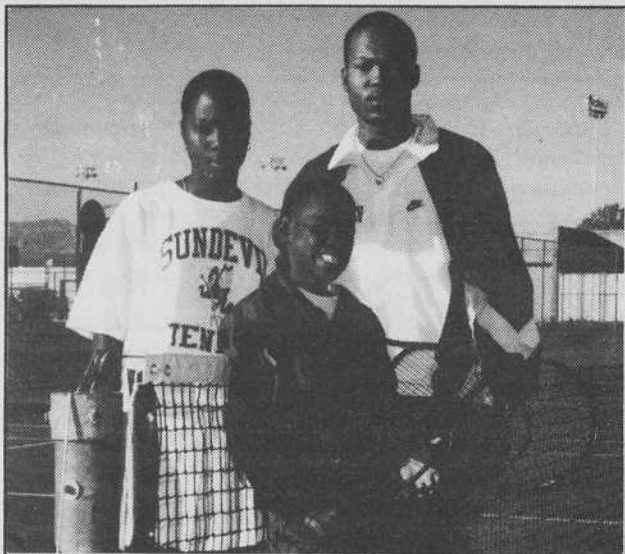


## SPORTS

## Tennis part of everyday life for local family



From left, LaTanya, Pierre and William Batton III are siblings building a potential tennis family dynasty.

Photo by John Broussard

By Lee Brown  
Sentinel-Voice

Over the years, African American sports heroes could be found mostly on America's football and baseball fields and basketball courts. Of late, however, that has begun to change with the recent success and recognition of golfer Tiger Woods and tennis pros Chandra Rubin and MaliVai Washington.

More and more, we are beginning to see larger numbers of African Americans participating in some of these

more non-traditional sports.

Such is the case locally with the Batton family.

William Batton Jr., his wife Suzette and their three children, William III (Will); LaTanya and Pierre moved to the Las Vegas Valley in 1989 from Long Beach, Calif. Little did they know at the time how that move would change their lives.

"We moved here in 1989," said William Batton Jr., who at one time played tennis for two years at Compton Community College in Compton, Calif. "The

family was into the traditional sports of football and basketball, but we had hooked up with a coach at the Green Valley Athletic Club named Michael James."

That chance meeting, fortunately for the Battons, would prove to change the family's lives more than they could have ever expected.

"From the 10th grade on, William (Will) had the opportunity at Eldorado (High School) to play high school tennis," William Jr. said. "Primarily, it was the opportunity to be coached by Michael James and to play at the high school level that really got the family involved in the sport."

An African American, James, formerly the tennis pro at the Green Valley Athletic Club in nearby Henderson, is currently the athletic director at the facility.

"He extended a hand to the family, to William, and from there LaTanya and Pierre jumped in," William Jr. said. "We met with him every Sunday until three months ago when they tore down the A.D. Guy Center tennis courts," William Jr. added of James, who volunteered his time over the years to help the Batton siblings.

Portions of the A.D. Guy Boys and Girls Club in West Las Vegas have been demolished to make way for a new facility, which will be paid for, in part, with the help of the Andre Agassi Foundation. The new center will house an indoor gymnasium as well as a complete tennis facility. With the Boys and Girls Club currently under construction, the Battons are currently working out with James at Western High School on the weekends.

"Primarily, what happened was that he wasn't getting much playing time in football," Batton Jr. said of his eldest son, who in addition to football, also played volleyball and wrestled at Eldorado. "So, we decided to make a switch, and it was a switch for the better. It was a non-traditional switch at the time. But we made it and we didn't know it would bring on the success it has.

"He stuck with it and it has paid off," he added.

And paid off it has. After playing competitively for only three years at Eldorado, Will was able to become a walk-on on the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) tennis team last year as a freshman.

"Actually, tennis wasn't something I thought about, it's something that kind of grew on me," said Will, now a 19-year-old sophomore at UNLV.

"I started out when I was about seven," he said of when he began playing the sport. "My confidence in my game grew more and more as my strokes

began to progress more. That came with all the practice I went through and with the blessing of God.

"I needed a change," Will added. "Since I was five-years-old, football and basketball was the common thing to do. I wanted to change. I wanted to do something different. I wanted to be a leader. Tennis is like my new frontier.

"I saw brothers and sisters being role models in basketball, football and track, but in non-traditional sports, I didn't see them as role models because I didn't see them at all," he said. "That's why I chose tennis. That's why I played four years of volleyball at Eldorado."

His choice to get involved in such activities, however, didn't go unnoticed, as he faced a lot of adversity from some of his peers.

"Of course when you start something new, everybody's going to tell you you can't do it," said Will, who hopes to be on scholarship next year. "No matter who you are or where you're at. Once you get through all of that, though, it's okay.

"I run into some of those people sometimes that didn't think that I would make it, and they still feel that I shouldn't be there," Will said. "As far as that goes, I really don't have any time for those people, but I also have to understand, too, that they are people who have locked their minds.

"Instead of trying to help everyone, they feel that if they don't do for themselves, they won't do for anyone else."

And aside from facing that type of adversity, Will also knew he would have to deal with the transition from high school competition, where he was a standout, to college.

"I knew I would have to start all over again (at UNLV)," Will said. "That's why you're called a freshman.

"As far as the transition, it really wasn't much," he said. "I was a freshman before in high school, and I made it through. So, I figured in college — with everyone being older — I'd make it through. As for the actual play and competition, it was a little tougher at first, but I think that better competition makes you better."

Though not on scholarship, and seeing little action thus far in his college career, Will still has a bright outlook for the future.

"Things are looking up this year," he said, compared to last year. Definitely, my play has improved a whole lot, and that's all the coaches need. (UNLV) Coach (Larry) Easley has been very fair to me. I couldn't ask for much more. He has given me the opportunity to play on a

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