

HOLDING

In this anatomy of a grand slam, Joshua Jennings looks at why organisers of the Australian Open have had to keep on top of their game.

IT WAS DIFFERENT being a fan at the Australian Open a decade ago. Hisense Arena didn't exist. Nor did the night feature matches on Margaret Court Arena. And the absence of stadium screens and Hawk-Eye technology meant the fan experience wasn't as immersive or all-encompassing as it is today.

In 2009, the Australian Open changed again, hosting the women's final at night for the first time. Despite the lacklustre clash (Serena Williams all but staved off yawns as she leisurely throttled Dinara Safina), the lit-up arena endowed the spectacle with an unprecedented showbiz element.

Craig Tiley, Australian Open tournament director, says fans who come through the Melbourne Park turnstiles for the 2010 Australian Open will embark on a different experience yet again. And why wouldn't Melbourne Park continue to reinvent itself in light of the other parties that would gladly relieve it of its rights to host a grand slam? Sydney, Madrid, Asia and the Middle East have all recently rubbed their hands at the prospect of muscling in on grand slam action. >

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“The competition is not just other tennis events,” says Tiley. “Now it’s other sporting events and entertainment events. There is a significant increase in the pace of introducing new initiatives.”

In 2008, a survey of pro tennis players and coaches conducted between office designer/manufacturer Haworth and the Association of Tennis Professionals found players were nonplussed by the overcrowded conditions of the Melbourne Park restaurant and player lounge. Tennis Australia has been outspoken about the venue’s need to modernise its facilities and construct more indoor practice courts for players.

Last year, the Victorian Government responded by providing \$5m for the preparation of the Melbourne and Olympic Parks’ Masterplan. Developments on the agenda for Melbourne Park include a new “town square” in the centre of Melbourne Park with a lightweight roof to shade patrons, improved player facilities, more practice courts, better media facilities, a roof for Margaret Court Arena, new headquarters for Tennis Australia and better access for pedestrians.

“We need to upgrade our facilities not only to maintain our status as a grand slam, but to be able to beat the competition,” Tiley says.

The initiatives slated for the 2010 Australian Open include a bigger entertainment precinct known as Grand Slam Oval (featuring big screens, live music, a Jacob’s Creek wine bar, a Heineken bar and a Lacoste

2009 Australian Open glory: American Serena Williams celebrates her win (above left); Rafael Nadal pounds down a serve in the men’s final (above right).

clubhouse), earlier night sessions in the first week, bigger prize pool and a big-ticket match between Pat Rafter and Goran Ivanisevic.

Veteran television commentator and former top-10 tennis player John Alexander says he’s impressed by the state of men’s and women’s tennis. He compares it to the early 1990s when Edberg, Courier, Sampras, Agassi, Ivanisevic, Becker, Chang and Lendl stocked the top 10. Given the comebacks of former world number-ones Justine Henin and Kim Clijsters (and local favourite, Alicia Molik), and the resurgence of Lleyton Hewitt, the storylines emerging for the 2010 Australian Open are also promising, Alexander notes.

“You could name six, eight or even 10 players capable of winning,” he says. ➤

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"The Australian Open is the first big event of the year and everybody's fit and fresh and ready to go, and you've got to say that it's the Open to beat all Opens."

The tournament didn't always attract the best players in the world. Players such as Agassi and Connors famously snubbed the event. But today injury is the only reason players are absent. The crowds are eager, too: attendance at the 2009 Australian Open was 603,160 compared with 266,436 at the first tournament at Melbourne Park in 1988.

Tennis Australia's 2007-2008 annual report outlines a multitude of factors that make the Australian Open a fan-friendly experience: organisers are accountable for having the event broadcast around the globe, ironing out kinks in venue infrastructure, supplying security, creating attractive ticketing options and addressing human resources, IT, merchandising, sponsorship, hospitality and off-court entertainment.

Location and climate play a major part in the uniqueness of the tournament, according to Tiley. "We're located close to the city, so access for the fans and players is very easy. It's also the time of the year: summer, the height of outdoor life. Many visitors and players are coming from the Northern Hemisphere where it's cold, so it becomes a welcoming environment from a climate point of view."

But while the Australian Open continues to improve, so do the other tournaments. The China Open became the Shanghai Masters this year (masters events have the most prestigious tournament status next to grand slams) and its tournament director wants China to create the fifth grand slam. The Chinese Tennis Association reports 130 million of the 1.3 billion Chinese population are interested in the sport and the number of tennis courts in the country is multiplying by 15 per cent annually, according to sports marketing firm Infront Sports and Media. China also hosted the Olympic tournament in 2008 and the end-of-year Tennis Masters Cup from 2005 to 2007.

Brian Catton, tournament director of The Hong Kong Tennis Classic, an exhibition event that takes place the week before the Australian Open (Venus Williams and Jelena Jankovic headlined the 2009 event), says he expects there will be "some type of event" in Asia that is up to the level of the grand slams in the next 15 years.

So what will be in store for grand slam tennis in the coming decade?

"I think organisers and players realise the whole lifeline of any event and sport is to bring the fans closer to the athlete," Catton says. "I think technology will lead the way in ensuring fans have a greater interactive experience."

IBM and Tennis Australia already work together to enable Australian Open fans to check on-site match information displays, on-court scoreboards, on-site results kiosks, and the service speeds players clock up on the courtside radar guns. In 2009, fans logging on to the Australian Open website enjoyed first-time access to interactive draws that enabled them to follow their favourite players in real-time, online forums and widgets for news, schedules and scores. They could also access scores, stats and schedules on their mobile phones.

"There will be a lot more [opportunities for] visual appearances, whether through TV or digital means, that are going to appeal to the fans," Tiley says of future Australian Opens. "I think you'll see more match information displays and more live streaming on screens around the site so you can be anywhere on the site and know what's going on at the other end." +

