

Out in the OPEN



It was a gamble. Moving a successful relatively new event across the region. From a facility built for such events--to a place that would have to be retro-fitted.

Could the \$100,000 Sarasota Open Make the Transition?

The previous home—the Tennis Gardens at the Longboat Key Club—is an elegant facility with beautiful courts. This year’s home—the Lakewood Ranch Country Club—was grassy, shady, and a natural place for a relaxing courtyard framed by vendor booths. Due to the lay-out, it was easier to spend a day at Lakewood Ranch.

PHOTO BY CARMEN



Jared Donaldson

Arias, came out a couple days to watch tennis and catch up with old friends like **Taylor Dent** who was in town coaching his rising star **Jared Donaldson**. There are a number of rising American teenager stars. I’m hoping one of them will develop into the next Sampras, Agassi or Courier. We’re due.

■ Rising American star **Frances Tiafoe** spent the most time in the tournament

office. He has a personality as large as his forehand. I overheard Tiafoe needing a hitting partner before a match, and I contacted my friend, Lakewood Ranch Teaching Pro **Chris Marquez**, who was able to produce one of his students, the #1 player from the Lakewood Ranch high school team. **Ashley Bongart** represented herself well and was even asked back for a 2nd session the following day. She’s heading off to play for the Tennessee Volunteers in the fall. (She defaulted in the semi-finals of the “Nick Bollettieri Invitational Women’s Tournament at the Sarasota Open” with an Achilles issue.)



Frances Tiafoe



PHOTO BY CLIFF ROLES

This “Star” was at the Van Wezel, but not at the Open, seen here with Sarasota Open Director Tony Driscoll

Tournament Founder/Director **Tony Driscoll** reduced the general admission ticket price, but then excluded general admission ticket holders from entering the main stadium. He compared it to the arrangement at any of the Grand Slams or even the Miami Open. You can walk all around the grounds, but need a bigger ticket to get in the stadium. Some general admission ticket holders felt snubbed, but

still appreciated getting in the door for a low price.

As for me, I was honored to have the bird’s-eye view as the public address announcer for a third year. Being a life-long tennis player and full-time broadcaster, this is like being a little kid in a candy store. Even at 9:30pm, when the last match teetered toward ending or going toward a 3rd set, I may have been the only one—who had been there since 9:30am—still wanting more tennis.

■ Star watching: **Dick Vitale** was there each day, perched in the corner of the end zone seats, occasionally looking up from his cell phone to watch a point. (He’s a voracious social media contributor with hundreds of thousands of followers waiting for his next posting.) **Nick Bollettieri** was a recurring face at the Open. He’s such a unique guy—nearly 84-years old and still going strong. I love seeing people make a fuss over him because I know he enjoys that—and deserves it. One of his first students, **Jimmy**



Dick Vitale and Nick Bollettieri

PHOTO BY CARMEN



Michael Mmoh

■ I was asking two younger players, who were in the tournament office, for more information about one of them so I could introduce them properly. 17-year old **Stefan Kozlov** took the opportunity to tease his friend/opponent **Michael Mmoh** about his relative lack of Wikipedia page. (Even though Kozlov did go on to win, Mmoh is no slouch: He has already played in the U.S. Open.)

■ I received a tip that **Renzo Olivo** of Argentina was known for doing tricks, bouncing the ball off the side of his racquet. So immediately after his match, I congratulated him on the loud-speaker and invited him to show us his tricks after he towed off and caught his breath. Minutes later, while I had since moved on to read other announcements, there was the young Argentinian standing next to me with a look of, “Do you still want me to do

PHOTO BY JOHN KELLEY



Alex Kuznetsov

it?" Yes! He did it and wowed the crowd. He did it two days in a row. I didn't ask him to do it after he lost in the semis. I was pulling for him.

It's hard not to pull for certain players after getting to know them a bit during the week. I found myself feeling sorry for certain players who lost early in the tournament.

I literally watched them walk out of the venue with their bags and set off for their next Challenger Tournament in Savannah or Tallahassee. 2013 Sarasota Open winner **Alex Kuznetsov** is a perfect example. (I concluded being a pro player isn't as glamorous as may seem. There must be days they don't feel like playing tennis, but their income depends on it. I felt especially bad for players who had wives and children in tow.)

One of the best parts about working for the tournament is getting to observe the players and their personalities away from the court. Journeyman and former Top 60 **Michael Russell** is consistently friendly and humble. **Paolo Lorenzi** was quick to smile: He saw me walking with the microphone toward the court and asked if I was going to sing some Karaoke. (So many players remain inside their smug exterior, it's nice when some show a little personality and warmth.)



Paolo Lorenzi

PHOTO BY JOHN KELLEY



Federico Delbonis and Facundo Bagnis

I didn't see the eventual winner, **Federico Delbonis**, a single time off the court. He was a stealth-like winner, at least from my perspective. He didn't spend much time socializing. All business. And it paid off. (He beat fellow-Argentinian, good friend and house-mate during the week **Facundo Bagnis** in straight sets.)

Bagnis and his fellow-Facundo and countryman, **Facundo Arguello**, held off some match points to win the finals of the doubles. Afterward, I thought I'd let Arguello speak since Bagnis spoke after his singles loss in the finals, but Arguello shyly deferred. May be a language issue. They were funny as I later asked a trivia question about the #1 Argentinian in the world in the 1975. They both looked at me with smirks, but I told them they weren't allowed to answer. (Guillermo Vilas.)

The women's final was perhaps the most interesting of the week. **Fanny Stollar** looks like **Maria Sharapova** and has the cool poise of someone well beyond her 16 years. On her way to

PHOTO BY JOHN KELLEY



Fanny Stollar and M'balia Bangoura

winning the title, she mentally disappeared, and a young high school player from Lakewood Ranch, **M'balia Bangoura**, nearly came back to win. I was sitting between Nick Bollettieri and Dick Vitale—who both had some sharp insight and comments about the match. (Not sure what I can repeat here and still retain their friendship, so I'll let it go at that!)

Sarasota County Commissioner **Carolyn Mason** came out one day to give a proclamation to 2010 Sarasota Open winner **Kei Nishikori** who has since risen to #4 in the world. Kei is just a nice kid, relatively



PHOTO BY CEMARIE MARCAN

Ray Collins and Kei Nishikori

PHOTO BY CARMEN



anonymous here but a complete rock star in Japan. We were left alone to chat while we waited to take the court for the ceremony. I didn't want to just talk tennis, so we talked about the convertible souped-up blue Jaguar in which he arrived. I heard he made \$42 million last year in endorsements alone!

It was a week of intriguing matchups and results...and it's a treat seeing the region's tennis community unite for the week. Can't wait 'til next year.

American fans were thrilled to see Ohioan Chase Buchanan make it to the semi-finals.



PHOTO BY JOHN KELLEY

Doubles: Argentines Facundo Argüello and Facundo Bagnis defeated India's Divij Sharan and South Korea's Chung Hyeon.



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