

# Serving Up ACES

by Keith Loria



Looking around the talented high school volleyball squads in our area, it might be surprising to know that six years ago, girls interested in taking part in the sport were pretty much at a loss for options. Although there were some house leagues in Sterling and other Northern Virginia locales, there was nothing for those in Vienna, McLean, or Oakton.

“There was no volleyball at all for these girls, so for an elementary-, middle school-, or high school-aged kid to play, you had to go out to other areas because of the lack of opportunity,” says Bob Bell, a volleyball enthusiast and father. “I worked with the Vienna Youth Incorporated, which runs other sports, to establish a house league known as Vienna Youth Volleyball.”

The teams were formed based on the school pyramids, and in the first year of 2008, more than 200 kids signed up. That has grown to over 350 today.

“I was surprised by the interest. We sent it out to our existing sports people and made it really easy for everyone,” Bell says. “There was no weekend commitment, so you could play at your other sport, and that was our initial focus. We were real flexible to allow people to practice on days that don’t conflict with other commitments.”

Bell’s volleyball background includes championship caliber play at inter-collegiate clubs, USAV clubs, and co-ed and

sand/grass doubles. He says his passion for the sport is fulfilled when he works with the younger players in teaching proper techniques and spreading the love of the game. His goal is to never be the last volleyball coach for any player — and his hope is that all his players progress to their next level of play.

“I became involved in all this when my daughter was in seventh grade and came to me saying she wanted to try volleyball. She was a competitive swimmer, and because I used to play volleyball, I reached out to my friends,” Bell says. “I went to see my friends at Virginia Elite Volleyball, and they became my mentor on this.”

Bell started running some clinics and began coaching in Centerville and eventually started his own program. At first, the girls weren’t that good, but he brought in great coaches and the talent level has grown considerably.

VYV now has 350-plus girl and boy participants and focuses on introductory and intermediate volleyball programs that are run in the spirit of USA Volleyball’s grassroots initiatives.

For the first time, boys 14 and under can compete on the same teams and in the same tournaments as girls. There are also boy-only teams, and currently about 25 boys play in the house league.

In addition to serving as commissioner of VYV, Bell also founded Vienna Elite Volleyball in 2010. This league is part of USA Volleyball, the highest national affiliation for the sport around. All participants have to be members.

“We are part of the Chesapeake Regional Volleyball Association, which goes from Delaware to Richmond,” Bell says. “On any given weekend we can be in Annapolis, Manassas, or Dover.”

The clubs also travel to other tournaments, such as a recent trip to Pennsylvania and national tournaments upcoming in Philadelphia and Omaha. Then there’s the annual Williamsburg Revolutionary Rumble in May, which brings teams up from the south.

Many of the Elite teams are finding great success. In January, the U16 Voltage team won gold at a tournament in Columbia, Md. Meanwhile, the U15 Tenacity squad took first place at the NVVA Volley Like a Rockstar Open tournament, held January 26.

“We’re having a good year. It’s too early to say how good we are, but the teams are doing well relative to their competition at this stage of the game,” Bell says. “Hopefully, we can continue to improve and sustain that.”

For the 2013 season, Vienna Elite drew from a pool outside from just the Tysons area for the first time. Volleyball players from Langley, Marshall, Madison, South Lakes, and some private schools all join forces.

“We really should be called Liberty Elite, because most come from the Liberty district,” he says. “We started in Vienna, so our name is just a little more restrictive than what we actually are right now.”

Bell believes that volleyball is a great sport for girls and offers more than some of the more popular options out there today.

“It’s a great team sport, and I think some sports you aren’t dependent on someone else, but in volleyball, if you play it right, three people are touching the ball every time the ball comes over the net,” he says. “It’s all designed that 50% of those on the court are in on the play.”

He also praises the social aspect of the game with relatives and friends of all ages enjoying the action.

“You start to see your friends come out to watch them play, more so than in other sports, Bell says. “It’s not an easy game. You have to be jumping and getting to the right position at the right time and not let the person on the other side of the net block you. It’s challenging and a lot of things have to be done right, and the draw is that it’s different and fun.”

**author:** Keith Loria is a freelance writer who writes regularly about sports, business, entertainment, and the arts. When he’s not writing, the Oakton work-at-home dad can be found playing with his daughters Jordan and Cassidy.



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