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Cardio Tennis: A Match Made in Aerobic Heaven

By [Megan Voelke](#)

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I should've brought more water. I'm sprinting through my second obstacle dash around the tennis court -- batting back a blitz of balls, hopscotching through a rope ladder on the ground, zigzagging around neon orange cones -- and there is just one small bottle of thirst-quenching goodness waiting for me beyond the baseline.



During a Cardio Tennis class held by the District's Shiloh Baptist Church, Kevin Taylor runs through a footwork exercise after hitting the ball. (By Jay Premack For The Washington Post)

I have totally underestimated Cardio Tennis.

It's no wonder that I'm poorly equipped for this sweat-inducing hour-long workout that has popped up on dozens of courts in the Washington area. After all, this isn't the tennis I remember from years of lessons and matches, with breathers to discuss technique and strolls to retrieve a stray ball.

The name of this game is full-body fitness, says the Tennis Industry Association, which developed the drill-format, heart-thumping exercise class with the [U.S. Tennis Association](#) a little more than three years ago. "I tell people, 'You don't play tennis to get in shape. You get in shape to play tennis,' " says Brian O'Donnell, a longtime tennis pro and national grass-roots programs manager for the tennis industry group. "And that's what Cardio Tennis does."

Sure, a well-paced tennis match has its health benefits, but it's not the same concentrated calorie-burning blast, O'Donnell says. (He estimates that an hour of Cardio Tennis burns 400 to 600 calories in women and 800 to 1,000 in men.) He also stresses that you don't have to know how to play tennis to do the workout, which largely sidesteps formalities of skill and scoring to focus on aerobic exercise.

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"Keep those feet moving!" shouts instructor Jumanne Jahi to the six of us who've schlepped out of bed for the 8 a.m. class on a recent Saturday in Centreville. He's a tennis pro turned drill sergeant for this workout, playing deep house music to set an upbeat tempo while guiding the class through light and intense exercises.

"I'm there to keep everybody moving and to modify the drills, to make sure

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that everybody is getting something out of it," Jahi says.

Some of the drills he prescribes incorporate standard shot-making (forehands, backhands, volleys); others require teamwork. One of the liveliest of these assigns one racket to a team of players who have to share it to keep the ball in play. The scramble makes for an engaging, if not downright giddy, calorie burn. For racketless maneuvers, Jahi commands his cadets to do baseline jumps and lateral shuffles between the doubles lines, sometimes

even stomach crunches.

"We're spoiled by Coach J. He tries everything. He brings in jump-ropes, cones, horizontal ladders. He'll create stations to not only build our stamina, but to build our strength, without us even realizing it," says Priscilla Branch, 39, of Centreville, who has done Cardio Tennis for more than a year. And why does this approach work for her? "It brings out the kid in me," the software developer says. "That's my opportunity as a grown-up to come outside and play and stay fit."

Despite appearing to be a distant relative at times, Cardio Tennis can still tap into the competitive edge of its mother sport. Using balls that tend to move slower on the court than average tennis balls, my class manages a few long rallies, with animated shouts of "Bring it!" and "C'mon!" from my opponents.

No final score is announced, but in the contest to build endurance, everybody earns a few points.

"I couldn't play singles before because I didn't have the stamina," says Constance Seid, 43, a stay-at-home mom from Reston who has taken Cardio Tennis classes for two years and plays in a tennis league. "I love tennis, but I hate to exercise. This doesn't feel like exercise to me. . . . It's as tennis as you want it or as cardio as you want it."

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