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Winning at Love

Matthew Shepard JAM Raises Money, Awareness

By [Wyman Meers](#)
For Outsports.com

In late September, all athletes have a heightened understanding of the beauty of sport as morning chills give way to bold afternoons that announce the impending arrival of autumn. The air becomes clearer and, in it, our actions more greatly defined.

The early morning crunch of football helmets portend a coming cold, while fading green baseball diamonds rustle softly with spare hope for a chosen few. Meanwhile, basketballs are left to echo against backboard and cement during impromptu pick-up games, the rise and fall of orange-red orbs a promised memory like so many setting suns.

And on a recent picturesque, windswept afternoon in the Bronx, it was the glistening golden arc of tennis balls that was entrusted to honor just such an autumnal memory when players from New York's Metropolitan Tennis Group gathered to participate in the 7th Annual Matthew Shepard Memorial Tennis JAM.

Almost unbelievably, it has been seven years since the brutal murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay man, in Laramie, Wyo. Games seem of little importance while reflecting back on those prematurely frosted days in 1998 when Shepard was beaten to the brink of death and left bound to a fence by two men who lured him from a bar by pretending to be gay. He passed away in a hospital room on just such an early autumn afternoon.



Top row, L to R: Ron Kelly, Jody O'Neil, Lois Ferrell



Metropolitan Tennis Group member Raphael Miranda



Participants of the 7th Annual Matthew Shepard Memorial Tennis JAM - Sept. 24, 2005



MTG President Jeffrey Fairbanks connects with the ball.



Outsports Discussion Board members: From left to right: Jemal Creary, aka "Jammy"; Wyman Meers, aka "Gaga4Gaby"; and Jeremy Marchese, aka "SelesFan91."

Bottom row, left to right: Kevin Mondrick, Rachel Greiper, Randi Driscoll, and Judy Shepard.

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"It was sensational news, of course," says JAM founder Jody O'Neil of the incident that ignited his activism, "but what really motivated me was the sight of children protesting at Matthew Shepard's funeral service [under the tutelage of the infamous Reverend Fred Phelps]. Everyone can have his or her political views, but when you co-opt kids to carry hate placards at a gay man's funeral with his grieving family across the street, you have dropped below acceptable boundaries for what constitutes a civilized human being."

O'Neil's concern for children in the wake of unbridled evil would compliment well the mission of the fledgling Matthew Shepard Foundation, a non-profit organization established with the funds donated by people from across the world to assist with Matthew's medical expenses. Shepard's family decided it was important to put the donations to a more lasting use.

"Our focus is raising awareness among young people," said Judy Shepard, Matthew's mother, who was able to attend the JAM for the first time this year. "We speak at schools and provide educational programs on tolerance and diversity, because it's young people who will ultimately make a difference."

"A child's mind is too precious," said O'Neil. He is still as visibly passionate today as he was in that first moment when he incorporated his love of tennis into a 'tennis-a-thon' fundraiser that began in 1999 with a mere fourteen players raising \$500 to support the Foundation's efforts to promote Equality Through Diversity. "We have to act."

Tennis is a perfect metaphor for Equality Through Diversity. No two tennis players strike the ball exactly the same way or construct points in an identical manner. Particularly at the recreational level, skill sets vary widely and range from the mediocre to the magnificent. Some players are similar to one another and others perform in striking contrast, yet all styles have equal opportunity to flourish and all styles permeate the sport from the most basic beginnings into the upper echelon of the pro tours.

O'Neil has now nurtured the JAM through seven consecutive years, bringing together all of these varying elements and putting them to unified use. Participants compete in a round-robin doubles format with the initial lineup decided by lottery. Therefore, men and women can be paired together, as can novices and teaching pros. Play is divided into seven periods, with teams and partners rotating at the end of each period to allow for maximum interaction between all the faces and elements of the sport.

It is an afternoon of complete inclusion. For every game a player earns, he or she donates two dollars to the day's total proceeds. Grassroots fundraising efforts are furthered in the form of prizes donated by sponsors and participants, which are then raffled off to ticket holders while the day's results are tabulated. Judy Shepard playfully participated in this year's raffle as she drew numbers and displayed the list of items up for grabs. Finally, the most successful 16 players on the day are announced. These men and women advance to the playoffs to compete for gold, silver, and bronze honors.

The mood of the JAM is more joyous than somber. It is, in fact, a conglomerate of varied emotions like any sporting event. There are players with smiles on their faces for winning volleys, high-fives of encouragement when doubles partners miss their shots, and – as is human nature – there are those who become too wrapped up in wanting to do well and momentarily lose sight of the grander purpose of accumulating points on the scoreboard. Undoubtedly, all the players do their best to be successful, but the focus of the JAM reaches far beyond competition. Each year, the Matthew Shepard Memorial Tennis JAM has surpassed its previous fundraising efforts. JAM7 looks to be no different, as organizers expect proceeds to top \$8,000 once all donations are tallied.

"There's so much to be encouraged about," says Shepard as the competition and courts heat up, marking the players' skin in varying bronzed shades. "We lost attention on the national level after the change of administration, but grassroots efforts are thriving. I've seen so much positive change in the last seven years."

"These events are more real to me," she adds when comparing the JAM to the numerous high-profile celebrity charity events she has attended. "This is Matthew's community. These are Matthew's friends."

The JAM is quickly evolving from its humble grassroots beginnings and becoming more accomplished with each additional chapter that is added to its already impressive history. This year, the Tennis Channel, Channel 13, the USTA Metro Division, and the Gay and Lesbian Tennis Alliance all lent their support to the cause. Former WTA pro Leslie Allen, once ranked as high as 21st in the world, participated in the JAM for a second time and brought her young daughter to this year's event. Another strong show of support came from acclaimed singer/songwriter Randi Driscoll, who penned the song "What Matters" in honor of Matthew's memory and participated on-court in JAM6.

Despite a hectic rehearsal schedule and the numerous demands of preparing her own upcoming benefit for the Matthew Shepard Foundation – a performance on Oct. 10th at New York's Birdland – Driscoll made a point of

being present in this remote corner of the Bronx for the opening announcements. Being an active participant in last year's JAM and seeing the Metropolitan Tennis Group come together in kindness left an indelible mark on her. And she is not alone. As interest in the JAM from television and other media outlets grows, organizers are tentatively planning to move next year's event to Manhattan. Hopes are high that the tennis courts in Central Park can be secured and the participation of additional celebrity guests is also in the works, thanks in large part to Judy Shepard's attendance this year.

"I've wanted Judy since Day 1," says O'Neil. "It was a dream come to life! She is an inspiration for gay people, their families, and for mothers."

In a time of economic strain due to hurricanes Katrina and Rita, as well as the ongoing war in Iraq, JAM organizers point to Judy Shepard as the major encouragement to fundraisers. O'Neil, however, feels the truest testament to her impact extends beyond the hard numbers. He thoughtfully continues, "One of my favorite scenes from the JAM was seeing Judy speaking with [participants'] moms, who will speak to other moms, and so on. It was maternal majesty!"

By design, sports negate our differences via the very sincerity of competition: ethnicity, gender, and sexuality are rendered irrelevant within the confines of a playing field. But on rare occasions, sport can be a catalyst for community and build into a crescendo that is paradoxical to its own truths. The Matthew Shepard Memorial Tennis JAM ascends to such heights, stimulating participants' hearts and heartbeats with the defiance of individuality inherent to competition and the simultaneous recognition that our differences are what make us human.

Conversely, being human imbues the boundaries of courts and fields with significance, and that humanity is reason enough to give boundaries the respect they deserve. Perhaps it is not the crispness in the air that allows an athlete a momentary glimpse of clarity, but rather the exhaustion after exertion that brings us all to the basics of life: exhalation and inhalation, the taking in of our environment and giving back something of ourselves in one smooth action. That is the physical manifestation of the spirit inside each of us; a promise of life. The JAM has certainly held true to keeping that promise in Matthew Shepard's honor. It has enjoyed impressive growth each year and shows no sign of stopping.

"I was very touched [by the idea of the JAM], although I never imagined it would go on for seven years," Shepard said. But for the mother-turned-activist, seeing the JAM's success this year meant believing. Each strike of the tennis ball is a vow to speak, act, and educate by loving example. Each mark on the scorecard is combustion for change. Every late autumn day will be a commitment to memory. As this group of gay and gay-friendly athletes cherishes the turning landscape of colors inside their souls and outside their eyes, they will never forget to appreciate the simple joys of running, jumping, breathing, and being that bring our games to life.

More information on the programs of the Matthew Shepard Foundation, including information on Randi Driscoll's appearance in New York, can be accessed via the Foundation's [website](#).

The Metropolitan Tennis Group (MTG) is a not-for-profit organization formed to provide its membership with expanded opportunities to play recreational and competitive tennis. The organization also serves as an alternative social forum for lesbians and gay men. Please visit the Metropolitan Tennis Group's [website](#).

Sept. 28, 2005

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