


F5 Silverline Web Application Firewall service
Built on technology with a proven
99.89% block rate.

LEARN MORE



THE GLOBE AND MAIL 

August 14, 2015

Rogers Cup ball crew aims for invisibility in the 'best seats in tennis'

By SEAN GORDON

From wayward serves to player tantrums to sweat-soaked towels, jobs of ball boys and girls aren't without occupational hazards

The job is to be invisible. This is not easy to do in a bright red shirt.

If you've watched the Rogers Cup, you've seen them scurrying around the court, corralling wayward balls, fetching towels and water, and then quietly melting into the background as play resumes.

They are the ball crew; it's a pretty sweet gig.

"It's actually kind of addictive," said 14-year-old Katherine Potter, who is at her second of what she hopes will be many Rogers Cups (ball kids are eligible to return until their 18th birthday).

"Best seats in tennis," added 17-year-old Carl-Janis Jean-Noël.

There are occupational perils aplenty; Jean-Noël once ran off the court in the wrong direction and fell square on his backside when he spun and tried to catch up to his mates.

Some hazards are less benign: Two years ago Gabriel Delage was picking up a ball behind Rafael Nadal during a doubles warm-up and caught a serve from Feliciano Lopez square in the right eye – Nadal hadn't seen Delage and didn't block it.

Delage is in uniform this week, and Nadal made a point of visiting with him to check in and see how he was doing.

Tournament stakes being what they are, occasionally a player will lose it emotionally, in which case it's a good idea not to be standing too near.

Potter learned the hard way last year when Victoria Azarenka smashed her racquet in frustration ("there were pieces of graphite flying all over the place").

So when American player Jack Sock approached melt-down during a match this week, she knew to give him a wide berth.

Experience matters.

And yes, the towels players use to wipe themselves down during a match can get downright disgusting as the

match wears on.

Tennis players can be superstitious – after a winning point make sure to return the ball quickly to Richard Gasquet – although many are merely finicky.

Nadal likes to have two towels. Defending men's champion Jo-Wilfried Tsonga likes a specific kind of chair on court-side.

"I was doing a doubles match and I handed a water bottle to one of the players and he grabbed it by the other end," Potter said. "I was like, oops, didn't know there was a right way to do it!"

Some players are curt, mostly they're friendly, and the occasional one is unfailingly polite (Gael Monfils apparently says please and thank you a lot).

Big servers invariably toss aside the most recently used balls.

"You can tell, they're bigger and fluffier, so slower," said 16-year-old Philippe Laroche. "Lots of players have super strict routines."

In Montreal, tournament organizers recruit 96 ball kids, and roughly a third graduate each year; they are split into 12-member crews, six of whom are on the court at any given time. They work as many as four matches a day (inevitably, the kids name their teams and stake out locker room turf).

Some are accomplished tennis hands (like Laroche) and others are recreational club players (Potter). Some are just avid fans who don't really play at all (Jean-Noël).

Anyone can apply. The lucky few who are selected undergo a short training camp three weeks before the event, and newbies are there for three days.

"Everything happens quickly out there ... there's a lot to think about for a 12-year-old," said Nicolas Beaudet, who started as a ball kid in 1997 and now runs the program.

Retention rates are high.

"It's like a family," he said. "It's hard to leave."

The word "family" comes up a lot in the ball kids' lair; the vast indoor space occupied by the small army of tournament volunteers that is delimited by repurposed school lockers and has the pride of a place next to the chow line.

"The kids love it. It's a completely different experience than anything they'll get in a week of school or summer camp," Beaudet added. "They also know what it brings them."

It gives the experience of working within a well-oiled professional sports apparatus, as well as match tickets and free swag – including clothing and shoes ("I'd like to thank our sponsors Lacoste and Head," quipped Jean-Noël.) It's a job, and it's competitive – the number of ball crews is reduced after the early rounds – but there's about as much levity and joshing around as you might expect from a bunch of teens (Laroche is hit by a wave of teasing when his peers realize he's been talking to a reporter).

There is also a reputation to uphold.

"The U.S. Open kids throw, and we throw both here and in Toronto," Beaudet said. "Almost everyone else rolls, whether on hard court or clay."

There's the merest hint of disdain when he says "roll." Then again, Beaudin pays more attention to these things than most folks.

"I don't watch the matches any more, I just watch the ball kids," he said with a laugh.

If you happen to tune in to the final weekend of the tournament, it's worth doing likewise for a moment or two.

Who said you had to be a player to live the dream?

The Globe and Mail, Inc.



The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.. Permission granted for up to 5 copies. All rights reserved.
You may forward this article or get additional permissions by typing http://license.icopyright.net/3.8425?icx_id=25977430
into any web browser. The Globe and Mail, Inc. and The Globe and Mail logos are registered trademarks of The Globe and Mail, Inc. The
iCopyright logo is a registered trademark of iCopyright, Inc.