The Second Time Around

The senior tennis tour offers players a chance to extend their relationship with the fans

by Bob Latham

I have often pondered the allure of spectator sporting events involving athletes who have retired from regular pro leagues or tours. I am, of course, distinguishing a senior sporting event from something like a fantasy camp where you interact with your sports heroes in a non-competitive way. I'm referring to paying a hard-earned spectator-sport dollar to go and see players who were once the best in the world but are now well past their prime.

It's not the same as going to see an aging rock band. Bruce Springsteen just turned 59 but has lost very little speed off his musical fastball. Athletes, however, have a much shorter window of peak performance. Many sports, of course—and particularly team sports—are not conducive to a seniors tour. For instance, a senior boxing circuit—George Foreman's fights of the 1990s aside—would not be a pretty sight. Tennis and golf are the most notable exceptions, each having commercially viable seniors events.

I recently had the chance to examine the allure of a senior tennis event by attending a stop on the Outback Champions Series, and by enjoying a fortuitous lunch with Jim Courier. Courier, once the number one tennis player in the world, is the founding partner of New York–based Inside Out Sports & Entertainment, which owns and operates the Outback Champions Series. The series consists of eight tournaments for former highly ranked ATP players, with events in Newport, Rhode Island; Naples, Florida; Surprise, Arizona; Boston; Charlotte; Dallas; the Cayman Islands; and Dubai, with hopes for further expansion.

For many tennis fans, the Outback Champions Series provides a "signpost," said Courier. "It takes you back to a time when you and the players were both younger, and looking at them helps you assess how you are now compared to them." In other words, if John McEnroe can still get around a tennis court, I'm not so old after all.

Courier was quick to point out that the Outback Champions Series is "not a victory lap." There is $150,000 in prize money at each stop and a $100,000 grand prize for the player who compiles the most points during the eight series events. Thus, players play to win. While acknowledging that the tour is designed to allow fans to "extend their relationship" with tennis legends, Courier emphasizes that the brand would not have much value if the tennis were not competitive. And as if to prove the point, McEnroe was disqualified from the Outback Champions event in Newport this year for a familiar staple in his repertoire: code violations. McEnroe was thus able to prove Courier's point about the players playing to win and about fans getting a chance to "extend their relationship" with McEnroe (and others), while at the same time proving a recurring point of Dr. Phil: If the relationship was tumultuous the first time around, it will be the second time as well.

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From a player's perspective, Courier points out that the players are at the stages in their lives when they can "have their cake and eat it too." They can play highly competitive matches against competitors who are still fit but do so in a collaborative and congenial way, and in a way that reaches out to fans.

Consequently, there is a degree of relaxation to the event. Players will communicate with each other occasionally, and with the crowd, allowing their personalities to come out. For instance, in a match that I saw Courier play against Karel Novacek, he hit a sharply angled cross-court passing shot. Novacek quipped: "You were supposed to go down the line." Courier retorted: "I couldn't follow directions well even in high school. That's why I had to become a tennis player." But despite the entertaining repartee from time to time, most of the unwritten codes of the pro tour are still followed: The players don't speak or make eye contact on changeovers and don't intentionally distract their opponent. The tennis is serious. You may not see the sustained power or frenetic pace of the pro tour and the tactics are not as varied, but there is still plenty of skill on display. As Courier said to me: "We lose our feet as we get older, but we don't lose our hands."

While several other Grand Slam champions have appeared on the tour—McEnroe, Pete Sampras and, soon, Boris Becker—the goodwill, energy and talent of Courier himself is the driving force behind the tour. Courier is at different times a promoter, showman, recruiter, spokesman and athlete—making him equal parts the P.T. Barnum, Ringmaster Ned, Lamar Hunt and Darrin Stephens of the Outback Champions Series. At the same time, he is still Jim Courier, as he proved at a recent event by beating Thomas Enqvist of Sweden and taking a decisive lead in the series rankings.

Outback has re-upped its sponsorship, and the tour is well worth a look—even at the risk of the revelation that time has been kinder to your tennis contemporary than it has been to you. Fifteen years from now, however, Rafael Nadal and James Blake may need to change clothing lines before their debut on the champions tour lest they disprove that theory. ■

Bob Latham is a partner at the Texas-based law firm Jackson Walker, L.L.P., and is a former chairman of USA Rugby. He can be reached at blatham@jw.com.