

Classic serve and folly

by Jerry Magee

Remembering the Acura Classic, which is painful. Women's tournament tennis in San Diego didn't have to die, not in a place where the weather is sublime, where there are 70 tennis venues and where interest in the game, I would say, is as keen as it is anywhere.

LAST SERVE - Sun-drenched tennis fans at the La Costa Resort and Spa in San Diego soak in one of last-ever Acura Classic matches. CNS Photo by Sean Dufrene. I want to be realistic. In most areas, tennis is an elitist sport. The game is viewed as a pastime for the wealthy. It is civilized in a day and age when violence is more saleable, or aren't you aware how mixed martial arts, which can be brutish, is being received?

In the San Diego area, however, my argument has been that tennis is not an elitist thing, favored only by the privileged few. Too many people play it. Many of them showed up at the La Costa Resort and Spa for the Acura Classic. The event counted six sellouts. It did a total attendance of 86,475, according to a tournament spokesman. The number of sellouts was a record. So was the total attendance, which exceeded the previous record of 84,956, set in 2002.

After the officers of Promotion Sports Inc., Raquel Giscafne and Jane Stratton, determined to divest themselves of the Acura's Tier I designation on the Sony Ericsson WTA Tour, in my thinking it was incumbent on the Sony Ericsson WTA Tour to come up with other interests that would operate here. In leaving San Diego, the tour is walking away from one of the leading tennis meccas in this country. What city would you place at San Diego's level in this regard? Boca Raton, Fla.? Newport, R.I.? Carson, with its foul air?

One of the great inequities of how the WTA Tour is being rearranged is that an event in Carson is remaining on the schedule and San Diego is not. File that under pure folly.

Tennis tournaments have to be played where there are tennis players. The WTA Tour discovered this when it scheduled its season-ending championships in the urban atmosphere of the Staples Center in Los Angeles and saw it played to row on row of empty seats. There must be a great many tennis players in Beijing, China, because the Acura's Tier I classification is going to be attached to a tournament there, or so we are told. The

tour can deal with the Tier I matter as it would, having purchased it from the Giscafre/Stratton amalgam.

The tour's CEO is Larry Scott, who is a visionary. I would suggest he pay a bit more attention to what was right under his nose, Scott having attended the Acura's 24th and last final. In his wisdom, Scott has mapped out what he terms a "roadmap to 2010," which is intended to address the ills of the women's game as Scott perceives them.

Scott, I suppose, is well-intentioned. The women's tour is a vast, sprawling thing that at the moment lists events from January through November and touches on many countries. Scott's plan is "to create a more understandable calendar structure for fans, and one that builds rivalries by ensuring that top players remain healthy and are consistently playing against one another on the tour's biggest stages," as it is stated in the tour's literature.

The key word there might be "healthy." Players have overextended themselves. They compete too frequently, and they get nicked. To assure their well-being, Scott would cut back on the number of events. His plan is commendable, but it overlooks one thing: These women are independent operators. They are compelled to participate in selected events in which their presence is mandatory, but if they are concerned about their fitness, they should plan their seasons more judiciously.

I have to think, finally, that Giscafre and Stratton bought a pig in a poke when they made an investment of at least \$1 million in upgrading their La Costa cotillion from a Tier II to a Tier I event. They handed out \$1.34 million in purses last week. At Carson this week for what is known as the East West Bank Classic, a Tier II tournament, the prize money is \$600,000, yet the Carson field is the equal of the one at the Acura.

Just about the only difference is that Carson doesn't have Anna Chakvetadze, who won many friends at La Costa. But it has Ana Ivanovic, which La Costa did not. The Serbian woman is among the more appealing players in the women's game.

Imagine how Giscafre and Stratton must feel. Like all of us, I suppose, who have lost what was one of the

more appealing sports events in our area. And it didn't have to happen.

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