

# RACQUET



FALL 1990 \$3.00

## *American Style*

**TENNIS FANTASY:**  
Playing with the Legends

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Top Tennis Towns

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*Special Section*

**THE U.S. OPEN**

# SWEET SPOTS

## THE BEST TENNIS TOWNS IN AMERICA

by Jennifer Graham

**T**o the tennis connoisseur, there is nothing quite so compelling as the unmistakable sound produced by the fleeting impact of ball on strings. Like a cork exploding from a bottle of vintage champagne, it signifies a delicate and intoxicating perfection. Devotees refer to the reverberant "pock" as the song of the sweet spot. And indeed it is, for in a handful of communities scattered across America, that sound literally fills the air—not as a mere song but as a glorious symphony of strokes and serves. If a sweet spot is the area where a millisecond of tennis can be savored for a lifetime, then the following towns qualify as such, for nowhere in this country is the game more profoundly woven into the fabric of everyday life.

**A**sk a group of insiders which city has the best tennis program and Midland, Michigan, is bound to come up. Its 40,000 residents are absolutely mad for the sport, and have been for nearly two decades. What sets Midland apart from other sweet spots, however, is the revolutionary course tennis has followed: in a day and age when corporations have been accused of taking the game away from the people, the people of Midland have taken tennis away from a corporation.

In 1971, chairman Paul Orrefice of the Dow Chemical Company introduced a plan designed to increase worker productivity through physical fitness and competition. Not surprisingly, Orrefice, who still plays four times a week, believed that tennis was the perfect vehicle. Thus the Midland Tennis Center was born. Originally designed to

include 14 courts, it hadn't even made it off the drawing board before the Midland citizenry demanded more. The first set of blueprints were scrapped in favor of the present 32-court complex. There has hardly been an open court since.

A big part of the success of the Midland Tennis Center is that Midland itself is Dow's global headquarters. Many employees stay only a few years in the city, so they make it a point to really throw themselves into the game. Another major reason for the city's love affair with tennis is that it has always been a bargain. The cost for an indoor court tops out at a prime-time rate of only \$14, and kids can get on for \$4. At those prices, tennis is hard to resist—not only for Dow employees, but for the rest of the city as well. The center makes no distinction between "Dow" and "non-Dow" players, a policy that kept business booming even when the salad days of the 1970's began to wilt.

The house that Dow built is now home to thousands of fervent tennis enthusiasts of all ages and from every walk of life. Yet it is difficult to convey accurately just how rapturous the community's affair with the game has become. Midland is obsessed—*everyone* seems to play. It is in many ways the sweetest spot of all, for from a small spark of corporate inspiration, tennis has spread like wildfire.

**T**he tennis fires have been burning in Atlanta since the turn of the century. With the Atlanta Lawn Tennis Association (ALTA) fanning the flames, league competition has engulfed the entire city. The number of people who play in ALTA events has been estimated at well over 80,000, making Atlanta the undisputed

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queen of organized tennis. But it is the passion behind those numbers that is the driving force behind the city's program.

One look at the mammoth ALTA yearbook is enough to suggest that Atlantans take their tennis very seriously. Filled with the names, numbers and addresses of every player in the metro area, it could easily replace the city phone book. Players are divided by age and skill into 24 different categories, which ensures stiff competition and keen interest at all levels. Even the lower ranked players are extremely serious about their games.

There are plenty of exclusive clubs in the Atlanta area, many of which sprang up during the tennis boom of the 1970's, but the drive to develop public facilities is what has kept its program growing at an impressive annual rate of 9 percent. To date, the city boasts more than 15,000 courts, most of them available to ALTA members. On those courts members vie for division titles with the genteel ferocity that characterizes the fighting spirit of the South. They are battling not just for glittering silver trophies but rather for ALTA backpacks, which are equally prized by tournament competitors.

Atlanta knows how to have a good time, a reputation that the tennis population strives to uphold during the eight major tournaments sponsored by ALTA each year. The entire city seems to turn out for each event. Sometimes as many as 50,000 people show up, making the tournaments look like one huge picnic ground. Families transport spreads of unimaginable variety and proportion, and it is not unusual to spot tables featuring linen napkins, bottles of champagne and silver candelabra.

With the unbeatable combination of warm weather and the red-hot ALTA, tennis in Atlanta is one endless summer.

**A**tlanta's cold weather competitor is, without a doubt, Cincinnati, where the hottest winter tennis in the country zips along unimpeded by the legendary cold snaps that produce day upon day of freezing temperatures. Indoors is where the action is from September through April, and there is plenty of it. More than 7,500 players in the sports-crazed metropolis participate in leagues and events sponsored by the Greater Cincinnati Indoor Tennis Association, which has capitalized on the trademark enthusiasm of its members to produce what is perhaps the most competitive program of any kind.

During the 1970's, people in Cincinnati played

tennis because it was the thing to do. Since then it has evolved from a social activity into more of a serious thing. The people who play now are pretty much tennis purists.

Small wonder. A player would be hard-pressed to drive more than ten minutes without coming across at least one top-notch facility. The clubs are well-organized and embrace the same no-nonsense attitude that seems characteristic of the city's approach to sports. Even the kids are highly trained and organized, beneficiaries of superb junior programs that are helped along by private schools and clubs.

The resultant breed of player in Cincinnati is quite unlike any that one will find elsewhere, a fact illustrated most vividly when league play rolls around each winter. With the arrival of the first snowflake, half the city seems to drop everything and starts plotting strategy for the indoor wars. Getting on the proper team is critical, but that's just the beginning. The coaches drill their players every week and then make out a lineup for the matches. There are twelve people on a team, but only eight can play in a given competition, so the four bottom players can get pretty upset. People literally quit talking to each other because of it.

Members often change clubs if they feel they have been slighted, and some well-heeled players even join several clubs simultaneously just to get into more than one league. Once a person does find the perfect team, he or she is likely to be loyal. One woman, who moved from Cincinnati to North Carolina actually flew back the following winter to help her team in a critical match. Had World Team Tennis stimulated such fanatical dedication during its brief existence, it might still be around today.

**T**o the conspicuous consumers of Santa Barbara, "Don't leave home without it" refers not to plastic but to graphite, for to begin the day without a racquet in the city of perfect smiles is like not brushing one's teeth. Tennis is everything in the sun-drenched and star-studded locale, as much a part of its social fabric as the laid-back lifestyle. And, as one might expect, it is that lifestyle which distinguishes Santa Barbara from every other sweet spot. People are not obsessed with the game, but the game is definitely part of the average person's day.

A stroll down State Street—Santa Barbara's main drag—puts the role played by tennis into perspective. Court attire is not the exception, but rather the norm. People in the downtown area look as if they

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are heading for one of the city's five big clubs. Many are. The Tennis Club of Santa Barbara, Knollwood, La Cumbre, Cathedral Oaks, and the Santa Barbara Polo and Racquet Club all feature long waiting lists, and courts that are jammed to capacity 12 months a year. Then there are the private courts—hundreds of them. Tucked behind and beside the million dollar homes that wind from the beach up into the mountains, they are rarely unoccupied.

What is most disarming about Santa Barbara is that with such a richness of tennis, tennis itself is not a particularly hot topic. Residents do indeed play every day, but once they are off the courts they pretty much forget about it. It is the rare cocktail party, in fact, where one can find a group of players yammering about their backhands. Tennis in Santa Barbara is more of a reflex than an event. It comes so naturally, and is so deeply ingrained, that the game is simply a way of life.

**I**f tennis in Santa Barbara is white wine and pasta salad, then it is Mountain Dew and babyback ribs in Camilla, Georgia—one of the most unlikely sweet spots in the country. Once a year in June, the sleepy southern town wakes up to host one of the country's most charming tournaments, “The Thrilla’ in Camilla.” The event, which draws hundreds of topflight amateurs to the wealthy peanut-growing region, also attracts around two dozen touring pros who return year after year, proving you can't keep a player in the city once he's been on the farm.

The tournament, which is now officially called the Lite Southeastern Pro Invitational, was the brainchild of Eddie Williamson, a gentleman farmer with a cause. Twenty years ago, Williamson and some friends took out personal loans to finance construction of a new mental retardation facility on the outskirts of Camilla. Besides an obvious commitment to the needy, the group shared another passion: tennis. Thus, when it came time to start making good on the loans, Williamson hit upon the idea of staging the quintessential small-town tournament. The group scraped together the prize money, signed up some 250 volunteers and charged a modest admission to the hundreds of Georgians who drove to see tennis southern style. That was in 1975.

By 1990, the loan had been repaid, and over a quarter of a million dollars had been raised for the center. Seven corporations now sponsor the tournament, which has blossomed into the most signifi-

cant tennis weekend in the state. To what does Camilla owe its success? It is without a doubt the pros who draw the crowds. But the pros come because of the local people, whose outpouring of love and generosity makes road-weary players feel that, for one glorious weekend a year, Camilla is their home away from home.

Indeed, players stay in the homes of the townspeople. There are no hotels in Camilla proper, which claims fewer than 5,000 inhabitants, so there is not much choice. Yet neither the players nor their hosts would have it any other way. The atmosphere extends from the courts to the cotillions, which, although a mite less formal than in the days of Tara, serve as the highlights of the Camilla social season. The highlight of the tournament itself is the pro-am competition, which features doctors, lawyers, bankers, accountants and farmers from the surrounding counties, all vying for Georgia's unofficial title of top dog.

Few of the players who make the event fail to return. They crave the flavor of Camilla, its easy life and easygoing people. Pros are pros—they all want to win—but in Camilla, if they lose, it's not quite so bad.

**T**he town of Ojai, California, also manages to pack a year's worth of tennis into one long weekend. The Ojai Valley Tennis Tournament—an event that attracts the most talented amateurs in the state—just celebrated its 95th year. Every April more than 1,400 players descend upon the picturesque community to celebrate a rite of spring as hallowed as the return of the swallows to Capistrano.

For all the changes that California has endured since the turn of the century, tennis week at Ojai has managed to retain the marvelous trappings of the past. The area was originally populated by British settlers, and at tournament time that heritage is no less evident today than it was when English gentlemen in white flannel trousers took to the courts for the inaugural competition in 1896.

Paper cups and plastic utensils are frowned upon at Ojai, where silver spoons and fine china are the order of the day. The pouring of the tea, in fact, is an honor as coveted by the townspeople as the trophies are by the players. It is a privilege reserved for the wife of the tournament president, who circulates with one of the two silver urns specially ordered for this purpose in the early years of the competition. The atmosphere at courtside, needless to say, is

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rather civilized. "Next to Wimbledon," joked an umpire, "it's the only sensible tournament in the world."

From its humble beginnings as an out-of-the-way affair for instructors at the nearby Thatcher preparatory school, the Ojai Valley Tennis Tournament has grown tremendously. Over 500 matches are played on 104 courts, qualifying Ojai as one of the biggest and best amateur tournaments in the country. Even ESPN has gotten into the action, drawn as much by the aura of elegance as by the Pac-10 competition which highlights the event.

How do the 2,000 or so locals feel about being overrun by tennis players each year? They adore it. The town turns itself completely over to tennis for four days. The people of the Ojai Valley put the players up in their homes, and all the kids at the Thatcher school get Thursday and Friday off to help run the tournament. The local Girl Scouts supply the cookies; the Garden Club provides the flowers: in short, everyone pitches in.

Not surprisingly, tennis has become something of a focal point in Ojai all year long. Preparations for the tournament begin right after Christmas, when committees start forming to handle everything from transportation to housing to orange juice. After the players have all departed, the tournament association totals its receipts and then starts putting the profits to work in the form of free tennis lessons to promising young athletes in the area.

Civic pride and national recognition have come to Ojai thanks to its long relationship with tennis. But the folks who throw themselves into the game each spring haven't lost their perspective. As they are fond of saying around tournament time, "It's a nice thing to do at the end of April."

**T**he per capita champion of tennis courts in the United States is Duncan, Arizona. With a population of 600, and 16 playing surfaces, the unassuming little town easily accommodates its tennis-playing residents. To put that ratio in perspective, picture the island of Manhattan with 32,000 courts—laid end to end, they would extend north to the Canadian border. But tennis in Duncan is not a numbers game. It is a tradition.

And for 47 years, it was a one-man show. It all started in the summer of 1935, when two tennis courts were constructed for the local high school and H. T. Clothier, was approached to coach the team. Clothier was an art teacher who dabbled in tennis,

which made him more qualified for the job than anyone else in town. His initial reaction was that he might do more harm than good, so he enrolled in a few clinics, read tennis books, worked on his own game and watched experienced players whenever he could. By the time eight boys and ten girls showed up for the first tryouts, he was ready. Some had never even picked up a racquet before. The team failed to win a single match its first year, but Clothier, undaunted, pressed on.

Tennis began to take off in Duncan a decade later. Clothier's players embarked upon a phenomenal winning streak during which they did not drop a single match for eight years, a run made even more remarkable when one considers that many of the schools they beat had vastly larger student bodies from which to draw. The town got turned on and so did the kids. Duncan turned out one state champion after another—49 in all—during Clothier's reign. To this day, just about everyone setting foot on the town courts has learned the game at his knee.

Duncan is now the home of the H.T. Clothier Invitational Tournament, which brings together some of the finest high schools in the state. The Duncan team, now made up of the children and grandchildren of Clothier's first pupils, still manages to hold its own. Its current state champion doubles team, Brad and Bryan McCray, are the sons of a woman whom Clothier coached to two state titles in the 1960's.

Duncan may be a bit off the beaten path, but it is definitely mainstream where tennis is concerned. By virtue of its tennis courts and its tennis team, the town can and does deliver on a promise that all too few communities are able to keep: If a kid wants a chance to play, he'll get it.

**C**ompetition and camaraderie are good for the soul. Nowhere is this more evident than in the country's tennis-playing towns, for although they could not be more diverse, each possesses its own marvelous flavor and personality; each has its own rich tennis-playing soul. Not surprisingly, the people who inhabit America's sweet spots know just how lucky they are. And when they look at other, less fortunate locales, they do so with a certain sadness. Why, they wonder, haven't more people discovered what tennis can mean to a community? Why can't they see what tennis is really all about? As one lifelong resident of Atlanta observed somewhat sheepishly, "The promise of a good rally can be a great rallying force." ●