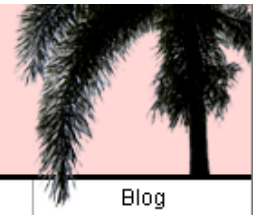


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News

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Tennis Academy Primes Young Players For the Pros

By JOSHUA REY

BOCA RATON, Fla. --The square-shaped construction site at the Evert Tennis Academy here is covered in sand, rocks and yellow Wilson balls.

It does not look like much, but in the tennis world, it might be the most talked about patch of dirt this side of Roland Garros.

When the United States Tennis Association announced last summer that it would create a landmark national training program at Evert Academy to provide year-round housing and coaching for the country's promising junior players, the response was mixed among tennis aficionados and trainers.

Some questioned what criteria would be used to pick the students. Others worried that the coaches would not be qualified to mold up-and-coming players.

With construction about to begin on the 18,000-square-foot, three-story housing and training complex, USTA officials said the program is beginning to take shape.

It is a 10-year partnership between the USTA and the academy, which will combine old styles of coaching and new techniques for up to 24 players between 14 and 18 years old, who will be housed at the academy, said John Evert, director of the academy's player development and younger brother of 18-time Grand Slam champion Chris Evert.

The USTA will provide coaches who will live at the academy, in the same building as their players. The training complex is expected to be finished in September or October.

The idea is to emulate programs that have been in existence for years in countries such as Spain, France, and Great Britain, where tennis associations have paid for coaches to train and travel with the same players year round while they are young and developing their skills.

"Now that they are going to see these kids on a day-to-day basis, they're going to get a true vision and a true feel for if these kids are hungry or not," Evert said of the coaches.

Paul Roetert, managing director of USTA Player Development, said he believes now is the right time to start grooming young players, as superstars such as Andre Agassi retire and professional American players struggle in international tournaments.

"We needed to step up as a national governing body, and as an organization, to make a positive change," Roetert said

Evert has a lifetime of tennis experience. He was an Orange Bowl champion as a junior before turning pro, worked as a sports agent and then became a coach.

He said he believes that American juniors are playing in too many tournaments around the world, missing out on matches



MYRNA VILLA / The New York Times Institute
Jack Sullivan practiced on a clay court at the Evert Tennis Academy Tuesday afternoon.
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against other Americans at home.

He hopes that the 20 USTA coaches who are expected to come to the academy this fall will revive competition among America's young players. The USTA coaches who will train at the academy are members of the association's "high performance" staff, which focuses on the country's most promising young players.

Kyle Mayberry, a personal coach from Weston Tennis Center in Weston, Fla., who trains several young American professionals, praised the concept.

"There are some excellent coaches that the USTA has," Mayberry said. "One of the good things is the fact that they're bringing all the best American kids together and getting them to compete with each other on a more regular basis. I think that helps build future players."

But some argue that the players would be better served working with different coaches.

Mike DePalmer Jr., who was a coach under famed Agassi trainer, Nick Bollettieri in the 1990s, said the USTA coaches all have different philosophies about how to train players.

"They're teaching and coaching based on their personal experience, where at Bollettieri's you've got one chief," DePalmer said.

The students, he said, would benefit more from a program that has a consistent training philosophy, like the Bollettieri Tennis Academy, a 28-year-old institution that has produced champions such as Maria Sharapova, Jim Courier, and Monica Seles. Bollettieri's program is part of IMG Academies in Bradenton.

Evert Academy, which opened in 1996 and is still considered a relatively new institution, has had success stories.

Andy Roddick, the 2003 US Open champion, trained at the Evert Academy when he was a teenager. Chris Evert, who won the French Open seven times, visits the academy three to four times a week to work with the players.

"Partnering with the Evert Academy seemed to be the right thing to do because they're focused on tennis exclusively," said the USTA's Roetert, who also considered the IMG Academies and Saddlebrook Preparatory School, which focus on other sports besides tennis.

Roetert added that the Evert Academy is closer to the USTA's current player development headquarters in Key Biscayne.

The Evert Academy also emphasizes the importance of playing on clay courts because at the professional level it is hard to become a top-ranked player without mastering the surface.

Throughout April and May, the only tournaments at the professional level are played on clay.

The academy has 14 clay courts and nine hard courts. In addition, John Evert has contracts at two other tennis centers, with 20 clay courts and eight hard courts.

"Having the clay courts is one thing and getting out there and practicing on the clay courts is another thing," he said. "Everybody's got to get together at the USTA and decide how important it is to play on clay."

The USTA will pay for the players' room and board, their coaching, and travel to and from tournaments. The association will also pay for the coaches' travel.

"It's an investment by the USTA," said Roetert, who did not provide an exact cost. "And really the investment hopefully will be paid off by the kids, by doing well in the major tournaments, whether at the junior level initially or the pro level later."

Mayberry, the Weston coach, said the students picked for the program should have an attitude and work ethic that match their physical abilities.

"Everybody wants to be a pro," he said. "Everybody wants their kid to be a pro. But very few kids are actually willing to do the work and have the right attitude to take that next step to being a pro," Mayberry said.

To be admitted to the USTA program, the players will have to show not only that they are talented, but also dedicated to the game.

The association will train players who are very strong but have been unable to find worthy competitors and coaches because

they live in small towns or in parts of the country where the sport is not very popular.

"This will be for those kids who really don't currently have access to those training facilities, that have absolutely great talent," Roetert said in July at a press conference announcing the program.

The idea seems to be working.

Last November, Madison Brengle, 16, of Dover, Del., moved into an existing Evert dorm to train as part of a pilot program financed by the USTA. She will move into the new facility once it is built.

"The idea is very good," said Gaby Brengle, Madison's mother and private coach. "Obviously, it's nice to have a lot of players to play against and train with."

Brengle had the bad luck of growing up in a town of 34,288, with few outdoor tennis courts to practice on and even fewer quality opponents to play against.

But at Evert Academy, Brengle, who is ranked second in the country and 27th in the world among junior girls, has practiced with promising players such as Ashley Weinhold and Chelsey Gullickson.

Jean Desdunes is her USTA coach and said the results have been striking.

Just before Christmas, Brengle defeated a field of eight older, more experienced American players to earn a wild card spot in the Australian Open, where she will compete against the best professional players in the world.

Gaby Brengle said she hopes with the help of the USTA, her daughter will only climb higher in the professional rankings. Madison Brengle is now ranked 497 on the Women's professional tennis tour.

"She's still improving," her mother said. "You wait to see how improvement translates into points on the pro tour and see how it ends up."

The program has benefited the regular students at Evert, too.

Brooke Bolender, 14, has trained at the academy for the last year and a half. In recent weeks, she has been drilling against Brengle, Weinhold, and Gullickson.

"It's good experience to be around girls like them," she said Tuesday in an interview at Evert's, where she spent the day punishing flat ground strokes from the baseline. "They're role models for me."

She said she has seen the results of hitting against stronger girls. In December, she was ranked 66 among girls 14 years and younger.

In the following weeks, she reached the quarterfinals of the 16-and-under Orange Bowl and 14-and-under Junior Orange Bowl international tournaments.

Now, Bolender is ranked 31 among her peers. She said she is anxious to play against more players from USTA as they begin to arrive at the academy.

"We're really excited to have the players come so it will be good," she said.

Roetert said that he is not necessarily anxious for the program's players to become superstars. His goal, he said, is for the first American national academy to help players reach their maximum potential, whether they become professionals or simply obtain college scholarships.

"If their maximum potential is to get a college scholarship, wonderful," he said. "That is success. If we look at a pro career, some of these kids may have the potential to have a great pro career as well. That's even better."

But DePalmer, one of the program's critics, said that with the investment the USTA has made, the only legitimate measure of success would be for the students to make the Top 100 professional rankings.

"The bottom line is that with the amount of money they're putting in, they're trying to produce pro players," DePalmer said. "I don't care what anybody says."

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