Volleyball lessons: Coach gives life, game skills in classes

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SANTA CRUZ — Those crossing paths with Phil Kaplan think they are signing up for a beach volleyball class.

Little do they know they will be picking up litter, learning how to care for others and volunteering at the soup kitchen before long.

Kaplan, a 66-year-old semi-retired kinesiology professor at Cabrillo College said he was “terrible” at volleyball when he first took a stab at it in 1968. But after a few years, especially once he was introduced to the sunny beachy version of the sport, volleyball “caught fire” with him.

“We’re down at the ocean, and it’s a great interactive, social game,” said Kaplan, gesturing toward the Surf volleyball court lining Beach Street at the Boardwalk. “People don’t realize how complicated it is. It requires more athletic skills than almost anything.”

Kaplan, who teaches beach volleyball classes through both the kinesiology program and the Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Department, calls his course “No Attitudes Allowed.”

Kaplan will be honored on May 14 as the Santa Cruz Chapter of the American Red Cross Community Hero.

“If you look deeper, you find out that Phil is a hero to so many and has touched and inspired thousands of people beyond the normal coaching effort,” Lisa Uititalt, wrote in Kaplan’s nomination. “Phil Kaplan is not a hero that came about in one instantaneous moment or incident. His heroism spans over the past 35 years and has had an impact on so many people.”

Kaplan himself is reluctant COACH & PAGE 3

2014 HEROES BREAKFAST
What: Santa Cruz County Chapter of the American Red Cross annual event
When: 7-9:30 p.m. May 14
Where: Coconut Grove Ballroom, 400 Beach St., Santa Cruz
Tickets: $50 available at rcrross.org/Inua24U

Coach
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accept such accolades, saying volleyball is its own reward and, if done right, is a lifelong sport that brings out the best in players on both sides of the net.

“We’re about building relationships with each other, building community,” said Kaplan, who has also taught sociology, tennis and hiking courses. “Winning is important to all of us, but we have to put it in the right perspective... We talk a lot about caring for one another.”

A lesson Kaplan hopes to pass on to his students is one that he said took half his life to discover — the fact that life is not all about one’s self. Which is why he has students participating in local coastal cleanup efforts with Save Our Shores, picking up thousands of discarded cigarette butts, and collecting small electronics and energy bars wrappers to raise money for nonprofit organizations. He said his and students’ efforts over the years have raised more than $70,000 in donations so far.

Uititalt, who serves as director at the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary Exploration Center, first came across Kaplan and his beach volleyball class at a time of high stress, she said.

“It’s a whole culture in Santa Cruz that I don’t think people know exist,” Uititalt said of people Kaplan has taught. “They’re from all walks of life, I think he’s changed people’s lives (though I can’t say how many people.”

Uititalt said it’s great that Kaplan is promoting an environmental and sustainable ethic while providing positive human behavior lessons. Plus, she’s having a ton of fun, Uititalt said.

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