

NOTL Tennis Club nets Southern Ontario's best young players

Two-day long weekend tournament attracts 17 OTA ranked under-12 tennis players to the courts at Memorial Park for the first sanctioned tournament hosted by the local club



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1 / 10 NOTL Tennis Club member Jeremy Pukhkalov in action Saturday versus Linus Zhou. | Mike Balsom

Some of Southern Ontario's best Under-12 tennis players converged on the Niagara-on-the-Lake Tennis Club's courts at Memorial Park this long weekend for an Ontario Tennis Association-sanctioned tournament.

"We are very honoured to hold this tournament this year because to the best of my knowledge, we haven't held a ranked tournament here," club tennis coordinator and tournament director Adam Wodz explained. "We hosted a rookie tournament last year, but this one is the real deal. These kids are all ranked and this tournament will affect their rankings."

The event attracted 17 boys and girls between the ages of 10 and 12 and their parents to spend Saturday and Sunday in NOTL, with competitors coming from Markham, Waterloo even Quebec.

Both Wodz and Milla Matsko, whose son Jeremy Pukhkalov was competing, said it was easy to fill the entry slots with families who wanted to visit the town on a long weekend. Wodz credits Matsko for urging the club to play host to the juniors.

Eleven-year-old Wheatley School student Jeremy has played tennis since he was five years old, explained Matsko. But most of the tournaments he has participated in have been out of town.

"We go to Vaughan, Scarborough, North York all the time," said Matsko, a St. Catharines resident. "I thought it would be wonderful for us to have a tournament here, it's so beautiful here. And Jeremy is so happy and proud to play on his home club's courts."

Matsko and her son are both members of the NOTL Tennis Club. Jeremy can often be seen on the Memorial Park courts on weekends taking on much older and taller players and holding his own against them.

"He's very competitive, he doesn't like to lose," said Matsko. "He plays often with high schoolers and has a private coach in St. Catharines. In the summer he also is part of a group in Grimsby. He hits the ball hard and fast."

The self-officiated matches over the weekend were impressive to see. The athletes showed the poise and maturity of much older players in several very competitive matches.

The Local watched Saturday as Mihailo Aksentic and Nolan Panich faced off in a marathon rally that resulted in at least 30 returns between them. Rosie Kowalewski's court presence in her match against Elena Vamoser was impressive. And Pukhkalov swung his racquet with speed and finesse against opponent Linus Zhou.

"This is a good thing for the region, to promote tennis in Niagara," exclaimed Matsko. "Some people don't believe that tennis can get to this level, that kids this age can be this good. Just look around, these kids are like little pros."