

TENNIS WITNESSES

First rule of being a ball kid, keep the ball rolling

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Being a ball kid is not glamorous. Tennis players demand quick service, so children hoist umbrellas and dole out towels with the silent efficiency of butlers. The hours are long. Youngsters bake in the sun, dodge serves and chase shanks – even kill the odd bee. Occasionally they are handed towels splattered with snot.

“Players do disgusting things,” says 16-year-old Shankar Mani, a four-year veteran of the Rogers Cup ball crew in Toronto.

Tennis audiences rarely sees ball boys and girls doing anything but chasing balls, tossing them with a single bounce along the edges of the court, and dutifully offering balls and towels to the players. Their mission is to be silent and invisible.

In reality, however, they are tiny witness to some of the most intimate moments experienced by the greatest players. And they have some unusual insights.

On a recent morning, about 100 children and teens gather on Court No. 3 before Rogers Cup action begins in north Toronto. They are between 11 and 19, and they dress in matching black shorts, red shirts, caps and shoes. The youth split into six teams of 13. The same teams will cover matches at Rexall Stadium later in the day. Timed with a stop-watch and penalized a second for each fumble, they play a game that simulates the throws and catches they will later have to perform flawlessly. The fastest crew will get to choose which match they will cover. Second-round matches featuring Andy Murray and Novak Djokovic are coveted.

“This is like the real Olympics!” one boy shouts.

Another yells: “This is for all the marbles!”

Fun games such as these are important for stress relief, because for the week-long Rogers Cup, these young volunteers will work longer days than most adults. From 9:30 a.m. until as late as midnight, they might work as many as four matches.

On the court, however, they’re under pressure.

The job of handing a towel to a player, for example, is not as easy as it sounds. “If they look at me even two seconds, I know I’m taking too long,” says 11-year-old Daniel Sperber, a ball-crew rookie.

Holding an umbrella? Also a potential mine field.

“[Andre Agassi] said: ‘You don’t have to stand that close to me. It’s just the sun,’” remembers Rob Hilton, now 23, of that mortifying moment when he was 11.

Disrupting a player’s concentration is a cardinal sin, so ball kids must be sensitive to each player’s needs and quirks. The best ones develop the sensitivity of a daycare worker and foresight of a palm reader. “If you don’t accommodate them, everything is harder,” Mani says.

Maria Sharapova, for example, catches balls only from the right side. Agassi never liked it when ball kids changed locations on the court. On a winning shot, Richard Gasquet of France will wait for that same lucky ball to make its way back to him. Rafael Nadal never steps on a painted boundary line. And never, ever touch his water bottle.

Mani learned this the hard way.

“Don’t touch,” came the command with a Spanish accent.

Of course, there are unbelievably cool moments, too, like being two feet from your hero, or being thanked by Roger Federer for your exemplary service. Off the court, ball kids might as well be at a glorified summer camp: They watch TV in their lounge, flirt and goof around with peers, and are put through fun team-building exercises.

To get a spot on a ball crew is competitive, and once they’re in, ball kids rarely leave. They come back year after year until they are forced out at 19. Every year, 80 to 200 young people compete for the 15 to 20 spots that open up when elder ball kids move on. Even then, some ball kids stick around as “committee members” – or team leaders – using vacation time from their jobs as engineers, tennis coaches and communications strategists to guide the next generation of ball kids.

They’re still having fun.

“I just got a text message from one of our committee members,” says Jake Brockman, 20, laughing as he read it aloud. “We have a problem. Louis ripped his pants straight down his ass. Can someone get him a large pair to replace them?”

“It’s a losing battle with these shorts,” another committee member, David Catalfo, 23, explained after Brockman dashed off. It was the fifth case of ripped shorts a ball-crew member had suffered in three days.

As veterans, they all have stories to tell. Once, Brockman earned a standing ovation after he chased and squashed a grasshopper that had been distracting Andy Murray.

“You’re not a ball kid unless a player yells at you,” says Caroline Cameron, 22.

Their annual reunion at the Rogers Cup has a way of bleeding into the rest of their lives. They’ll get together once or twice a year to hang out. Even their enjoyment of tennis is tainted by their ball-crew experience.

“Once you’ve been a ball kid, you can’t watch tennis the same way. You watch the ball kids,” Brockman says.

The Canadian ball-crew kids have earned a reputation on the ATP Tour as some of the best. But they still keep an eye on the competition. Wimbledon kids have an after-school program for honing their skills, but in ball-crew circles, their techniques are considered soft; they roll balls. It’s the U.S. Open kids who are the envy of their peers. Unlike at the Rogers Cup, where they aim for one bounce, those ball kids get to throw the balls the full length of the court – and even cross-court.

“They’re talented,” Brockman says. “Those U.S. Open kids, they’re having a party out there.”