

A Half Century in the 'Zoo: Rite of Passage for Junior Tennis

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For over 50 years the USTA has brought the great names of tennis to Kalamazoo for its national tournament. The Boys 18-16 National Championships have become recognized as one of the stops in the careers of players destined to achieve world class status. For those who envision professional tennis, Kalamazoo has been a necessary test of skills and stamina. Rod Laver personifies the stellar performers who starred at the Nationals. Returning for an exhibition in 1993, he was opposed by another tennis legend, fellow Aussie, Ken Rosewall. The latter was a four-time Wimbledon singles finalist, while Laver won four titles at Wimbledon as well as Australian, U.S., French and Italian titles. These gentlemen of the game honor the sport by paying homage to the Junior tourney, the crucible for honing competitive skills.

This paper traces some of the history and impact of this exceptional tournament. A basic premise of the approach is that such multi-faceted experiences mirror the fundamental values of a sport and a community. In so doing they represent qualities which van Gennep incorporated in his 1909 definition of rites of passage. As Berenstein put it, "It is less important that a man experiences himself as having lost crucial battles in his attempt to individuate than that he try...Struggle, as such, has lost much of its virtue. In the modern age only the outcome counts, regardless of personal meaning to the individual man. But the struggle itself is the true heroic deed that strengthens man's ego." The Nationals present a rare opportunity for youngsters to cope with inner fears by competing with the best and emerging better for the struggle.

Among the many stars who passed such tests are Arthur Ashe, Jim Courier and Pete Sampras, plus Wimbledon champions Bob Falkenburg, Tony Trabert, Rod Laver, Chuck McKinley, Stan Smith, Jimmy Connors and John McEnroe. A past president of the USTA, David Markin, described Ashe, the first black player inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame (1985), as "...the best ambassador-at-large that tennis has ever had." Dick Stockton, ranked in the

1970s six times among the top 10 players in USTA men's tennis, commented about his Junior days, "Kalamazoo is the biggest junior tournament a kid can play. Winning at Kalamazoo is like a pro's winning at Wimbledon." Tommy Ho of Winter Park, Fla., in 1988 was the youngest 18-and-under single's champion-- at age 15. A few months after winning that title Ho signed a pro contract. Ho recalls, "obviously it was a stepping stone to my career or I wouldn't have turned pro. Winning produced a lot of contracts for me and the wild card to the U.S. Open, and that changed my life." Those comments could be re-affirmed by players like Martin Blackman, Michael Chang, Jimmy Giammalva, Larry Gottfried, Ham Richardson and David Witt.

While the talented athletes were the chief focus of the visual coverage of this tournament, other emphases were the community's commitment to young people and to tennis, leaders whose abilities gave the physical site permanence, and a belief in sportsmanship, firm discipline and fair play which undergirds the Juniors. Personal testimony from a variety of sources reflect how this sport experience made an impact on parents, volunteers, officials, and players. Few said it better than surgeon Alan Roberts, 1957 champion, who states, "Truly, tennis is a game for a life-time. It has been very important because most of my friends are from tennis. My experiences with tennis have been most valuable in teaching me how to deal with life. They taught me that good preparation and a willingness never to quit can turn defeat into winning."

This is the story of how a midwestern city, thanks to out-standing leaders and community commitment, hosts a tourney each summer with world-wide impact. A major force in the development of America's male tennis stars, it is a necessary rite of passage on the road to maturity and sometimes wealth and fame.