

TIA Tennis Forum Reviews Industry, Sets Path for Future

The third annual TIA Tennis Forum, presented by Tennis Magazine, took place in New York City during the US Open and brought together industry leaders and many others interested in the future of the tennis industry. The audience heard about the state of the industry, various TIA and Growing Tennis initiatives, and plans for moving the sport and industry forward.

USTA Chairman of the Board and President Lucy Garvin led off the Forum, which was held during the USTA's annual Tennis Teachers Conference. "The TIA and USTA have a long history of working together," she told the crowd. "While we all have our own brand which we represent, what brings us together is our shared brand, which is tennis."

TIA President Jon Muir said that while the Tennis Health Index (a composite of five key measures) shows that the health of the sport has increased 18.1 percent in the U.S. over the last five years, the sport is still facing many economic challenges. "The general feeling is that we kind of bottomed out in the third quarter [2009] in terms of racquet shipments," he said. "Are consumers essentially delaying certain discretionary purchases? Yes."

Tennis ball sales, said Muir, are now trending relatively flat. However, sales of transition tennis balls are up 63 percent over a year ago. "We're starting to see the impact in sales and distribution of QuickStart Tennis products."

Muir referred to recent, continued increases in tennis participation: "What else can we do to build on the momentum from a participation standpoint?" he said. "Frequent players are the ones that fuel the majority of the economic drivers of this industry. If we could get 1 million people—a 20 percent increase in frequent players—to become frequent players, it will have a huge impact."

Addressing frequent-player growth is the subject of one of the three ongoing Task Forces that came out of two TIA "Tennis Summits" held earlier this year, Muir said. Other Task Forces deal with communication/positioning ("We need to be clear on defining a roadmap for the future and clear communication," said Muir) and economic benchmarks ("It's hard to grow something you can't measure.").

Key in the communication/positioning area is the promotion of the site PlayTennis.com, designed to serve as a simple consumer portal that is a central "clearing house" for the mainstream audience to learn more and to join the sport. "This will be the first step," said Muir. "We'll get key messaging out there through this site. It's a wonderful opportunity for all stakeholders to get behind."

TIA Executive Director Jolyn de Boer told the audience about key industry initiatives such as the GrowingTennis System (www.growingtennis.com) and new features and

interfaces that are helping consumers and players find places to play, programs, partners and retailers.

Kurt Kamperman, the USTA's chief executive of Community Tennis, updated the crowd on QuickStart Tennis for kids 10 and under. "Training is big," he said. "We have to be training 20,000 parents a year" in QST, emphasizing that the training is not designed to take over from certified teaching pros. Currently, there are more than 17,000 recreational coaches and parents trained in QST.

"The biggest challenge," said Kamperman, "is that there's not enough organized play and competition" on QuickStart courts. He added that there needs to be a sound progression that will lead to Jr. Team Tennis and tournament on shorter courts.

About 1,300 QST facilities are registered on GrowingTennis.com. More than 400 permanent QST courts or courts with permanent QST lines have been installed in the U.S. in the past two years. And starting next year, WalMart will carry foam balls that are used in QST.

The last part of the Forum was the induction of Alan G. Schwartz of Highland Park, Ill., into the Tennis Industry Hall of Fame. As an avid player, club owner, founder of Tennis Corporation of America, volunteer, former USTA president and more, "Alan stands alone as a titan of our sport," said Jeff Williams, Tennis Magazine publisher and chairman of the TIA's Tennis Industry Hall of Fame Committee.

"Twenty years ago, [the TIA and USTA] were not a united family, but because of the efforts of Alan and others, bridges have been built that have brought us together," Williams said in his introduction. "Few people in the history of the tennis business have had the influence and prolific presence that Alan has had in his more than 40 years in this industry."

The audience gave Schwartz a standing ovation as he received a plaque. "I love tennis. I love the sport. I love this industry and I love being a contributor," said Schwartz. "You have my promise that I will continue with undiminished passion to give back to this game I love so much."