

For love of the game

W&M grad returns to give tennis workshop focused on his "effortless" method of teaching. **Sports**



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SPORTS

TENNIS



Brent Zeller, founder of Effortless Tennis, coaches Stacy Clement of San Rafael during a group class at the College of Marin in Kentfield on April 18. Zeller is celebrating 50 years of teaching tennis this year. **ALAN DEP/MARIN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL**

Strokes of genius

W&M graduate will mark 50-year anniversary of teaching tennis with workshop at Williamsburg Inn

By Sonny Dearth
Staff writer

If you play tennis, Brent Zeller has advice you might expect from a guy who lives in California and enjoys the Grateful Dead: Relax and enjoy it. That counsel can apply to other parts of life too.

The 70-year-old William & Mary graduate has returned to the Williamsburg Inn courts to celebrate a milestone of his tennis teaching career.

About eight of his adult pupils from Marin are joining him at the Inn for a workshop from May 30-June 2, and he'll be in the area through June 14.

"The Inn's allowing me to bring students in to mark my 50th anniversary," he said. "If I can find a place to teach a few more lessons while I'm there, I'd love to do a three or four day clinic."

Zeller, who grew up in Pennsylvania's Lancaster County, said he went to W&M in the fall of 1972 and often played No. 5 or 6 as a freshman for the tennis team. Rod Stoner, the lodge manager, called Zeller and asked him if he'd like to be a court attendant at the Williamsburg Inn.

"I kept working there and didn't go back to the team," Zeller said. "In the summer of '74, I taught my first tennis lesson there."

He became a U.S. Professional Tennis Association member in 1975 and worked at the Tides Inn in Irvington for a year after graduating from William & Mary in 1976.

"One of the guests there turned out to be a retired Army general," Zeller said. "He had started teaching in Annapolis, we really hit it off and he said we have a teaching position."

So Zeller worked in the Baltimore-Washington area for a few years, but then he ventured to California to visit a friend and see a Grateful Dead concert in 1985. He soon decided to move to California's East Bay and teach tennis there.

"I've always said my tennis can take me anywhere," Zeller said. "I was pretty confident in my teaching, even at that time. I seemed to have a knack for it. I came out here, found a job within a month or so and have been in Marin County for 39 years."

Don't expect a lot of yelling and screaming at his lessons, which he usually holds at the College of Marin and a county park. He lives in San Rafael, California.

"My program is called Effortless Tennis," he said, estimating that he has taught tennis for more than 30,000 hours in his career.

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In Annapolis, Zeller noticed at Friday night mixers that "people's personalities would change when they got on the court."

Some people would become wallflowers, and some would become raging maniacs. That started me wondering what was going on there."

A 1974 book called "The Inner Game of Tennis" by Timothy

Gallwey emphasized avoiding self-criticism and instead allowing natural ability to take over. During the "tennis boom," when many people were taking up the sport, it was well-timed.

"That was like my Bible," Zeller said. "I was taking what he said and adapting my own program to it. People were being thrown into competition ... and they had virtually none of the mental and emotional skills needed to be successful. ... The premature approach of competition was limiting everybody's devel-

opment, and it's why so many people quit tennis."

Zeller regularly competed in men's tournaments until the mid-1980s, earning a top-10 ranking in Maryland, "but I didn't have all the skills, especially the mental and emotional skills."

In 1992, Zeller removed competition from his program, emphasizing "competence before competition. ... I have no problem with competition, I just think people should have the skills before competition. ... They were way too tense and uptight

to perform anywhere close to their potential. Just by removing the competition, people start to relax, and they also start to learn good concentration skills."

Zeller has written a book on his research called "Evolutionary Education — Beyond Competition." The book "shows how a non-competitive learning system can transform education and the society as a whole by teaching people to see people as partners in the learning process instead of competitors or adversaries and obstacles to our goals," he told

marinij.com.

That's a long process, but it applies in Effortless Tennis.

"The No. 1 key to peak performance in my program is joy. It's a recreational activity. You're supposed to be having fun doing this," Zeller said. "This is the best sport ever. You can play it until your 70s or 80s, but it's a hard sport. If you want to be a good tennis player, it's gonna take time."

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