

Hey, Get A Load of This Racket

Behind the Scenes At the U.S. Open, Courtly Luxuries Rule

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QUEENS, N.Y. -- Sick of your job? Here's some free career advice that could change your life: Ditch whatever you are doing now and join the professional tennis tour.

Yes, on its face this sounds idiotic. Tennis is very tiring, and no doubt life on the circuit would entail a *lot* more sweating than your current gig. There is a risk of sunburn, and buh-bye free weekends, if you reach the finals. But before you start toting up the downsides, maybe you ought to take a good look at the perks.

And what better moment than now, as the U.S. Open heads into its final weekend? We took a tour this week with publicist Tim Curry, who showed us around what is basically a Club Med hidden in Arthur Ashe Stadium -- except this resort is open just a few weeks a year, and it caters exclusively to 600 really good-looking tall people.

There's the stuff you might expect: a huge locker room with lots of flat-panel TVs, a phalanx of racket stringers, an enormous gym with row upon row of Cybex machines, and "quiet rooms" for massages and rubdowns. There are also on-staff nannies in a brightly colored nursery filled with toys, beanbags and play jewelry.

All of these areas were upgraded last year as part of a \$7.5 million renovation by the United States Tennis Association. The goal was to keep up with, if not exceed, the luxuries offered at the three other Grand Slam events.

"It's improved here like 100 percent," says Mike Bryan, one half of the Bryan brothers, the preeminent doubles team. "Except the locker rooms. At the French Open, they have computers in the locker room."

Hey, there are computers everywhere *except* the locker room at Arthur Ashe. And that's just the beginning. On the third floor, near the gym, you'll find Julien Farel, a Frenchman who typically charges \$550 for an updo in his Madison Avenue salon, which is frequented by the likes of Paris Hilton. He sets up a miniaturized version of his operation here and gives free haircuts to players. In exchange, he gets word-of-mouth buzz. He also gets challenges, such as the head of Novak Djokovic, the third-ranked men's player in the world.

"I really wanted to cut his hair last year, when he reached the final, but when I got in touch with his agent, he had just had a haircut," says Farel, who speaks with an accent magnifique. "And his hair was very square, very flat. I thought, 'Oh, that is over. You need a change.' So he came here, a few nights ago, at 7 o'clock-- and we close at 6. And he said, 'Can you cut me?' And I said, 'Of course. For you, we are open.' "

It took an hour. "Hair like a porcupine," says Farel, waving his hands around his head.

Feeling peckish? There's an enormous cafeteria with a smoothie bar, a sushi section, a Mexican food station, a pizza station, a baked potato bar and, on one recent evening, a main course of blackened mahi-mahi.

If you'd prefer to dine out, or need tickets to a Broadway show, proceed to the expansive, second-floor players' lounge and see Rachael Gangji, the tournament's concierge. You can ask her for just about anything. She rented a helicopter for one guy. When players cut instant sponsorship deals -- sport a corporate logo on your shirt and pocket upward of \$10,000 -- she'll get the patch sewn on, pronto. But her specialty is landing seats at restaurants that are booked solid. She brings to this task a lethal combination: an impeccable British accent and the open-sesame that is "U.S. Open."

"I've never been turned down," she says with a smile. "When I hear 'no,' I just think, this will take a little longer than usual."

Players too busy to find Gangji can make reservations on their own. Fifteen-year-old Sloane Stephens, a junior player who bounces when she talks and beams when she smiles, has eaten a few meals at Nobu, a high-end downtown Japanese restaurant that no mortal can enter without a week's notice.

"A lot of restaurants have a list of players at the U.S. Open," Stephens says. "So when you call you just say, 'I'm a player at the Open,' and they check your name on the list, and that's it. I've called 20 minutes before I showed up, I've called five minutes before, I've called as I'm walking in!"

This is not the only food-related upside that Stephens would like to mention.

"They have unlimited candy in the locker rooms!" she says. "So there's Snickers and Twizzlers all the time, and they never run out, which is good."

You'll find bags of candy, too, at the purser's office, which is basically an on-site bank where players pick up their checks. Given that first-round losers in the men's draw are paid \$18,500, you probably won't need a fun-size Milky Way to turn that frown upside down. There's a massive vault on the premises, along with one of those Vegas-style cash counters, so if you'd like a cash advance, that can be arranged.

"Shhh," says Kevin Lynch, who sits next to the vault. "We kind of discourage the cash advance."

When you're ready to head to Manhattan, a fleet of 125 Lexus sedans and SUVs is at your service. The rides are comped, of course, and Roy Fugazy, who is in charge of the operation, will do his best to find the right vehicle for you and your posse, if you have a posse.

"We always send a van to get Raffi," says Fugazy, referring to the top-ranked men's player, Rafael Nadal. "He used to call and say, 'It's me and one person,' so we'd send a sedan and when

we'd get there, he'd be with five people. If he called and said, 'I'm with five people,' by the time we showed up, he'd be with nine. We call him 'Rabbit' because he's always multiplying."

It's the sweet life, people. The only risk is that you'll get accustomed to it and confuse it with reality or start to think it isn't sweet enough. Michael Chang, who won the French Open in 1989, swears that he has encountered young players who actually moan about the amenities.

"I hate to say this," he says in the lounge on Wednesday, "but I think some tennis players are kind of spoiled."