

COMERICA BANK CHALLENGER 2011

“CENTER COURT: A HISTORY WORTH REMEMBERING”

By Kirsten Fairchilds, photos by Joyce Tarter Rideout

Arthur Ashe once graced it, Patrick Rafter and Andy Murray launched their careers from it and Michael Chang attempted a comeback on it.

Bjorn Borg walked by it, Jimmy Connors joked with members on the balcony above it and one of the best men's doubles team in history — Stan Smith and Bob Lutz — impressed the crowd gathered around it.

Clint Eastwood once paced it, Merv Griffin hosted parties on it and Dwight Clark proved that his athleticism was better suited for sports that took place far away from it.

Oh, if Center Court at the Seascapes Sports Club in Aptos could only talk...

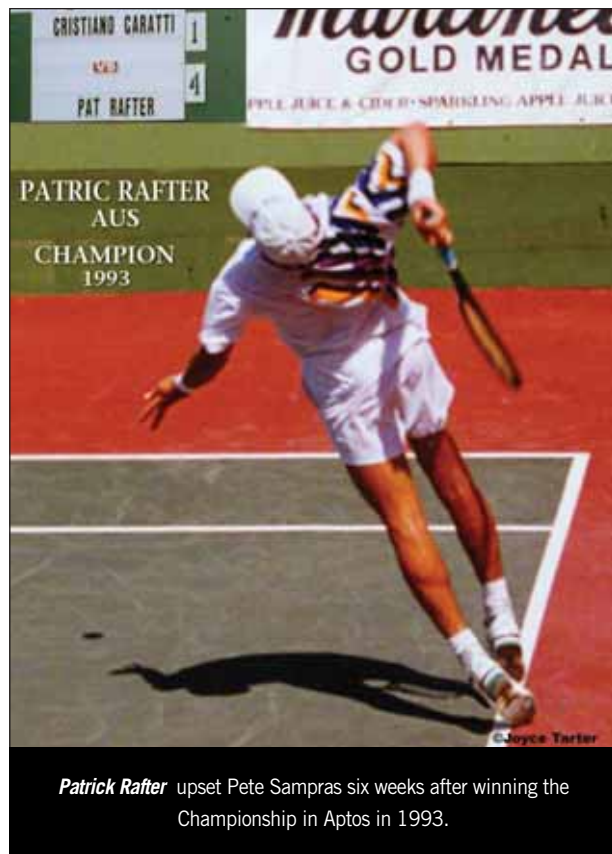
Considered one of the premier showcase courts in California, Center Court is the Seascapes Sports Club's signature court. While those who've played on it may good-naturedly grumble about having to fish around for lost tennis balls in the gutters underneath the stands, the sunken stadium court holds an appeal that newcomers immediately recognize.

“My first impression of Center Court was that it was truly exceptional,” Seascapes Sports Club Owner Paul Kepler said. “That it would be part of the property we were about to purchase was unbelievable. I felt it could become a very big plus.”

“If we had not had Center Court, I don't believe the USTA would have awarded us a challenger to begin with,” Kepler continued. “Obviously, I didn't know about the challenger at the time we bought the club, but getting the challenger happened within that first year. To my way of



Center Court Seascapes Sports Club.



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thinking, Center Court was probably one of the key ingredients to making that happen.”

According to Kepler and a number of sources, the club was built in 1972 and was owned by the Teamsters Union pension fund, which also owned the Aptos Seascope golf course and other properties in the area that would house future developments like the Seascope Resort and Seascope Village.

Erik Van Dillen was the club’s touring pro in the early years. Along with Henry Kamakana (the club’s head tennis pro from 1974–84), Van Dillen helped arrange both professional and celebrity tournaments as well as exhibition matches that featured a number of Wimbledon men’s singles champions as well as up-and-comers that included a 17-year-old Bjorn Borg.

According to Seascope lore, Stan Smith (1972 Wimbledon champion), Jan Kodes (1973), Jimmy Connors (1974) and Ashe (1975) all played on Center Court — known by members and visitors alike as Court 1 in those early years.



Joe Montana and **Jim Plunket** played on Center Court at the Alley Oop in 1983.



Joyce Tarter played against **Dwight Clark** at the Alley Oop and won the match with **Y. A. Tydlie**.

“When Ashe came to Seascope, he had just won Wimbledon two weeks before,” said K.C. Jackson, whose family was charter members of the club. “When I was talking to Henry about this, he reminded me that Ashe was a last-minute replacement for Tom Okker of the Netherlands.”

“To me, Arthur Ashe was the biggest star to ever play on that court because of his social impact,” Jackson continued. “He was such an incredible gentleman. He spoke to everyone.”

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Jackson and a number of other longtime Seascope members agree that Borg, however, never made it to Center Court. Instead, he lost his match on one of the outer courts.

In addition to the top pro players that traveled to Seascope, the late Merv Griffin hosted celebrity tournaments that brought the likes of famous actors like Clint Eastwood and the late Lloyd Bridges to Center Court.



Henry Kamakana, R. C. Owens and Ron Ely enjoyed the Alley Oop Pro-Celebrity fund raiser in 1983.

Later, former San Francisco 49er R.C. “Alley Oop” Owens kept the celebrity tournament tradition alive with his event that had celebrities, athletes and then-current 49ers like Dwight Clark and Dwight Hicks showing off their tennis ability — or lack thereof in the case of Clark — on Center Court.

Now the sole owner with his two sons, Rick and Peter, Kepler said he bought the club along with Judy Welsh and Mark Elliott in 1986 when a law was passed that pension funds could no longer own real estate.

The trio agreed to have the facility become the new host of the California Open in 1987, keeping the club’s tradition of providing must-see tennis for members and visitors alike.

Since the late 1980s, the club has hosted both the Cal Open as well as the Comerica Bank USTA Men’s Challenger, which increased in prize money this year to \$100,000.

Although Chang’s late-career comeback failed (he played on Center Court in 1999, 2002 and 2003), Rafter (1993 champion) Mardy Fish (2011) and Murray (2005 champion) moved on from Seascope to carve out top 10 singles careers.

The current #1 doubles team in the world, Bob and Mike Bryan were 1998 and 2000 champions. But even for one past champion that didn't reach the upper echelon of tennis, Center Court holds the best of memories.

"Center Court at Seascapes is one of the more unique courts on the tour at either level — ATP or challenger," said Jeff Salzenstein, the challenger's only two-time men's singles champion in a recent telephone interview. "That court was one of my favorite ones to play on. I had a big serve, so I served great on that court."



Michael Chang took the time to sign autographs after each match.

Now retired and living in Colorado, Salzenstein used his big left-handed serve to great success on Center Court, where he claimed the 2001 and 2003 titles.

"The court is where I played some of my best tennis and had some of my fondest memories," said Salzenstein, who played at Stanford University and often had former classmates and friends come cheer him on. "It's such an intimate atmosphere with it being sunken and having such a wonderful setting. There are just certain courts that you remember in your career and certainly the center court at Seascapes is one of them for me."

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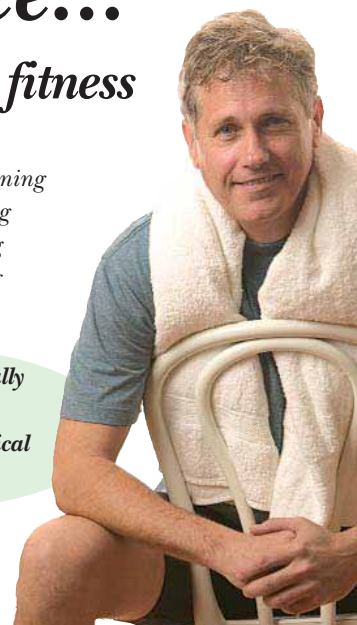
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The intimate atmosphere with the sunken court and its surrounding stands isn't just a plus for players like Salzenstein.

"Every seat there is so close to the action," said Bob Fennell, a club member since 1976. "You could be in the seat that's the furthest away from the players and you're closer than you'll ever be at any of the best stadiums. You just don't get a chance to see that caliber of tennis as close as on Center Court."

Located at the north end of Center Court, the club's new 4,000-square-foot, two-story Wellness Center was designed to not detract from the court's intimate atmosphere, according to Kepler. He and architect James Stroupe also came up with a way to honor the consistent caliber of quality tennis that has been played on the court over the years.

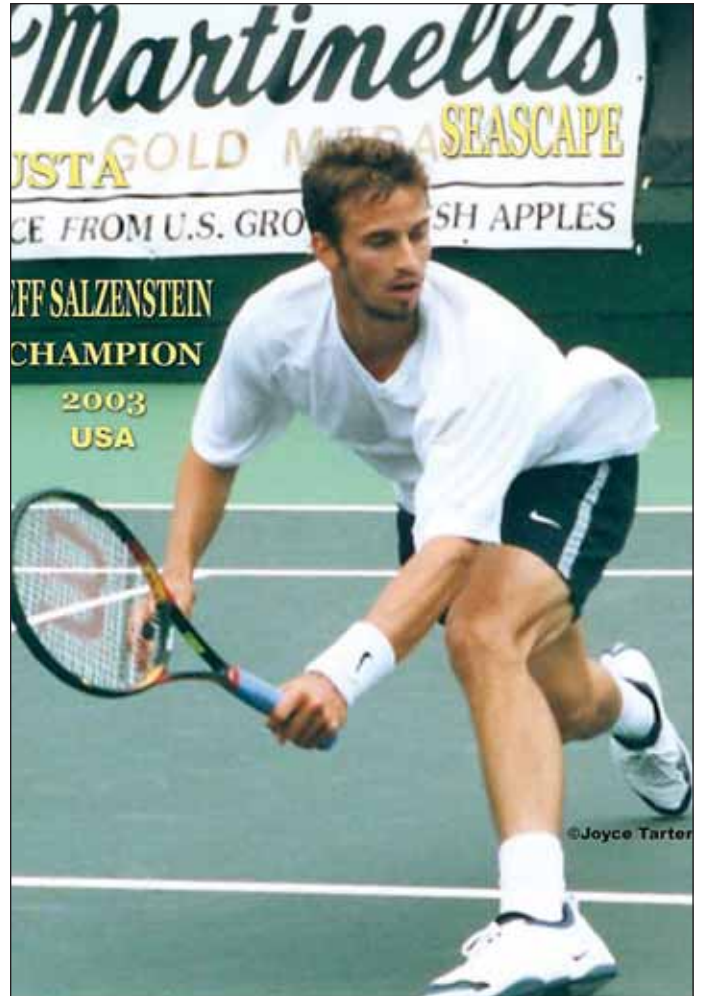
"My architect suggested to me a design that was similar to the main clubhouse at the Newport, R.I., International Tennis Hall of Fame," Kepler said. "I hadn't been there at that point, but he had a book that showed the architecture of that building at Newport, and I fell in love with it."

"We squared up our building with Center Court," Kepler continued. "Spectators will be able to look off the balconies and watch the tennis."

As far as feeling right on top of the action, the view from the second-floor balconies may surpass that of the other two buildings that buttress the west and south ends of the court.

The 1977 Club Champion, Jackson has logged countless hours playing on Center Court over the years, whether spectators were in attendance or not.

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"Center Court at Seascapes is one of the more unique courts on the tour at either level — ATP or challenger," said **Jeff Salzenstein**.

Jeff won the Singles Championship in 2001 and 2003.



Andy Murray won the 2005 Comerica Bank Challenger Singles Championship and is currently No. 4 in the world.



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“My favorite thing about Center Court is taking five minutes between points to look for the balls you’re playing with,” Jackson joked before turning contemplative. “Actually, I think playing on Center Court always elevated your game a little bit, even if it was just for a fun match.” ■



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