

A lovely Finish

After crowning the champions of the 2007 Acura Classic on August 5th, Jane Stratton and Raquel Giscafré, the tournament's owners and promoters, will walk off the Stadium Court at the La Costa Resort and Spa as winners.

By Roy Robertson



Photo courtesy of Promotion Sports

Game. Set. Match.

The one-time doubles partners turned sports promoters are, as they say in the sports world, stepping aside while they're still at the top of their game. Following this year's championship, Stratton and Giscafrré will conclude their remarkable run of 24 years, having built the Acura Classic into one of the premiere women's tennis events in the country, one which consistently draws top talent to Carlsbad.

"Raquel and I felt like we've taken this to the highest level possible," says Stratton, "and we've enjoyed every single minute of it. We just felt as though this would be the right time to retire from it."

The former professional players, who teamed up to create Promotion Sports in 1984, are bringing down the curtain on the Tier 1 Women's Tennis Association tournament, and preparing for what they anticipate will be an exciting final chapter in the event's history. Seven of the top 10 ranked women in the world are scheduled to be on the courts at La Costa from July 28th through August 5th, including defending champion Maria Sharapova, currently ranked number two in the world, and top-ranked Justine Henin, the 2003 Acura champion.

Once again, and for the final time in the foreseeable future, tennis fans will flock to the resort to enjoy nine days of singles and doubles matches, watching the action within a drop shot of the competitors. "What makes our tournament unique is that we have a good-sized stadium but it's not enormous," says Stratton. "The atmosphere is very intimate, and the fans get to see the best players in the world, right in front of their eyes."

Guests will also be treated to the special touches that transcend tennis and define the La Costa experience. Giscafrré says fans enjoy the dining, the shopping, live entertainment and amenities at the recently renovated resort. The carpet is literally rolled out for spectators, as well as for players. "The way the tournament is set up is just very classy," she says. "It just goes well beyond tennis."

Attendance for the tournament's finale is expected to top 80,000, with thousands of visitors coming to Carlsbad, staying in local hotels, and enjoying everything the area has offer when they're not courtside. Since coming to town in 1991, the tournament has had a profound impact on Carlsbad's economy each summer. Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Ted Owen says the community's business people have embraced the opportunity to cater to travelers through the years. "They're just delighted to have the business

and they're very cordial to the tennis fans." The attention Carlsbad has received through national and international, television broadcasts, and tourism that has come from that exposure, has been incalculable. "Tennis is such a universally recognized sport," says Owen. "We get a huge benefit by people seeing tennis and wanting to come here."

The allure of the facilities at La Costa, and the hospitality of the city's hosts, has once again lured an elite field to Carlsbad. True, the winner's check for \$196,000 may have caught the players' attention, too. "When we did our first tournament in 1984, our prize money was \$50,000," Jane Stratton says. "This year, we'll be presenting prize money of \$1,340,000." That purse makes La Costa one of the most lucrative stops on the Sony Ericsson WTA Tour. But Raquel Giscafrré feels the tourna-

uniquely qualified to anticipate and cater to the participants' needs.

"Jane and I both know what it is to be the heart and soul of a player. We know what it takes to be happy as a player," says Giscafrré. "Driving brand new Acuras, going to restaurants in Carlsbad, and shopping at Carlsbad stores, the players just love it." Her partner volleys back, "We know what they enjoy, and that's been a benefit over the years. Many players have said that playing in the tournament is almost like going on vacation."

Call it a 'working vacation' for the generation of elite players who have competed at the event. Throughout its history, the tourney has celebrated a roster of champions, which reads like a "Who's Who" of women's tennis. Steffi Graf, who

Giscafrré credits for really putting the tournament in the spotlight, is a four-time winner. Venus Williams has raised the championship trophy three times; Jennifer Capriati and Martina Hingis have each won twice.

Both Giscafrré, who is from Argentina, and Stratton, her American counterpart, cite the 1991 final as one of many lasting memories they'll have of the tournament. They recall a match between Capriati and Monica Seles that generated a dozen standing ovations from the fans. "It was incredible to see the interaction, and

how the fans truly enjoyed it," Giscafrré reflects. Says Stratton, "It was the start of when women started to hit the ball with so much power. It was shocking how hard

"Many players have said that playing (at La Costa) is almost like going on vacation."

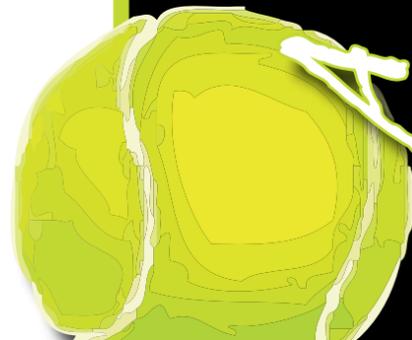
- Raquel Giscafrré, tournament co-owner



Svetlana Kuznetsova

ment's ability to attract top talent has to do with more than just money. As former players, Giscafrré and Stratton feel they're

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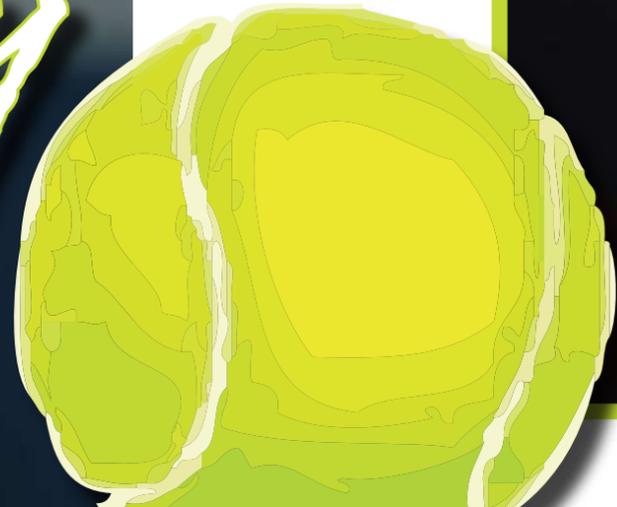


Photos courtesy of Promotion Sports

The influx of high-ranked women's Russian tennis players is evident at the 2007 Acura Classic, which will include Svetlana Kuznetsova (left) and Elena Dementieva.



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they hit the ball."

On August 5th, 6,500 fans will pack Stadium Court for the 2007 championship match. While the intimacy of the venue is, at once, one of its greatest assets, it also creates a drawback for an event that's grown exponentially over the years. "In this category, it needs a bigger stadium. The tournament has outgrown the facility," says Giscaf're'. Comparatively, Arthur Ashe Stadium at the U.S. National Tennis Association Center seats 23,000.

The decision by Stratton and Giscaf're' to discontinue the tournament follows the departure of the World Golf Championships Accenture Match Play Championship, which left La Costa for Tucson after the 2006 tournament. Michael Garten, the golf tournament's executive director, says attendance more than tripled in Tucson this year, and corporate involvement increased tenfold. "We had a fabulous relationship with the La Costa Resort and Spa for almost 40 years," says Garten, acknowledging the benefit to the resort and the area that came from the sporting events and annual coverage TV provided. "That, in part, is what put La Costa on the map, when you've got top players in golf and tennis competing, and exposure on TV, year in and year out."

As they approach the final edition of their tournament, the Promotion Sports team is quick to point out this is not the end of their involvement in bringing tennis to the area. "We like the idea of tennis being a vehicle to raise money for good causes locally," says Giscaf're', noting that the event generated \$300,000 for the Scripps Polster Breast Care Center last year, in addition to benefiting other local charities. The promoters envision future exhibition matches which may feature top men's players or mixed doubles play, "all with the idea of fund raising," says Giscaf're'. "Definitely, we'll bring back tennis to San Diego."

Before looking too far in the future, Raquel Giscaf're' and Jane Stratton have a tennis tournament to stage starting July 28th. Once again, tennis fans will have the opportunity to witness the world's best players in a world-class setting. The Acura Classic at La Costa may be best, and most succinctly, summarized in a slogan from their public relations department: "Incredible tennis. Incredible surroundings!" •



Justine Henin, coming off her three-peat of French Open titles, takes on the Acura competition.



Martina Hingis will continue her quest back to the top of the women's tennis rankings at the Acura.

Photos courtesy of Promotion Sports