

Tennis training program serves up winning regimen

It turns out developing a killer backhand doesn't start on the tennis court but in a gym with a medicine ball.

Mallory Gardner, a Kearney High School sophomore, is still perfecting the form on a lunge exercise designed to strengthen her core. "I don't think I did that one right," she says.

"Just try not to move that back leg at all when you step back. There ya go. Perfect!"

Zach Koelling, a physical therapist at Liberty Hospital's Outpatient Rehabilitation Clinic, works with Gardner as part of the clinic's Tennis Strengthening & Agility Program, offered to tennis athletes hoping to improve their game. Rather than teaching with tennis rackets, the program is designed to improve flexibility, strength and quickness with exercises that Gardner can perform throughout the year.

Now they're on to agility exercises, and Koelling demonstrates the footwork required for this drill.

"Make sure you bring your knees up." This one she picks up quickly. "There ya go. Alright, next one – same thing except sideways."

Gardner has played tennis for two years, and although she also has a private tennis coach, she's looking for some additional off-season training – not only to improve her game but also to reduce her risk of injury once the season starts again in the fall.

She injured her knee her freshman year, and after being saddled with a brace for a while, she knows how quickly a sports injury can crimp



your game. Mostly though, she's looking for those additional intangibles that make all the difference in a game setting.

"I hope to get more endurance and get more fit – and be more flexible to be able to play tennis," she said. "It will just help with my game."

The program is divided into four sessions, each lasting about an hour. Attendees will learn and perform different aspects of the program each week, including dynamic warm-up, upper extremity training, lower extremity strength, core strength, and speed and agility exercises. Plus everyone walks away with a workbook outlining each of the exercises, complete with color photos and illustrations.

Open to both male and female athletes of all skill levels from junior high through adults, the program has piqued the curiosity of Gardner's friends. "Everybody I've talked to seems really interested," she said. "I think this will be a really great program."

Classes are forming now for this spring and will be held at the Liberty Hospital Outpatient Rehabilitation Clinic at 130 S. Stewart Road in Liberty. The clinic will also be offering a similar program focused on soccer conditioning as well as a program on ACL injury prevention. For more information on any of these programs, call 816-407-2302.