

American players win big in Open's new digs

The fast, hard concrete playing surface gave American players a tremendous advantage in their own national championships.

By Mark Naison

THE YEAR'S U.S. OPEN MARKED an important step forward in the evolution of professional tennis, and potentially, in professional sports as a whole.

Traditionally played at the West Side Tennis club, a beautifully manicured facility with the atmosphere of an exclusive country club, the tournament moved to a new National Tennis Center constructed by the United States Tennis Association (USTA) in Flushing Meadow Park. Barren and utilitarian in appearance, surrounded by parking lots, highways and railroad tracks, the Center has two key features its predecessors lacked: it can hold upwards of 26,000 people (as compared to 13,000 at West Side) and it reverts to the public during the ten months of the year that it is not being used for tournaments.

This means that any New York City permit-holder can play on the same courts as Bjorn Borg and Martina Navratilova; that city high school championships can take place in a first class arena, and that clinics and exhibitions can be comfortably held in a setting where thousands of people can benefit. To give an idea of how unique this is, can you imagine Madison Square Garden being opened up at noon for pickup basketball games? Or Yankee Stadium housing the championships of the New York City high school baseball championships or of a South Bronx softball league? It's a precedent of inestimable value in a country where professional sports complexes are usually constructed at the expense of opportunities for popular recreation.

Nevertheless, the new Center is not without its own form of elitism. In the main stadium, all of the seats within 100 feet of the court are boxes sold in block for all two weeks of the tournament. This means that the best seats in the house are monopolized by corporations who use them as perks for executives or visiting businessmen, or by individuals wealthy enough to shell out \$300 per seat for the whole tournament. The rest of the public, who get their tickets through the mail on a first-come-first-served basis, can still get a good view of the action, but they sit too far away from the court to see the expressions on players' faces or hear their comments (which in some cases is an advantage).



Chris Evert beat back a strong challenge by Pam Shriver to win the women's championship.

In addition, the concessionaires at the Center couldn't resist the opportunity to make an easy buck from a captive audience. Hot dogs cost 95 cents, a regular sized Coke 65 cents, and strawberries and cream (for those with genteel tastes) \$2.95. At those prices, the smart thing to do is bring your own lunch.

Fast court aids Americans.

The level of tennis in the tournament was, on the whole, worthy of the huge crowds that attended. The surface on the Center's courts is a rubberized concrete on which the ball moves very fast. It was explicitly designed to give American players, largely brought up on hard surfaces, an advantage in their own national championship, and it wrought havoc with the games of some of the top clay court players from Europe and Latin America. The courts benefit players who serve and volley well, and make it quite difficult to hit top spin passing shots or lobs on all but the softest approach shots. As a result, Corrado Barrazuti and Guillermo Vilas, two of the highest seeds in the men's tournament, got knocked out in early rounds by young American players who would have offered them little competition on clay.

Still, the surface was slow enough to make for some great rallies and acrobatic shots, and to allow Chris Evert and Bjorn Borg, players most comfortable on the baseline, to reach the finals.

The final matches were most enjoyable to watch. In the women's division, Evert faced Pam Shriver, a 16-year-old American who had upset Martina Navratilova, the number one player in the world and an odds-on favorite to win the tournament. Shriver's emergence as a great player, like that of Tracy Austin, bodes well for the future of women's tennis. At six feet one inches tall, Shriver is the first woman player since Althea Gibson to combine that kind of size with great athletic ability, and there's no telling how good she is going to get. She has the hardest serve in women's tennis, great reach and accuracy on her volleys, and a

fine match temperament. Seemingly immune to the crowds and the pressure, she matched Evert shot for shot for two hours, succumbing only to the accuracy of her opponent's passing shots and lobs. On big points, Shriver invariably went to her strengths, coming to the net at the first available opportunity. It was Evert's great play, not her errors, that decided the match.

In the men's final, Bjorn Borg and Jimmy Connors showed once again why they are head and shoulders above the male players of their generation and are among the greatest players of all time.

With the grand slam on the line for Borg, and the number one ranking in the world up for grabs, both players came out slugging, trying to see if they could hit through the other player's ground strokes. They whipped the ball from side to side with great velocity, but neither player broke.

The difference came when they began attacking the net. In the middle of the first set it became apparent that Borg had much greater difficulty hitting passing shots off Connors' approaches than Connors did off his. As a result, Connors began attacking the net at every opportunity, including on Borg's second serve, and winning most of his points there.

As Connors' confidence rose his game soared to unbelievable levels. In his past matches with Borg he made the majority of the unforced errors, particularly on short balls to his forehand; in this match, he made almost none. Urging himself on with clenched fists, Connors hit hard from every position on the court, reluctant to give Borg—known for his endurance—the slightest opportunity to get back in the match.

Borg tried every trick at his disposal, charging the net on his serve, adding pace and depth to his ground strokes, hitting moonballs and lobs, but he couldn't disrupt Connors' rhythm or force him into easy mistakes. Every time Borg picked up his game a level Connors raised his accordingly. The result was an absolutely dazzling display of tennis virtuosity. ■