

11 things you may not know about the Rogers Cup

Content from: Peroni

Published Tuesday, Jul. 26, 2016 4:29PM EDT

Last updated Friday, Jul. 29, 2016 1:34PM EDT

An insider's look at Canada's premier tennis showcase



Borna Ćorić during a match at the Roger's Cup in Toronto.
(JENNIFER ROBERTS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL)

It's an action-packed morning at the Rogers Cup in Toronto, and matches are in full swing all around at the Aviva Centre. On the Grandstand court, the crowd lets out a gasp of admiration as South Africa's Kevin Anderson wins a hard-fought point from Serbia's Viktor Troicki. Ball kids in red race across the court to retrieve errant balls or hand a towel off to a player. Fans clutching tennis balls and Sharpies are already starting to gather along the practice courts in the hopes of catching their idols at play.

There's always something to talk about at the Rogers Cup, Canada's premier showcase of international and domestic tennis talent and the largest one-week professional tennis tournament in the world. But there's much

more going on behind the scenes at the Rogers Cup than you might imagine: epic Ping-Pong matches, visiting celebs, round-the-clock racket stringers and an army of volunteers with dedication to spare. Here's a peek behind the curtain with two of the sport's ultimate insiders:



Gavin Ziv (right) is vice-president of professional and national events for Tennis Canada and Karl Hale is the tournament director for the Rogers Cup. (JENNIFER ROBERTS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL)

1. The dynamic duo

The brain trust behind the Rogers Cup has deep roots in Canadian tennis. Gavin Ziv, vice-president of professional and national events at Tennis Canada, has worked on the Rogers Cup for 30 years. (His first stint as a volunteer at the tournament was as a ball kid at 11 years old.)

Karl Hale, tournament director of the Rogers Cup, played tennis at the junior, college and professional levels and was a top-ranked competitor on the seniors' tour. Both Mr. Ziv and Mr. Hale have vivid memories of seeing Canadian players flourish over the years at the Rogers Cup.

"I remember seeing Milos Raonic as a five-year-old kid on the Thornhill tennis courts," says Mr. Ziv. "Denis Shapovalov was a hitting partner for us the past two years, and now he's playing in the main draw. Seeing all these young Canadians do so well internationally has meant the biggest difference for what we do here in Canada."

Mr. Hale adds, "Tennis is my passion, and right now it's the pinnacle of success in Canadian tennis with Milos and [women's tour star] Eugenie [Bouchard], so it's really exciting to see them perform in the world stage at the top level."

Insider fact: When not engaged in tennis activities, Mr. Hale builds schools in his native Jamaica. This past

February, he built his 12th school with the help of all-time-great women's tennis star Serena Williams.



JENNIFER ROBERTS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

2. Backstage in the Player's Lounge

The Tevlin Player's Lounge has a reputation for being the best in the world, says Mr. Ziv, and each year, Canadian design group Andrew Richard is enlisted to change up and outfit the space for the players.

"It's a holding pen," says Mr. Hale. "After practice and before matches, it's a long way to go to their hotels downtown. So this is where they bide their time, keep entertained or do whatever they have to do to prepare or cool down."

Players can grab snacks, shoot some pool, gear up for a match in the quiet zone or de-stress with a massage in the Revlon Player's Spa. "It's not so much the therapeutic side; it's the relaxing side for the players and guests and their entourage," says Mr. Ziv.

The adjoining players' patio is a hotspot for meetings between coaches, agents, players and family members, says Mr. Ziv. "It all happens out here on the patio."



JENNIFER ROBERTS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

3. Celebrity Ping-Pong

One of the most popular features of the Player's Lounge is the Ping-Pong table, which has been the site of many heated matches between the world's top tennis players and other visiting celebrities, including a certain Canadian rapper/singer and all-around hitmaker.

"Drake has played Ping-Pong here," says Mr. Hale. "The Blue Jays, Sidney Crosby – when they come by and people are playing Ping-Pong they just jump right in. People like to watch the matches and it gets very competitive." One memorable match happened a few years ago when tennis giants Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer took up the paddles in an epic one-on-one battle. (No word, however, on who emerged the victor.)



COURTESY TENNIS CANADA

4. The heart of the action on Centre Court

The Aviva Centre's main tennis venue boasts 11,000 seats, "but the sightlines are fantastic," says Mr. Ziv. "We went with the architects who designed [stadiums for] Miami and Indian Wells, so we learned from other tennis tournaments what they had done for their stadiums and then made some changes and upgrades for ours as well."

Built in 2004, the Aviva Centre sits on the western edge of the York University campus and also serves as the year-round training centre for Tennis Canada. All 12 courts on-site were built using DecoTurf – the same hardcourt surfacing used at the U.S. Open. Unlike clay or grass, hardcourts don't require a cover in the rain.

"After a quick shower, the court will be dry in half an hour," says Mr. Ziv.

5. How to catch top talent

Tennis fans looking to get up close and personal with top tennis talent will want to pay a visit to the grandstand, the stadium's second-largest court and best-kept secret. "Being the second court, [it's where] you get a lot of really big-name tennis players, but 3,200 seats keeps it really intimate," says Mr. Ziv.

One of the bonuses of the Rogers Cup is that once a spectator purchases a ticket for the main stadium, they can catch tennis at any of the site's 12 courts throughout the day. (Besides the Grandstand and Centre Court, show courts range in size from 1500 to 300 seats.)

“Depending on what you want when you’re here, you can have world-class sightlines in a world-class venue in the stadium to getting a little closer to top players to sitting right beside them and putting your hands over the rails, watching a practice court,” says Mr. Ziv.



JENNIFER ROBERTS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

6. On the practice courts

Take some time to hang around the practice courts to catch top names in action, suggests Mr. Hale. “This is where you’ll see all the players practising and you can watch your favourite players from two feet away.”

Though you might think rivalries would keep top-10 players away from each other before matches, Mr. Hale says they are all great friends and practise together frequently. For example, this past Saturday saw a practice match between world No. 1 Novak Djokovic and world No. 4 Stan Wawrinka.

Insider fact: Organizers order over 10,000 tennis balls for the tournament, which have to be kept in a special air-conditioned room at a consistent temperature throughout the week.



JENNIFER ROBERTS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

7. Catching the Rogers Cup at home

Fans at home will have a chance to experience the Rogers Cup like never before this year, because every single match will be broadcast in some way, says Mr. Ziv. “Our two main courts – the stadium and the grandstand – have historically been broadcast. But now, what you see on courts 1, 2 and 4 will also be broadcast digitally.” Even two practice courts will be streamed online this year. (The women’s tournament in Montreal will follow suit.)

According to Mr. Ziv, the added exposure is a great way to boost the tournament’s presence internationally. “We are viewed in over 70 million homes over the next nine days, so that does a lot for the reputation of Canadian tennis, and international recognition is important to show we are developing as a world-class tennis nation.”



JENNIFER ROBERTS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

8. Powered by volunteers

Over 1,000 volunteers work on the Rogers Cup each year “and we couldn’t do it without them,” says Mr. Hale. Volunteers work in all areas of the tournament, from guest services to ticketing to transportation. The tournament’s fleet is comprised of 150 drivers, who take the players back and forth to their hotels, pick up VIPs and run errands, like the “banana run” (picking up bananas and getting them out to the practice courts for the players).

“People covet the banana run; it’s always a badge of honour,” says Wanda Restivo with a laugh. Ms. Restivo runs transportation services at the Rogers Cup and is the tournament’s longest-running volunteer, having offered up her service for 41 years. She started back in 1975 as a “girl Friday” at 16 years old.

Ms. Restivo says there’s a high return rate for Rogers Cup volunteers because it’s such a positive environment. “Every year, you come back to rekindle the friendships.”



JENNIFER ROBERTS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

9. Serious hustle with the ball kids

Some of the most passionate volunteers at the Rogers Cup are also some of the youngest. The 80 volunteer ball kids that fetch errant balls, provide towels and shade players with umbrellas range in age from 12 to 19.

Six-year veteran ball kid Gilbert Nghiem, now 19, says the key is trying hard to anticipate the players' needs, even before they need them. "You have to catch on to what the players want," he says. "Serena [Williams] only takes one ball at a time, whereas Stan Wawrinka will take six balls at once and then throws them out when he decides which one he wants to hit."

Audrey-Rose Latham, 15, is in her third year as a ball kid and says being good at her job on-court requires laser focus. "And there's a lot of running, so endurance is huge, and patience too."

Chris Adolphe, 14, and also in his third year, says he's been inspired to up his own tennis game through his experiences on court. "I just love the experience, because you're living the moment with the players."



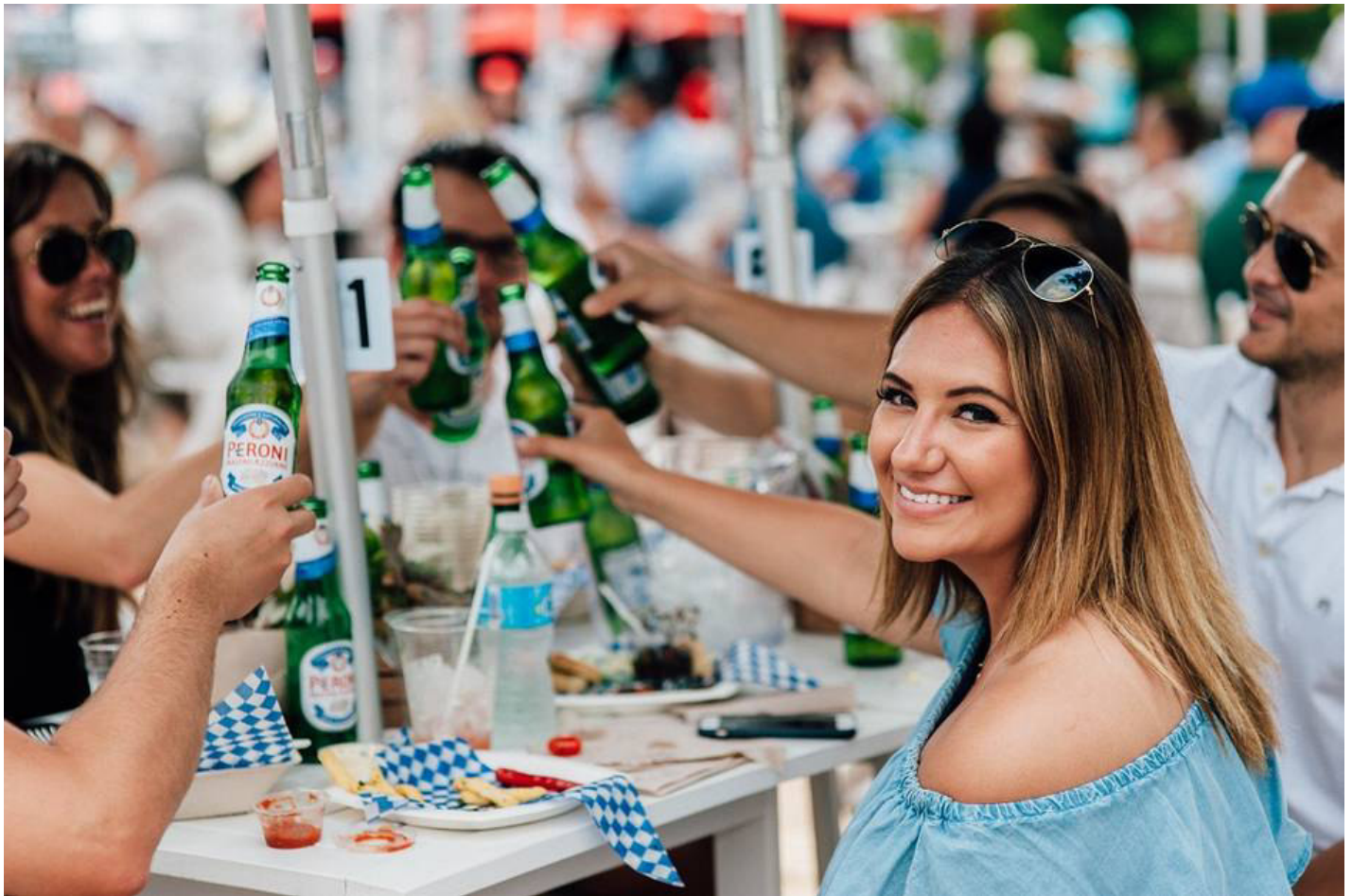
Stringer Jason Fernandez works on a racquet for the Roger's Cup. (JENNIFER ROBERTS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL)

10. Stringing rackets for the world's best players

To ensure players are well prepared for matches, the Rogers Cup has five professional “stringers” provided by Sporting Life, who work full-time, around the clock, stringing rackets for players. “They string over 500 rackets on average through the tournament, and each player has his or her own preference as far as tension goes,” says Mr. Hale.

Twenty-three-year-old stringer Jason Fernandez will be working with the players for the first time this year, having cut his teeth with the general public last year. “The learning curve is pretty easy to just pick up, but being able to master it and get it into your system – that’s the hard part,” notes Mr. Fernandez.

Insider fact: In general, the men’s tour tends to prefer their strings looser than the women, and while the men generally prefer synthetic strings, the women tend to prefer a combination of synthetic and natural “gut,” or animal material.



COURTESY PERONI

11. Even more to do on-site

To keep the crowds engaged throughout the tennis day, there's an interactive area with sponsors' tents and a retail village.

For example, Peroni Terrace is a fully-licensed area for the public, where there is even a bocci court to play in between matches. The Tennis Canada zone is also a place where you can "sit in the lounge, grab a snack and drink and watch tennis on the big video board," says Mr. Ziv.

It's all an effort to draw more people to the tournament and bring in more revenue for the sport, says Mr. Hale. "The revenue for this event all goes back into growing the sport in Canada, from high performance to getting rackets in kids' hands, so the success of this event is vital to the development of the game in Canada."

. This content was produced by The Globe and Mail's advertising department, in consultation with Peroni. The Globe's editorial department was not involved in its creation.