

# Two good to be true?

Doubles allowed and players can't wait to get back

BY JEFF WILLIAMS

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Lizi Bitton of Hewlett, mother of three, real estate appraiser and “addicted” tennis player, is anxious to get back to playing the game she loves — doubles tennis. She’s not alone across Long Island’s tennis community, where doubles is the game of choice.

Since the game was reopened across the state on May 15 under the guidance of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo’s executive order, it was restricted to outdoor courts and was widely thought to be restricted to singles play. But there’s nothing in the executive order under Item 13 that mentions anything about how the game should be played, either mandating singles or excluding doubles. And just about anywhere you go to a public court on Long Island, some doubles is being played.

This past Wednesday, Sportime’s outdoor facilities in Amagansett and Quogue allowed doubles under protocols largely taken from the United States Tennis Association guidelines.

“The guidance from the Empire State Development Corporation is clearly outdoor tennis is allowed now, using proper distancing and disinfection protocols, which we have put in place with great care,” said Claude Okin, CEO of Sportime. “Further guidance from the Suffolk County website indicating that tennis is open in Suffolk County in parks and otherwise and that people are advised to consider the USTA recommendations. The USTA recommendations do not say no doubles. It says players may wish to consider starting with singles, but if doubles is played, just use care. That’s what people want to do and that’s what we are doing.”

That’s what Bitton, 55, wants to do: play doubles several times a week and captain her USTA teams that play doubles at Sportime’s indoor facility in Lynbrook, which like all other indoor tennis operations remains



Doubles partners Ruth Settles of Westbury, left, and Lizi Bitton of Hewlett, who has recovered from COVID-19, believe they can play safely.

closed. She believes doubles tennis can be done safely in the COVID-19 environment, and she has a unique view of that.

After her usual winter season of playing indoors, she doesn’t think that tennis contributed in any way when she contracted COVID-19 in the middle of March.

Bitton said her son developed coronavirus symptoms March 12 and that hers developed a couple of days later. Subsequent testing revealed they both had the virus. She was diagnosed with pneumonia but did not have to be hospitalized, and both then tested negative. That experience makes her believe that tennis is a safe environment.

“My daughter, my other son and my husband tested nega-

tive twice and tested negative for antibodies,” Bitton said. “So even with two people sick in the house in constant contact, they didn’t get infected. They were negative for the virus. Doesn’t make sense for me that I could get my tennis partner infected outside in 70 degrees playing in the sun.”

The vague restriction on doubles appears to be something that arose during a phone conversation between Westchester County leaders and the Empire State Development Corporation on the first of May, according to Okin.

“There’s no guidance from the state that there is no doubles. That is just sort of a thing that happened,” he said. “We sort of participated in it be-

cause we knew about that call . . . The guidance says nothing about all these other details about restrictions. It just says, with distancing, with disinfection, you can play tennis.”

Sue Dalessandro of Valley Stream, 71, has been playing for 40 years. Doubles is at the center of her game, as it is for the vast majority of recreational players, especially seniors. She and friend Al Silverstein started a mixed doubles group of 65 and over that plays at Hempstead Lake State Park. They haven’t started playing this year.

“People just absolutely love playing mixed doubles,” Dalessandro said. “When you are 65 and over, you have some things in common. You are com-

petitive but you are kind to each other.”

Ruth Settles, 48, of Westbury, who is a frequent partner of Bitton, said doubles is everything to her. “Playing doubles, four players, two a side, we’re always six feet apart,” she said. “Very rarely do we bump into one another. When you talk about doubles, four people on a court, social distancing isn’t a problem.”

Despite the social distancing, the game brings people together in an increasingly meaningful way for Dalessandro.

“Tennis is such a great escape to recharge your mind, your body, get some exercise,” she said. “That’s what we really need right now, an escape from what’s going on around us.”

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