

# New team spirit in the Tenderloin

By *Stephanie Salter*  
INSIGHT STAFF WRITER

Every Saturday and Sunday morning, Nghi Trinh and her children, Dennis and Nina, set out from their Tenderloin apartment on Ellis Street and head for Yerba Buena Center. Along the 10-block walk they meet up with two or three dozen other neighborhood kids and a few chaperones at the Indochinese Housing Development Corp., the Tenderloin Children's Playground or Salvation Army.

Saturdays, the group's destination is Yerba Buena's bowling lanes. Sundays, the venue is the ice rink next door.

Accompanying each of these weekend parades — in spirit and philosophy — is an unlikely but kindred soul: UCLA basketball legend John Wooden. Like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Walton and all the Bruins who played for the Wizard of Westwood, the Tenderloin kids and their chaperone-coaches have become disciples of Wooden's "Pyramid of Success." Their version: a new program called the Tenderloin Youth Sports Initiative.

In a time of constricted public finances — when athletics and music even at middle-class suburban schools are threatened — the Tenderloin program is a testament to the power of community organizing. It is also a testament to people pulling together, volunteering energy and hours, and sharing a vision that relies a lot more on good will than big bucks or politics.

The Wooden connection imbues it with a kind of American-melting-pot quality that sometimes seems to have died out with the last of Frank Capra's films.

"One of the things I like best is this one," said the Vietnam-born Nghi Trinh, holding a laminated copy of Wooden's pyramid and tapping her finger on the building block labeled, "self-control."

"It is such a good thing to teach the kids and to remember yourself: If you calm down and control yourself before you do something, you are not going to do the wrong thing so much," she says.

The adaptation of Wooden's formula to a sports program for poor, inner-city public school kids commenced about 18 months ago with two San Francisco mothers. Midge Wilson, executive director of the Bay Area Women's and Children's Center, was talking to another woman as their daughters practiced synchronized ice skating. The subject was the virtues of team sports. The other mom told Wilson, "I have a video you might enjoy."

That mom turned out to be former tennis pro Peanut Louie Harper; the video was Wooden's documentary about the philosophy of his pyramid: "Values, Victory and Peace of Mind."

"I turned it on while I was making dinner that night, and I could hardly finish cooking," said Wilson. "I was spellbound by every word Coach Wooden said. All the things I had thought for many years about the potential for sports to build more than athletic skills, he was saying them and showing how to do it."

Plain-spoken and as homespun as the Indiana farm that nurtured his childhood, Wooden has preached such old-fashioned virtues as industriousness, loyalty and enthusiasm throughout his long coaching and mentoring career. Now 93, he still advises students and adults that team sports, when executed properly, can instill values, habits and cognitive skills that will serve people as well off the court as on.

As Sports Illustrated's Rick Reilly wrote of his former coach:

"You played for him, you played by his rules: Never score without acknowledging a teammate. One word of profanity, and you're done for the day... He believed in hopelessly out-of-date stuff that never did anything but win championships."

Ten NCAA championships to be exact. And he compiled an 88-game consecutive win streak that no one has come close to reaching.

Said Wilson: "When he was coaching, it wasn't just about the sports with him. It was about how to live your life in a principled way, thinking of others, sacrificing for

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# Tenderloin has its share of good sports

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the greater good."

Wilson, her center's staff and several other community activists were the primary force behind the creation of the Tenderloin Community School. Ever since it opened, they'd dreamed of a neighborhood sports program that would match the high caliber of their public grade school.

In January 2002, folks from the Bay Area non-profit, Team-up for Youth, moved the dream closer to reality: They gave the center a planning grant and asked it to be the lead agency in exploring the Tenderloin's needs and qualifications for one of their five-year, funded sports-organizing projects.

Team-up for Youth was founded by the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the San Francisco Foundation. Its aim is to "level the playing field for children and youth who have been left out of the game" by reinforcing and expanding out-of-school sports in low-income communities. Former Oakland A's owner and inveterate philanthropist Wally Haas is chairman.

Just as they did during the Tenderloin grade school's eight-year planning process, Wilson and myriad volunteers fanned out into the community and held listening sessions with parents and kids to determine what sports were most desired — and possible.

Everything from the easy-to-offer (basketball) to the improbable (golf) was requested. Someone even listed Muggle Quidditch, a Harry Potter-inspired field game that features broom sticks, hoops, bean bags and a shuttlecock.

During the process, Wilson made sure everyone involved with the Tenderloin sports project saw the Wooden video. Each new viewer became a convert.

Said Peanut Harper: "He tells you the great things your parents told you, you know, in the olden days? Family values, good common sense, things you don't hear enough of today. I find myself referring to him a lot, saying (to her daughter), 'Casey, Coach Wooden says...'"

Harper, who grew up in San Francisco and polished her tennis game on the city's public courts, sees Wooden's approach as an

antidote to the pressures of competitive sports and socialization in general. With emphasis on building skills, not showing them off, on persistence, concern for others and "just being yourself," his ideas "help ground you."

"So much of playing sports today is all about 'We gotta win' or 'You can't play because you're terrible, sit down,'" said Harper. "Sports is such a short part of your life and then what do you have? How many athletes do you hear about, as soon as they quit, they just plummet? That's the grounded part. For young kids, Coach Wooden's philosophy can give them a sense of what's important. It will save many, many tears."

At one point in the Tenderloin planning process, Harper's friend Steve Jamison got on board. The co-author of "Wooden: A Lifetime of Observations and Reflections On and Off the Court," Jamison told Wilson she should call Wooden and tell him what a fan she'd become.

She did. Last August, at Wooden's invitation, 22 women and men from the Tenderloin drove down to Los Angeles and spent nearly five hours with the Wizard. They met at his church in Encino.

"It was incredible," said Wilson. "He talked in this totally humble tone of voice, and everything he said just spoke straight to our hearts."

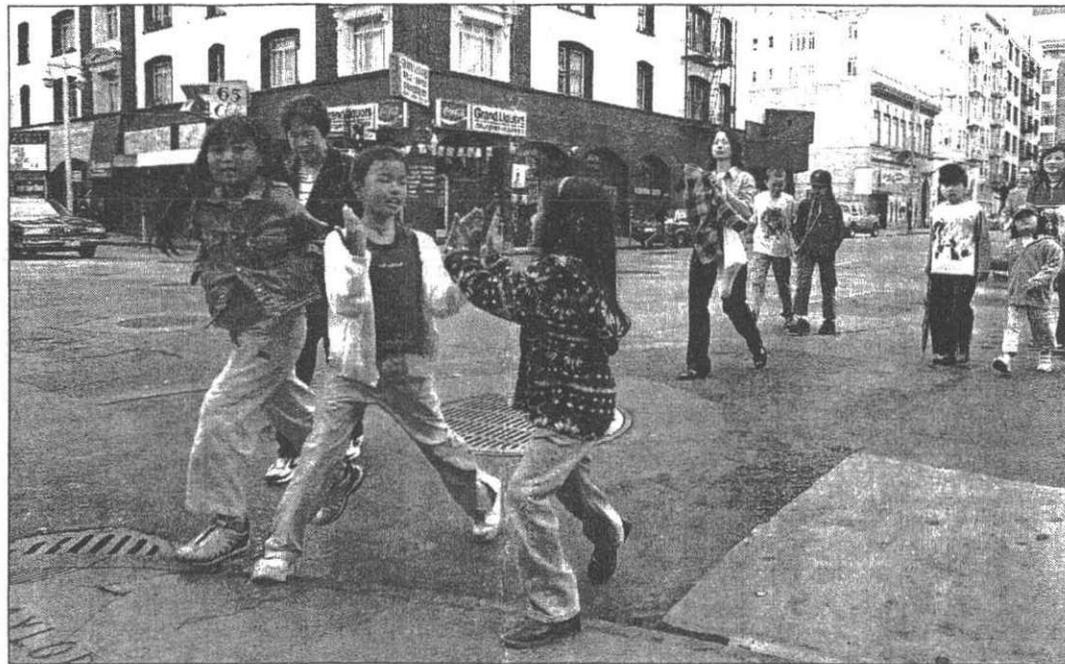
A few months later, with a multi-year grant from Team-up For Youth, an eight-sport Tenderloin program was launched.

"We wanted to use Coach Wooden's pyramid as a model for every element of every sport," said Wilson.

Alas, Muggle Quidditch didn't make the cut. But girls volleyball and boys basketball did. Keeping with Team-Up for Youth's goal to involve girls and boys who tend not to participate in traditional sports, the Tenderloin program also offers cheerleading, ice skating, bowling, dancing, yoga and — soon — trampoline and girls hoops.

Each year, the group plans to add new sports, as paid student coaches and adult volunteers materialize, go through the training process and commit themselves to a few hours each week.

One such volunteer is Jen Arens, the Youth Ministries Co-ordinator for the Salvation Army's Turk Street Central Corps and an early member of the sports initiative planning team.



MIKE KEPKA / The Chronicle

Lisa Ngo, 8, Kimberly Tran, 8, and Nina Huynh, 7, walk with a group of kids and parents from their Tenderloin neighborhood to bowl at the Yerba Buena Center.

"I got roped into bowling," she said on a recent Saturday morning as nearly 50 Tenderloin Strikers — including her son Thijs — propelled yellow, pink and orange balls down the Yerba Buena lanes. "It was like, we were picking sports to coach and everybody said, 'You're from the Midwest, you do bowling.'"

Roped or not, Arens obviously relishes the task. In the nine months the Strikers' league has been rolling, she's not only whipped her own game into shape, she's watched tiny miracles take place in the girls and boys.

"One kid, she's in the fifth grade, has just been amazing. She lives in a studio with her whole family and was having some problems in school," said Arens. "The first time, she said, 'I'm coming with you but I'm not bowling.'"

Like so many children who grow up poor and marginalized, the girl was afraid to try anything that might hack away at what little self-esteem she possessed.

"But we did get her to bowl," said Arens. "She got a 7. Now she's scoring 50s and 60s and is really into it. I told her, 'If you can do better in bowling, how much better can you do in school?'"

The managers of Yerba Buena Center's bowling and ice skating facilities have responded to the Tenderloin Youth Sports Ini-

tiative in ways that surpassed even Midge Wilson's highest hopes. Instead of the regular fee of \$105-150 for eight weeks of ice skating lessons, the price per Tenderloin kids is \$20. Same kind of deep discount for bowling — and the kids get to store their league shirts there.

For Suzy Jackson, who runs the skating school at Yerba Buena, the Tenderloin kids struck a particularly poignant chord.

"I grew up very poor," she said. "But I started skating when I was 5½, and I had a wonderful coach. Income shouldn't have anything to do with it. This (project) was something I was very happy to do."

Notre Dame de Namur University in Belmont has begun to sponsor mini-camps for girls volleyball. The San Francisco Hilton became the sponsor for the Tenderloin basketball league, and Alpine Awards in Foster City provides discounted jerseys, T-shirts and bowling shirts.

Meanwhile, down in his modest condominium in Encino, John Wooden stays apprised of the Tenderloin sports project's progress. His co-author, Steve Jamison, and Peanut Harper have put the 15-block Pyramid of Success into kid-friendly language and concepts. Characters like Axelrod the Ant and Inch & Miles help illustrate such notions as poise, determination and team spirit.

With Wooden's blessing, Jamison is writing a children's book that will impart not only the pyramid but many elements of Wooden's humble, old-fashioned value system. (An example: "It's the practices I miss most even now.")

On the ice at Yerba Buena Center — mixed in happily with any kid who takes lessons there on Saturdays or Sundays — 7-year-old Nina and 8-year-old Dennis Trinh continue to follow Suzy Jackson through such challenges as skating backwards on one leg.

And their mother Nghi keeps finding ways to interpret and apply what she's learning in the monthly coaches' training sessions where the operative phrase is, "WW-CWD: What Would Coach Wooden Do?"

"In the meeting before we come to skate or bowl, I talk to the kids about what we are wanting to do," said Trinh. "I try to talk from the bottom of my heart. I say, 'Why do I bring you out here? Because you are good kids. We are a team. We should love each other.'"

*Insight staff writer Stephanie Salter learned about Tenderloin Youth Sports Initiative through her service on an advisory board for the Bay Area Women's and Children's Center. E-mail her at ssalter@schronicil*