

It's part tennis, part socializing—and getting bigger every year. Each spring for over 5 years is the Sarasota Open—and I have the best seat in the house. A behind the scenes look at...

THE SARASOTA

The Sunday afternoon finals of the Sarasota Open have become a see-and-be-seen event. From national celebrities (Dick Vitale), to former pro tennis players (Mary Pearce) to local CEO's (Tropicana's Mike Haycock). Women wear their Sunday best, and men try to look South Beach chic.

The players split a jackpot of \$100,000—including \$14,000+ for the winner. James Blake, Tommy Haas, Sam Quarry are just some of the names who have competed at the Tennis Gardens on Longboat Key.

But it isn't all glamor. Let me take you behind the scenes as the "Voice" of the Sarasota Open with a perspective you'd never see—even from the Ultra VIP box.

A dose of perspective

The tournament begins weeks earlier with a "Wild Card" opportunity for anyone who wants to pay the entry fee and to try get in the QUALIFYING tournament before the subsequent Sarasota Open! That initial competition ranges from really good amateur players in the area to rising stars from around the world looking for a break. The person who emerges the winner almost always loses in the first match of the Qualifying tournament, who in turn, often loses in the first round of the actual Open draw. (Exception: 2013's overall winner, Alex Kuznetsov, came out of the Qualifiers.) The point is—even though the Sarasota Open won't be confused with the U.S. Open, to make it to the Sarasota Open takes huge ability.

Places everybody!

The ushers and ball boys/girls are all volunteer and some have never seen a pro match before in their lives. The first-timers are sometimes exposed early on—and it can be painful. Players have been known to complain about the cadence or demeanor of a ball person. This past year a player requested a certain ball boy – okay, ball man (he's in his 60s) – be replaced. He simply wasn't "getting" the flow of the match and its subtle nuances.

Ushers have never been replaced but many of them don't realize that fans aren't allowed to come and go during the games. Tennis is steeped in etiquette, even though some of the policies don't make sense. You'd think a player returning a 150-mile per hour serve wouldn't care if the lady in the stands decided mid-game is the best time to go get a hot dog, but that's part of the tradition of tennis. You can't come or go during the game, or even after each game.

I also wince when I see players looking for a place to sit and watch a little of their competitors and the overzealous ushers press them for tickets.

Can I help you?

As the public address announcer, I have a little desk area where I do research on the players I have to introduce on the loud-speaker, as well as write promotional copy for the sponsors. I have a unique perspective of tournament founder/director Tony Driscoll who fields a non-stop parade of people complaining about everything from orange-cones in the parking lot to a lack of paper towels in the restrooms.

Then players come in—asking for everything from practice balls to rides back to their hotels. Some of the players are personable and take the time to meet new people. Others are low on people skills and treat you more like a potted plant. Needless to say, certain players become favorites of the tournament staff over the long week.

Please welcome...

Each morning I come in and am handed the roster of matches that day. It's my job then to do research on each player and introduce them correctly. It's like reading a dozen mini-biographies a day! I enjoy digging into their backgrounds, and seeing how they got here.

For example, one player became the best player in American high schools, went on to become the best player in American colleges and is now turning pro. And he's playing somebody from the other side of the world from a country that needs to buy some vowels. But after doing the homework, hoping you're matching the right player to the right bio, and then watch the battle play out in real time.

(One year a player who was having a successful week, meaning I introduced him several times during the course of the tournament said, "How come you stopped mentioning that I follow the Miami Heat?" My response, "You mean you're actually listening to me?"

Never off-duty

I begin each day at 10am with a gravelly--"Welcome to the Sarasota Open..." and end each day after the last ball is hit around 10pm with a raspy, "Thanks folks, drive safely, and we'll see you back here tomorrow." Inevitably my tone and intensity are diluted through the day.

I'm never off-duty, as evidenced by a couple spontaneous defaults during random matches. If a match suddenly ends, I have to be on the mic within seconds to brief the audience about what just happened, and what other options are available before the next match begins on the main court.

It's funny — I have a lot of quirks and phobias, but public speaking has never been one of them. I've convinced myself no one is really listening that closely and therefore there's no reason to be nervous.

Getting attached

I try to make the players look good. If they were once ranked 20 in the world, and are now ranked 500, I'll say, "Once ranked as high as 20 in the world..." I don't want to make the audience feel sorry for them.

I saw a player at the Sony Open in Miami and introduced myself as the announcer from the Sarasota Open and he knew exactly who I was. I was flattered.



You tend to root for certain players, and hurt for others. I recall overhearing a short but poignant exchange between last year's winner and his doubles partner with whom he just lost. Kuznetsov said, "Thanks, that was fun, we'll do better next time." Then the two exchanged itinerary's—each heading to different parts of the world to try to make a dent in the cruel, steady world of pro tennis.

It's a grind for the players, but it's a delight for the fans, for those nine days each Spring in Sarasota. RAY COLLINS