tennis, being coached by professional tennis coaches
 - (b) represent their school and compete with tennis players from other schools
 - (c) develop leadership skills through participation in competitive tennis
 - (d) learn valuable life skills through competition, and interaction with players from other schools, the coaches and members of ICC Tennis
 - (e) continue with tennis after leaving IMS
 - (f) use their tennis skills as a platform for self-development
 - (g) put something back into the programme at a later stage
3. **History:**
 - ❖ **Late 1999:** Members of the Tennis Section (including the Club's Professional Tennis Coach, Mr Stan Nortjé) approached Irene Country Club management to see if they would allow a Tennis Development Programme for the benefit of children from Irene Middle School at the Club. (see Footnote on Irene Middle School). Club Management welcomed the initiative and made its facilities available at no charge. Irene Middle School Principal, Mr Nick Pitse enthusiastically embraced the project.
 - ❖ **January 2000:** Approximately 80 children from Irene Middle School, ranging in age from 10 to 15 years came to Irene Country Club on Wednesdays for nearly two hours to learn to play tennis. Coaching was by Stan Nortjé, assisted by Tennis Club members Redvers Peverett and Susette Le Roux. Cast-off tennis racquets were supplied by Tennis Club members and friends. Tim Donkin, then CEO of DuPont International in South Africa, arranged for funds to run the programme through the company's "Social Investment" programme.
 - ❖ **Successes:** From 2001, teams were entered into the Primary Schools' league, and started winning matches. Coaching was extended to team members (by Stan Nortjé) on Friday afternoons and Saturday mornings.
Since 2002, five children from the programme have earned Gauteng North Under 14 colours, and one (Saide Moruane) has gone on to represent his country in Australia at the end of 2005.

In 2004, nine children were admitted to Lyttelton Manor High School (LMHS) (with full remission of fees) on the strength of their tennis. Three of these children obtained distinctions in the 2006 Matric examinations. Two were awarded full colours for tennis. Both of these young women are now doing courses at tertiary level.

In 2005, four children were admitted to the Rosina Sedibane School of Sports Excellence in Lenasia (with full remission of fees). Another three were admitted to this school in 2006, and two more in 2007. There have been further admissions in 2008 and 2009.

In addition, Saide Moruane, who travelled to Australia with the USASSA squad at the end of 2005, gained admission to Pretoria Boys High School (PBHS) in 2006 on the strength of his tennis. Saide, now in Grade 11 at PBHS, is a member of the school's first tennis team and is number 1 player in his school hostel.

A number of these young people who have left Irene Middle School have maintained contact with the Tennis Club, and play league matches for the Club. Some are supported by Club members, both financially and through career guidance.

Mahlatse Polwane, who attended the Rosina School after leaving IMS, is being trained as a linesperson who can officiate at international level.

Thabang Lefowa who matriculated at Rosina School, has qualified as a Level 1 tennis coach, and has been assisting with coaching players from IMS as well as representing ICC in league matches.

Lucky Diphoko who also matriculated through Rosina School was admitted into the armed services in 2009. Prior to that he also represented ICC in league matches. Both Thabang & Lucky represented Gauteng North Tennis at high school level, while Gyver Moropa represented Gauteng East Tennis. He was the first boy from the programme to represent Gauteng North at under 14 level.

Coaching: Stan Nortjé retired to the family farm at the end of 2005. This created a leadership and coaching vacuum. While we looked for a new Coach, the programme lost a degree of momentum. (In 2005, we had three teams entered in the schools' leagues. In 2006, this was reduced to two). Since then, a number of coaches have come and gone, having assisted with the programme with varying degrees of success. Professional Coach Andri Tiran was contracted to Irene Country Club Tennis during 2008. This appointment resulted in a strengthening and broadening of the programme.

2009: Currently there are more than 250 children being coached each week. The majority use the school combi-courts which are in poor condition. Team players use the courts at Irene Country Club

4. **Contribution to Community Development:** Irene Middle School (IMS) serves the poorest members of the community. (See Footnote, page 7)
- ❖ Prior to 2000, IMS had virtually no sporting facilities. There were no school sports teams, and therefore, little contact or competition with other schools in the area. When the tennis teams began playing in league matches, they interacted with children from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. When they began to win matches, their self-belief increased dramatically. (This has been reflected in improved performance in the classroom! Educators at Irene Middle School confirm this year after year). In addition, they learned invaluable social skills, especially as they were taught proper etiquette by the coach.
 - ❖ The children's vision was broadened when some of the players were chosen to represent their Province. The children and their parents realised that they could go on to far greater things than they ever previously imagined.
 - ❖ IMS learners look up to the tennis players as leaders and heroes. Tennis players often become the leaders at the school.
 - ❖ The parents have been exposed to the game of tennis through their children's involvement and also the annual "Development Tennis Open Day" that has been held at the Irene Country Club (ICC). Parents realise that playing tennis can give their children the opportunity to break from the "poverty trap".
 - ❖ ICC members playing sports other than tennis, have been made aware of the tennis programme, and are proud to hear of and see the progress being made. (When Saide Moruane was chosen to represent RSA, the community rallied round and helped raise the money to pay for his trip to Australia)
5. **Community Upliftment:**
- ❖ The children in the tennis programme know that new vistas are available to them. They love learning to play tennis and are so proud when they are chosen to represent their school! They have seen that they can get admission to 'better' schools where they will be given more opportunities to achieve their goals. They have had their horizons widened as they have travelled to play tennis. They can better compete in a world which was more-or-less closed to them before.
 - ❖ It is well known that participation in sport contributes to reduced levels of crime. No longer are the children hanging round on street corners because they have a healthy alternative.
 - ❖ The motivation to lead healthy lifestyles in order to stay fit for tennis as well as the example set by coaches, etc, could play a part in reducing the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies.
 - ❖ Their parents have been motivated to support their children as they have seen the new opportunities, and appreciate how much the children love the game.
 - ❖ There is no doubt that Irene Middle School has benefited hugely through the Tennis Development Programme; they are so proud of the achievements of the pupils.

- ❖ Community Awareness: Many people, whether they are farm workers or affluent members of local society, are aware of the Tennis Development Programme and what it has enabled individuals to achieve. The programme is obviously widely discussed.

6. **Role of Sport in the Project**: The Irene Tennis Development Programme was started so that children from Irene Middle School could learn to play tennis. In other words, sport was the reason for the programme. As we have gone along, sport has remained the prime motivator for continuing, but we have learned that it is all about the children and their development into confident young adults. Those who have joined the tennis programme, and who have started to succeed at the game, have also improved in other areas, most notably academic. We, who started the programme have realised that

"It is far more than learning to hit a yellow ball over a net".

It's about learning important skills which are carried into all aspects of life. It's about the growth of the whole person! We have determined to put as much money as we can into the sport aspect with administration costs kept to an absolute minimum.

7. **Leadership**:

- ❖ The team players have consistently taken leadership roles at IMS and elsewhere. Here are a few examples:
 1. Pauline Maseko, who attended Lyttelton Manor High School from Grade 10, captained the LMHS Girls' Tennis team in 2006. In addition, Pauline gained three distinctions in her Matric examinations, and has gone on to study at tertiary level.
 2. Thabang Lefowa has not only started on the road to becoming a fully-fledged tennis coach, but has also shown entrepreneurial leadership skills. All this while undertaking studies in IT.
 3. Saide Moruane, now in Grade 11 at Pretoria Boys High School, is a respected senior in Solomon House, as well as being a proud member of the school's 1st tennis team. He is also looked up to by his siblings despite the fact that he's the youngest of 5 children.

These young people have learned their leadership skills through their tennis. Team captains are given responsibilities and taught how to handle these. Growth goes on from there.

We have seen young people develop from timid, self-conscious individuals to self-confident young adults far more confident in themselves and their capabilities.

- ❖ Irene Country Club took the lead in supporting the Tennis Development Programme as part of its "corporate social responsibility". Not many Sports Clubs can claim to have such successful development programmes.

- ❖ Stan Nortjé, Professional Tennis Coach, took the leadership role in the development programme, and became so excited about the response from the children, that he provided additional coaching to players who showed promise, at no charge. There is no doubt his leadership example inspired the children. This "leadership by example" is being continued by current tennis coach, Andri Tiran and his team.
- ❖ Rik de Voest, currently South Africa's number 2 men's tennis professional and Davis Cup player, has taken an interest in the programme and visits IMS when he is in the area. He has also donated a racquet-stringing machine, tennis shirts (which he autographed and which are used as awards) and tennis racquets (which are proudly used by team players) to the programme. He is the children's tennis ikon and example of leadership.

8. **Future plans and goals:** The Tennis Development Programme has been running for almost 10 years, despite being hamstrung in its plans for development by lack of funding. The Lotto and The Sports Trust provided some funding in 2003 for equipment and facilities, but there has been no money to pay for coaching or for players to enter or travel to tournaments. In 2006 and 2007, the Tennis Club budget provided money to cover coaching costs. We have relied on occasional donations of sports equipment to keep us going.

That the Irene Tennis Development Programme was runner up in the 2007 Murray & Roberts Jack Cheetham Award was a source of great pride to Irene Middle School and Irene Country Club. The award enabled us to breathe new life into the programme. Expenditure has been carefully controlled. We have not been able to enter the players into all the tournaments we would have liked, due to budget constraints.

The programme has been expanded within IMS to afford children in the lower grades to develop their ball skills, but this has been limited.

We have also made tennis training available to more children at the school by utilising the two school combi-courts as well as three of the tennis courts at ICC. This has been made possible by having two professional coaches involved with the programme. (These two courts, erected by Gauteng Department of Education at the end of 2004, are in dire need of repair.)

If the children of Irene Middle School are to be able to compete on equal terms with children from more advantaged backgrounds, and if the programme is to develop beyond its present limited scope, we need to attend to the following:

- Ball Skills training: Make this training available at all levels at IMS, starting with Grade R. (Already partially implemented)

- Winners: Identify potential 'stars' at an earlier age. Give greater support to those with special talents and drive.
- Teacher involvement: Encourage and train teachers at IMS to actively participate in the Tennis Programme. (There is currently no teaching skill in sports-specific activities. A dedicated Sports Teacher should be appointed)
- Facilities at IMS: Upgrade and extend the limited tennis facilities at IMS so that league matches and tournaments can be held there. (Two additional tennis courts, plus the upgrading of the current courts so that they can be used for matches. A "Tennis Hut" at the courts would be a big 'plus'.)
- Coaching: Provide individual and more intensive coaching for players with potential
- Equipment: We need more equipment, including tennis racquets for all levels, a ball machine (for individual and group practice), as well as tennis shoes for all participants.
- Team uniforms: It would be a great encouragement to all players if team players were fitted out with proper tennis uniforms, including track suits, bearing the Irene Middle School badge.
- Competition: Enter more teams in league matches. (Start at Under 11 level, or earlier). This will necessitate providing transport for the teams.
- Opportunities: Make it possible for players with potential to participate in more tournaments.
- Beyond Grade 9: Offer coaching and mentoring opportunities to players from the programme who go on to other schools.
- Encourage older members of the programme to train as coaches, thus giving them opportunities to earn their living and put something back into the community.
- Financial Support: Provide some financial support for players with potential when they move to other schools (or even tertiary education)
- Broaden the Programme: Expand the programme so that children from other similarly-disadvantaged schools in the area can benefit.

Footnote: **Irene Middle School**

Irene Middle School (IMS) is situated east of the Pretoria-Johannesburg railway line, about 1 km (as the crow flies) from Irene Country Club. Children moving from the school to Irene Country Club need to cross the busy railway line.

Irene Middle School was formerly known as Irene Farm School. The school was built by the Van der Byl family so that children of their farm workers could receive an education.

Now, under the *aegis* of the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE), the school has been renamed Irene Middle School to better reflect its position in the community. It serves the local community, drawing children from as far afield as Tembisa.

Pupil Numbers: Irene Middle School caters for learners from Grade R to Grade 9.

There are about 650 learners at the school, of whom about 250 are currently involved with the tennis programme. Pupil:teacher ratios are high. Classrooms are crowded. .

Mr Judah Monyela, the School Principal, ensures that good standards of behaviour are maintained at the school.

For most of the children, Grade 9 marks the end of their formal education, but a few move to other high schools in the area (Tembisa High or Lyttelton Manor High).

Competition for entry to local High Schools is extremely tough.

Socio-Economic background of learners: The majority of the children at IMS are from extremely poor families. The annual school fees are of the order of R250. I understand that there are some families who cannot pay even this amount. (Those children whose parents are able to pay the school fees for nearby Irene Primary School will usually do so.)

Sports Facilities: The facilities at IMS are extremely limited. Prior to 2006, the only sports facility at the school was an unmarked space with two goalposts which was used for soccer as well as being the general play area. At the end of 2006, the Gauteng Department of Education completed two combi-courts, one of which was designated as a tennis and netball court. Unfortunately, these courts were poorly built and marked. The painted concrete surface of both of these combi-courts has deteriorated to such an extent that play on them has become hazardous. Representations by IMS to GDE have been made to have these courts resurfaced.

Prior to 2007, tennis coaching took place only at Irene Country Club. This meant that children had to cross the busy railway line and walk the 1 km to ICC for coaching.

Smaller children were not allowed to undertake this relatively dangerous journey.

Therefore, until the practice court was built, there could be no ball skills programme for the youngest group of children.

Trained Sports Coaches: IMS does not have any of its teachers trained in coaching or administration of tennis. (or of other sports) This means that, while there is support and encouragement for tennis and those involved, they are unable to assist with coaching.