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PHOTO BY STEVE RUARK

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Loch Raven Badminton Club president Richard Shingles, right, coaches fellow Cockeysville resident Xinna Sheng during a club play session at Northeast Regional Recreation Center. The club is a regional resource for lovers of all things badminton.

Young players hone skills at Loch Raven Badminton Club

By Jon Meoli
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The skill level displayed by the Loch Raven Badminton Club on Friday nights hardly resembles the version most commonly associated with the sport.

"Most Americans think of badminton as a backyard barbecue game," Ed Smith, 78, of Lutherville, said. "We still have fun, but we're a little more serious than that."

Well, maybe more than a little.

Players for the club, which meets weekly at the Northeast Regional Recreation Center on Oakleigh Road, in Parkville, are a cut well above what one might find at a typical neighborhood picnic.

Members play on eight regulation-sized courts and enjoy a family-oriented atmosphere that allows children to learn a sport that could last a lifetime.

At the adult play session on Friday, July 29, the children were relegated to the sidelines, hitting among themselves while the grown-ups secured the main courts.

But at the family play session the next morning, the children were the center of attention, playing beside the adults on the club's roll-out courts.

Charles Zhang, 11, of White Marsh; and Ari Wu, 12, of Lutherville, played on one court with abandon, sacrificing finesse and shot-making for sheer power.

Charles joined the club in 2008 at the urging of his mother, and said the sport is a good way to get exercise. He and Ari played beside older family members.

To be sure, the adults playing on the surrounding courts influence them. They give Elliot Strahan, 10 of Towson, the incentive to improve.

"I want to be as good as they are," he said, motioning over to the court beside where he and another boy were taking lessons.

Elliot began playing in his backyard in the summer of 2008 when his mother, Kelly Hom, found the Loch Raven club on the Internet.

Since then, Elliot has taken lessons with club president Richard Shingles and improved every facet of his game. Shingles puts the children through drills that work on their different strokes from each part of the court. One drill that takes particular skill required the players to hit backhand shots into an equipment bag just under the net — a feat Elliot

achieved several times.

And his practice has paid off. At the Maryland Junior Open in April, Elliot placed fourth in his age group in singles and second in the doubles bracket.

Charles and Elliot both hope to play for their high schools when the time comes, a future goal to which all the young players at the club may strive.

Our club helps the quality of the high school play locally," Smith said. "We have really good people here, and that's how young people learn."

Baltimore County is one of the few areas in the country that offers badminton as an interscholastic sport. Some players, such as Steven Iringan, 16, of Baltimore; and Nurit Kedir, 15, of Perry Hall, have been using the club to prepare for the upcoming high school season.

Nurit played Friday with Amanda Hallock, 17, of Pikesville, who has played at Garrison Forest School in Owings Mills since seventh grade and began with the club this summer. Nurit, who will try out for her high school team in a few weeks, just recently began playing and said the game is "harder than it looks."

"You run a lot if you're playing singles," she said.

While the prep season doesn't begin until the spring, now that she's found the club, badminton has become an even bigger part of her life.

"I love it," Haddock said. "It's my favorite part of the day."

Smith, who has been with the club for 35 years and playing organized badminton for much longer, has seen the club grow from its modest beginnings.

"There were far fewer people and lower skill levels back then," Smith said.

Along with the creation of their website six years ago, the move to the Northeast Regional Recreation Center has been a boon for membership. Since moving to their new location, Shingles said the club immediately added 55 members.

The move also gave the club a much-needed bit of continuity. After decades at Loch Raven High School, construction forced the club to become a wandering tribe of sorts.

Shingles said they spent two months at Baltimore Lutheran School, two months at Towson High School, and seven months at Garrison Forest before finding a new home.



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Xinna Sheng, of Cockeysville, hits a shot during the Loch Raven Badminton Club's family play time at the Northeast Regional Recreation Center.