



PACIFIC NORTHWEST

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Love Serving Autism Takes Center Court at Galbraith Tennis Center, Vancouver Tennis Center

USTA PNW adds new adaptive programming to help break down barriers to play and empower individuals with autism

Growing the game of tennis by providing access for all has long been the mission of the United States Tennis Association Pacific Northwest (USTA PNW). A big part of this growth includes adaptive programs that help break down barriers to participation.

To continue increasing access to the sport, USTA PNW has added new programming at its Galbraith Tennis Center (GTC) and Vancouver Tennis Center (VTC) community hubs to empower individuals with autism and other developmental abilities through the game of tennis. Over the course of the last year, the organization has teamed up with Love Serving Autism, a national program that provides specialized therapeutic racquet sports interventions to support developmental needs, promote inclusion, enhance physical health and communication, and foster emotional well-being.

This partnership underscores USTA PNW's commitment to accessibility in tennis. "At USTA PNW, we are proud to lead the charge in breaking down barriers to play and ensuring that everyone has access to the world's healthiest sport," said Matthew Warren, CEO and executive director at USTA PNW. "Programs like Love Serving Autism help us bring our vision for a healthier, more connected Pacific Northwest to life, and we are deeply grateful to our partners, supporters, and donors for making this possible."

USTA PNW's efforts also reflect its focus on growing inclusivity within the tennis community. "This programming complements our ongoing work to create welcoming spaces where individuals of all abilities feel they belong," said China Kirk, COO of USTA PNW. "Through partnerships with organizations like Love Serving Autism, we can foster social connection and promote the benefits of tennis for everyone."

Operational and Community Support

To make the new programming possible, USTA PNW designates court time at the Vancouver Tennis Center and Galbraith Tennis Center, which is located in Tacoma, Wash. The organization works with partner groups and provides funding for them to lead the programs at both facilities. As a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, USTA PNW relies on community and donor support to deliver programs like Love Serving Autism, underscoring the impact the organization's community partners, sponsors and donors have on making programs like this possible.

For Sanja Lemes, the director of tennis and delivery for USTA PNW, Love Serving Autism complements existing adaptive programs, such as Blind & Low Vision and Wheelchair Tennis, and reinforces USTA PNW's leadership in accessible sports. After connecting with founder Lisa Pugliese-LaCroix in late 2023, Lemes worked with her team to integrate the program into the 2024 class schedules at GTC and VTC. "The Pacific Northwest is full of amazing athletes who deserve access to the social, mental, emotional and physical benefits of tennis," said Lemes.



Social Impact and Registration

The Love Serving Autism classes are designed to teach children and adults with autism and unique abilities communication and life skills, fostering functional independence both on and off the courts. Through progressive lesson plans, participants engage in hand-eye coordination activities to improve motor coordination, stroke-production drills to enhance gross motor skills, and social interaction activities to build communication and life skills.

Pugliese-LaCroix, a former collegiate and professional tennis player turned speech therapist, launched Love Serving Autism in 2017 as an after-school program in South Florida. Today, the program serves approximately 750 participants across 50 locations nationwide. "Without the partnership of the USTA sections, I feel like we would not be as far as where we are today," she said. "It also gives us more credibility for facilities and coaches to know we're affiliated with these different USTA sections."

The concept of using tennis and other racquet sports as a way of promoting these critical developmental skills started small but has grown exponentially in a relatively short period of time.

The social component of the programming, in particular, has proved to be beneficial, according to Pugliese-LaCroix. With approximately 40 percent of participants being non-speaking or non-verbal, the class setting promotes meaningful interactions and the development of expressive language skills. "Just having this opportunity to engage with others and not feel like they are socially isolated is critical for their development," said Pugliese-LaCroix.

Registration is available for the Love Serving Autism classes at both VTC and GTC. The cost per class is \$15 and scholarships are available.

- [Vancouver Tennis Center Registration](#)
- [Galbraith Tennis Center Registration](#)

Future Goals

As Love Serving Autism grows, the program aims to expand its reach through further training and recruitment of coaches and therapists. A coach-certification grant is helping expand this initiative. Pugliese-LaCroix encourages anyone interested to get involved, noting that certification as a tennis pro is not required to join at the beginner level.

Looking ahead, USTA PNW plans to deepen its commitment to adaptive programming by expanding access to more communities throughout the Pacific Northwest. “Our goal is to ensure that anyone who wants to experience the benefits of tennis can do so, no matter their ability, background, or location,” said Warren. This initiative is part of USTA PNW’s broader mission to make tennis accessible for all, inspiring lifelong wellness and building stronger community connections across the region.

To learn more about [coaching](#) and [therapist](#) opportunities, visit Love Serving Autism’s website.