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Ladies who launch

The Racquettes have held true to the Tennis Center mission for 50 strong years.

BY WAVENEY ANN MOORE
Times Staff Writer

ST. PETERSBURG

The cool morning was perfect for the physical exertion demanded by a game or two of tennis.

This day, about a dozen women, in new anniversary T-shirts, were preparing to make their way onto the courts of the historic St. Petersburg Tennis Center.

It's here in the Bartlett Park neighborhood that the likes of Arthur Ashe, Rod Laver, Billie Jean King, Martina Navratilova and Chris Evert once played.

And for the past 50 years, this has also been the home of the Racquettes, a group of women who meld their love of the game with good works and a bit of socializing.

This Friday, members will celebrate the club's half-century with a catered lunch in the Tennis Center's clubhouse at 650 18th Ave. S.

At 93, Audrey Stimpert is the Racquettes' oldest member. This week she talked about migrating more than two decades ago to the St. Petersburg center from courts at Lazarillo Park in St. Pete Beach.

"I played golf until the early '80s and then they started giving lessons down at Lazarillo Park," she said. "Two or three of us decided we didn't like the hard courts. The hard courts are kind of hard on our knees." The St. Petersburg Tennis Center has clay courts.

"It was the best place to play and I just kept playing there," Stimpert said.

Racquettes president Anita Knapp, 64, said it was the opportunity to play with "a talented group of ladies" that drew her to the group.

"In its heyday, there were 150 to 200 members," she said, adding that numbers
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Audrey Stimpert is the seniormost member of the Racquettes at 93. The clay courts of the St. Petersburg Tennis Center enticed her long ago.

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Ladies who launch celebrate 50 strong years

decreased as members got older. Also, some women in the past 10 to 15 years found other places to play that offer more amenities, she said. There are now about 50 Racquettes.

"It's a little harder to attract and keep members," Knapp said.

Joan Dean, 81, a showbird from Darien, Conn., is one of the newer ones, joining about five years ago.

"I went up to the Tennis Center trying to find someone to play tennis with and I heard these women saying, 'How do we get a fourth?' They invited me to join," she said. "They are a delightful group of women."

"I think we have a lot in common with each other," said Mildred Steckman, 87, who lives in Gettysburg, Pa., but has been wintering in St. Petersburg with husband, Oscar, since 1982.

Her association with the Racquettes dates back to then, she said.

Besides playing tennis with the group, Steckman cooks pots of chicken soup for the annual Men's Senior Tournament and enlists fellow Racquettes to bake cookies for the event. The women have a luncheon of their own each month.

Knapp, who lives in northwest St. Petersburg and has been a Racquette since the mid '80s, said the group sticks to its original bylaws, which are to encourage women



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Lis Zinn, 78, left, and Anita Knapp, 64, president of the Racquettes, try out a new T-shirt that celebrates the milestone of the group that promotes tennis and service.

to play tennis and to support the Tennis Center. Club members also provide scholarships to promising young players.

The St. Petersburg Tennis Center, which

traces its history back 80 years, almost closed more than a decade ago. In 2001, the number of adult members had dropped to 13 at the facility, which was being run by the city. The

nonprofit Tennis Foundation of St. Petersburg took over, launching a promotional campaign, among other efforts, to save the historic center.

A 4,500-square-foot, \$1.27 million clubhouse built a few years ago replaced a building from 1934. The new building was financed with \$900,000 from the city and \$370,000 from the foundation.

These days the center offers children's programs, lessons and clinics and U.S. Tennis Association and Pinellas County leagues.

The Racquettes gather at 8:30 a.m. Fridays, October through May, but as the years have progressed, it has become a bit too early for past president June Hurley Young, who is 81 and lives on the other side of town.

An artist and writer who has sold 25,000 copies of her self-published *The Don Ce-Sar Story*, Young said she now plays only about once a month.

Stimpert, who lives in St. Pete Beach, doesn't have any secrets for still being in the game at 93.

"I feel good. I've just been lucky, I guess," she said. "I always liked to play something."

Besides tennis, that means playing the trumpet in a Masonic band.

Waveney Ann Moore can be reached at wmoore@tampabay.com or (727) 892-2283.