

[The Real Housing Story](#)

(Learn how Aptos has housed aspiring professional Tennis players for 20 years)

By Brent Ainsworth

Professional tennis players don't sign guaranteed contracts to play on the ATP tour. There are no signing bonuses upon turning pro. Paychecks aren't automatically deposited on the first and 15th of the month, and there's no such thing as a paid vacation.

If the players you see at the \$75,000 Comerica Challenger this week play well, they'll get paid well accordingly. The singles champion will nab \$10,800 – not bad at all. But that's just one lucky (and talented) guy out 32 in the draw. And potentially 28 more might've traveled to Seascapes Sports Club just for the qualifying tournament, to fight for four coveted spots in the main draw, and failed to make it. Some players have to stop touring more because they run out of cash than because they believe they can't win.

That's why the free housing provided by Seascapes club members and other friends of the tournament is so critical. This tournament is called "75+H," which means there is \$75,000 in prize money plus hospitality, which gives the players the option of paying for their own hotel or motel rooms or stay for free with members of the host club. Usually it's the more established pros who have experienced a level of success through the years who can afford to pay for hotels week after week. But most of the rookies will gladly take up a Seascapes member on the offer and shack up with a brand new friend or family. If the rookies have a great time, often they keep staying with the same family year after year.

Some of these friendships can last a long time. As the Comerica Challenger marks its 20th anniversary at Seascapes, making it the longest-running annual men's event on the USTA Pro Circuit, many locals are savoring memories of the players who have stopped by Aptos on their way to stardom – or even to obscurity. Whether it was a future Hall of Famer like Pat Rafter or whether it was a skinny kid from Peru who was playing in his first – and last – Challenger of his career, the stories are just as entertaining to hear these days.

Winnie Johnsen, a Seascapes member since 1978, has housed many players through the years and says it's been rewarding. "You gain a real understanding for what these young players have to go through," she says. "They appreciate the support that the fans and housing people give them, and we appreciate them for what they deal with day to day."

In 1989, the third year of the men's Challenger at Seascap, Johnsen hosted Bryan Shelton and Kenny Thorne, two good friends from Georgia. They rode bikes from Johnsen's house to the club each day for their matches. That's a little bit different than the limos and luxury tour buses enjoyed by players in other pro sports.

"We'd put the racket bags on our backs and off we'd go," Shelton recalls of the bike rides. "It was like a warmup for our matches. Of course, it wasn't so great after the matches going home. I asked for rides a couple of times."

Shelton and Thorne played doubles together at Seascap and made the final that year. One of their matches took place late during the dinner hour and many spectators were filing out of the club. Johnsen didn't want to be the only one left to cheer them on. "I got a rooting section together by buying everybody wine," she says. "I convinced about 10 people to stay and cheer."

She rooted for them until their touring careers came to an end. Today, Shelton – best known for his quarterfinal run during the 1991 Wimbledon fortnight -- and Thorne coach the women's and men's tennis teams, respectively, at Georgia Tech, and Johnsen keeps in touch. "Bryan still has the same laugh," she says. "He still asks about my family. Kenny has four kids now. They are still great friends. Right now they're running summer camps together."

Shelton adds, "Having Winnie and her friends coming out to support us was fantastic. Support like that makes you build friendships that last longer than our tennis careers."

Cecil Mamiit has played this Challenger about half a dozen times and has stayed with the Truman family of Corralitos all but one time. Peter and Kim Truman say they've enjoyed watching Mamiit go boogieboarding with their kids Lexy and Adam just as much as they've enjoyed watching Mamiit play – including his singles title in 1998.

"It's been great for the kids," says Peter Truman, whose family has housed at least one player for the past 12 years. "They've been to the Boardwalk together and he's hit balls to them on the court. He's brought his niece before and they've made friends with her. His father's been here, too. His mom's never been here, but she sends Cecil up with Filipino pastries."

Club member Bill Howe housed Andy Murray and his then-coach Mark Petchey last year. Murray, an 18-year-old Scotsman, won the singles title while enjoying a week living in a studio above Howe's garage in Day Valley. Howe put a microwave oven, a toaster and a small fridge in the studio to make the boys feel

at home. Occasionally, they gobbled up the great home cooking at the Howe's House or shoveled pasta at a waterfront restaurant in Capitola.

"It was very comfortable for them because they could come and go as they pleased," says Howe, who hosted Greg Rusedski 12 years earlier and remains friends with him. "Andy had arrived on the Thursday before the tournament, so he was here a long time. I ended up giving them an extra car and Mark drove it around. They had a great time and we really enjoyed having them. We're great friends with both now."

Howe has a great photo of himself with Andy and the Howe's Scottish terrier puppy. "I sent him the photo the week after he was here and asked him to sign it," Howe says. "He said he'd do it as soon as he had a chance. It was months later when his mother found the photo in Andy's tennis bag with our crumpled-up address. She made him sign it and sent it to us with a charming thank-you note for our help."

When Murray showed up in San Jose in February of this year, Howe was in the stands supporting the kid in every match. He got to see Murray blow past Mardy Fish, Yeu-Tzuoo Wang, Robin Soderling, Andy Roddick and Lleyton Hewitt to claim the first ATP singles title of his career. "I got to see him over there and he had nothing but compliments for the (Seascape) tournament," Howe says. "He's a really good young guy. He's fiery, but he's honest and a great person. If I were 19, he'd be my best friend."

Many foreign players visit Aptos during the summer hardcourt season, and often they are seeing the States for the first time. "I like hosting the foreign players," says Howe, who has also hosted Michael Tebbutt of Australia and Axel Pretzsch of Germany. "They are always extremely polite. For some reason, they feel like a guest in your house and they're very gracious for everything you do for them. Axel stayed with us a couple of times. He and his girlfriend took their vacation and stayed with us for two weeks, and they are planning on doing it again. We love having the players back after their playing careers are over."

For some reason, Aptos has always been a favorite for Israeli players. And those Israeli players always seem to find their way to Danene Forman's house. "It's funny ... it's not like I requested just the Jewish players," she says. "It's purely by accident that I happen to get these guys. It's been wonderful."

For the past five years, Forman has hosted Harel Levy, probably the top Israeli player of the past decade, and often another countryman. The established rapport with Levy has meant a lot to Forman. In 2001, she lost her son, Marcus, to cancer at the age of 42. Levy made his first visit to Forman's home in July 2002 and warmly filled a gap in Danene's life.

“I was ready to have young life in the house,” she recalls. “Harel was the perfect match ... the nicest young man, thoughtful and caring. ... I’ve been blessed because he is such a nice guy and so easy-going.”

Today, Levy is good friends with Forman’s grandson, Connor Crossley. “Connor got him hooked on Gameboys,” Forman says. “It’s a running competition. Connor plays a pretty decent game of tennis, having benefited from from Harel’s occasional short lessons that are always the envy of our club players who happen to catch the two of them on the court. As a result, Connor makes sure to have the latest, most up-to-date game on the market when Harel is due to come.”

Levy and the other Israeli players know how to work Forman’s washer and dryer, and they are masters of her barbecue. Forman remembers to stock up on lox, bagels, cream cheese, rice and pasta. Yet the players still come to Forman’s condo with bags full of food from the local market. Long after the tournament, Forman keeps in touch with Levy via e-mail and follows his progress on the Internet. She cherishes the long-distance friendship she has with Levy’s father, whom she has never met in person.

“It’s just been a fabulous experience,” she says of housing players. “The players are happy to talk about the other players they’ve played, the conditions at other tournaments around the world, the fabulous places and the places that are so poor. No matter where they go, the desire is there and the good play is there. It’s tough for them out there.”

Dozens of Seascope members have amazing stories to tell about their brushes with tennis greatness – about the time Lan Bale borrowed a fishing rod, the times the Bryan brothers (and their dad) had the club rocking as they played classic rock tunes at the club, the time the Kratzmann brothers turned in Grammy-winning performances at the bowling alley’s karaoke bar. Rick Kepler, Seascope’s director of tennis, loves the annual Ping Pong tournament that is held on the Monday of tournament week.

“We have prize money for it and the guys are really competitive,” Kepler says. “I’m still trying to win the thing after all these years. I got to the final one time and lost to Michael Joyce. It’s one tradition that I really look forward to. Some of my fondest tournament memories are at the Ping Pong table.”

In the early 1990s, former USC players Adam Peterson and Jon Leach slept on the kids’ bunkbeds at the Kepler condo (Kepler himself played at USC and has an automatic bond with every Trojan). “I don’t think Jon has to sleep on a bunkbed these days,” Kepler says, referring to Leach’s marriage to Lindsay Davenport.

Which party gains the most from these relationships, the players or the hosts?
Maybe it's a toss-up. Everybody wins.

"It has withstood the test of time," Shelton says of the Comerica Challenger. "The people they have there putting it on make it very special for the players. It adds to the whole feel of the tournament."

Brent Ainsworth is the features editor at the Marin Independent Journal newspaper and lives in Novato. He covered the Challenger for the Santa Cruz Sentinel from 1988 to 1996 and has since served as a media coordinator for the tournament.