

Jon Vegosen's Speech at the 2011 USTA Annual Meeting and Conference

Opening Session - April 2, 2011

Introduction

Good morning.

I am excited to welcome you all to Naples and the 2011 Annual Meeting. What an inspiring group of colleagues you are. Whether you are a volunteer or a member of the staff, I am thrilled about working with all of you these next two years. It is a distinct honor and privilege to be leading the USTA as its 50th President. You have my commitment that I will always strive to act in the best interests of tennis and our association.

The USTA is an extraordinary organization. The reason, I believe, is primarily because of our people -- the volunteers and staff gathered in this room today, along with the other volunteers and staff in communities throughout our 17 sections whose passion and dedication drive all we do. Our people are, without doubt, the USTA's greatest resource. It is your limitless talents that afford our association — and our sport — the opportunity to plan and achieve without limits. I applaud you and ask you to give yourselves a round of applause.

The Weekend

We have a tremendous weekend planned. Our keynote speaker is Andrés Tapia, an expert in the field of diversity – so critical to our long-term health and growth. Tomorrow morning, you'll hear from our Executive Director, Gordon Smith, Kurt Kamperman, Patrick McEnroe and Sue Hunt about our sport and our vitally-important 10 & Under Tennis initiative.

Our Committees and Task Forces have full agendas. I must say, I am impressed with the goals that have been set. They appear in the Annual Meeting Program Book, and many of them are what I call "SMART" goals – Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Time Sensitive, and Results Oriented. I wish you productive meetings.

The Awards Ceremony tomorrow – always a highlight of the meeting – will showcase individuals and organizations who have had a significant impact on the game.

We'll have the Section Tennis Tournament and other activities on Sunday afternoon.

On Monday, one of our sport's top journalists and USTA Serves President, Mary Carillo, will be interviewing our new Davis Cup Captain, Jim Courier, fresh off his exciting debut with a first-round win over Chile.

Our social evenings should be lots of fun and allow us to catch up with one another. And, most important, more than 850 of us are here together, at this beautiful resort, to share ideas and learn from one another.

Road Map

At this time, I would like to share my vision and our theme for the next two years, along with our priorities for the term.

Vision

The USTA already has a compelling mission – to promote and develop the growth of tennis. But the opportunity lies before us to further that mission and transcend it — to put in place a plan that will help to grow the game and enhance the lives of those who play it.

Imagine if instead of only promoting and developing the growth of tennis, we also devoted ourselves to promoting and developing the growth of people through tennis. Imagine if we became known as the sport that is genuinely concerned about the lives of its constituents and a sport that is responsive to their needs. Imagine if we created pathways for youngsters from diverse backgrounds to easily enter, enjoy, and pursue our sport in their communities, at their levels, on an affordable basis that would NOT require them to sacrifice educationally and would strengthen their personal growth. Imagine if we put in place a player development system that aims to create the conditions for developing both champions on the court and champions in life.

All of us who have been involved in this great sport for a good part of our lives know well the bounty of benefits that go hand in hand with tennis. We need to make more people aware of those benefits. Because, when we share our sport, we in fact extend to others a universal key that opens doors, minds and hearts. And when we develop people through tennis, we inevitably promote and develop the growth of tennis itself.

Theme

With regard to a theme, the last two administrations, appropriately, had themes that looked inward – Jane Brown Grimes' was *Future Ready*, and Lucy Garvin's was *Teamwork: One Team One Goal*. These were important themes that fortified us internally and prepared us well for the solid structure that this association now enjoys. At this important stage of the USTA's history, I believe strongly that it is time for a theme that "reaches out." This theme is:

Tennis: The Sport of Opportunity

Each of us in this room has been enriched by the opportunities that tennis has provided. I wish there was time to share everybody's stories. And I wish I could describe this morning how each of you can and will provide opportunities these next two years. Regardless of your Section's priorities, irrespective of your role as a volunteer, regardless of what Committee you may serve on – be it Leagues, Adult Competition, Constitution & Rules, Grievance, Awards or others, - and no matter what your position may be with the USTA or the Sections, you are, and will be, an important part of the opportunities that our sport creates. For this I thank you.

I recognize that, for far too long, tennis has been perceived as anything but a sport of opportunity. It has too often been viewed as elitist.

We have made good progress in taking some of the air out of that myth. Particularly during this past decade, we have become a more inclusive sport that embraces all communities. Michelle Obama's selection of tennis for her "Let's Move" initiative implicitly recognizes this. And while tennis is a sport that provides fitness and competition, it actually goes beyond both. Tennis also provides opportunities for

education and character development that are the envy of other sports. Just look at how USTA Serves, NJTL, and First Serve make a difference every day in the lives of hundreds of thousands of youngsters.

But we have not yet realized our full potential to be the sport of opportunity for all. Not enough people are cognizant of the countless opportunities tennis provides. And, more importantly, we still have yet to maximize the opportunities that our sport could and should offer.

Here's our challenge:

While tennis has been the fastest growing traditional sport for most of the past decade, we are still failing to attract and retain new frequent players – especially children 10 & Under.

Today, we have only about 20,000 youngsters playing 10 & Under competitive tennis or junior team tennis. In sharp contrast, soccer has approximately two million youngsters aged 10 & Under playing competitively.

Compared to several European countries, we don't have nearly as many juniors playing sanctioned tournaments. We have about 138,000 juniors 18 and under playing competitive tennis. France, which is 1/5 the size of the US, has over 500,000.

These are staggering differences. They paint a picture of untapped potential we need to examine. Our national junior tournament structure is very expensive. If junior players want to pursue tennis seriously, their parents must spend enormous amounts of money and travel great distances to tournaments. Additionally, competitive juniors often have to shortchange their educations.

Countries like France and Spain have thousands of tournaments where people can play and compete at their levels locally, inexpensively, and regularly. France has in place a tennis tournament and rating system that encourages and accelerates player development in local communities. It's no wonder that France has 11 of the top 100 players on the ATP World Tour. Spain, has a stunning 14. The U.S. has but 6. In the WTA rankings, Russia has 14 top 100 players. We have 8.

We are also not appealing to enough of the people who do try our sport. While USTA membership has steadily increased to about 750,000 (thanks to our Membership Department), this represents only 15% of the approximately five million frequent players in our country. We can do better. And we must, as a business and as a moral imperative, step up our diversity and inclusion initiatives. We want and need the face of our sport to more closely resemble the face of our country — and that face is an ever-evolving mosaic. We need to do a better job of addressing that fact, or we cannot realize our full potential for growth.

In order to reach our potential, we have much to do. We need to provide meaningful opportunities to people. We need to be sure that tennis is accessible to all communities, regardless of economic circumstance. We need to put our constituents – our people – first. We also need to make sure everybody knows about the phenomenal opportunities that tennis provides. To fulfill our mission, we need for tennis to be, and to be perceived as, "The Sport of Opportunity."

Priorities

I have established six priorities that I believe will support our efforts to be “The Sport of Opportunity.”

Priority 1:

The first is to **maintain strong and transparent relations with our partners and enhance volunteer service opportunities.** What does this entail?

We need to embrace our partners. All of us within and outside of our association must work together.

This means that volunteers and staff must work collaboratively and cooperatively. To reinforce the importance of this, over the next two years we will be highlighting examples of strong volunteer and staff relationships. Indeed, the Annual Meeting booklet describes some shining examples of successful volunteer-staff collaborations from last term.

Our first priority also includes maintaining strong and transparent relations between National and our Sections. Our Sections are our wellspring. They are powered by passionate people who, every day, provide the energy that spurs our sport’s continued growth. There must be open and frequent communication with the Section Leadership. You have my commitment to promote that kind of dialogue.

The first priority also means having vibrant and candid relationships with allied organizations. As these slides illustrate, we have many wonderful partners. We all are in this together. Our sport’s success can be — and must be — a shared success.

The first priority also entails providing responsive service to our customer base and our constituents in the tournaments, leagues, festivals, and workshops that we host and sponsor.

Finally, if we are to be the Sport of Opportunity and fulfill the tenets of our first priority, we must enhance volunteer service opportunities and nurture the volunteer pipeline.

The USTA is blessed to have an incredible base of passionate volunteers who make a significant difference for tennis. At the same time, there are tennis enthusiasts of all ages from diverse socio-economic backgrounds who would like to contribute but who cannot afford the time required to attend Annual and Semiannual meetings at any level of the USTA. They have families, careers, or obligations that prevent them from serving.

Many of the potential contributors to our sport are young; however, our existing volunteer base is older. 45% of our Volunteers are 60 and older, and almost 75% of our volunteers are 50 and older. Make no mistake, though, we “older fogies” still have a lot to contribute.

At the same time, if people are our priority and if we are to be the Sport of Opportunity, the USTA Family needs to find a way to allow busy tennis enthusiasts to contribute. In addition, we need to create a pathway, beyond the biennial Committee

Appointment Process, to identify, attract, recruit, and retain younger volunteers who, eventually, can become future leaders at all levels of our association.

I have created a Task Force on Alternative Projects and Volunteer Assignments to accomplish these goals. The Task Force will produce, as a deliverable, a database of prospective volunteers who are prepared to contribute their services on a task specific, limited assignment, or project basis at the appropriate level. There are any number of people out there who are passionate about our sport, and we cannot allow that passion to go untapped. We need to go the extra mile to get those people involved, because our mission to grow the game is an ongoing one; there is no finish line in what we seek to accomplish. In the near and distant future, we will always be driven by the enthusiasm and energy of those who love our game.

Priority 2:

Our second priority is to **advance the financial soundness of the USTA**. It would be wonderful if I could stand before you and say, “Don’t worry. We have a reserve of:” **[Visual and sound effect: One Hundred Billion Dollars.]** But Don and Harry said, “No way.”

More seriously, this priority includes a number of critical steps:

We must keep the US Open robust and find new ways to enhance the tremendous revenue it provides for our association. As part of this initiative, we need to market the US Open to younger people to make tennis and the Open more relevant and exciting than ever.

Our budgets must plan for the future. As the three Section representatives on the Budget Committee last term suggested, this means budgeting for substantial surpluses, and saving and investing those funds for future uses – especially maintaining and improving the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center.

Last term the Board adopted a Master Plan for the NTC. That Plan is really more accurately described as the “NTC Strategic Vision,” as it lays out what we hope for the future of the NTC. To help make sure that that vision is achieved, on time and on budget, I have created a Major Construction Oversight Committee comprised of talented volunteers and staff.

We must make sure that our investment in Cincinnati pays off handsomely and that, like the US Open, this tournament provides us with additional revenue to support Community Tennis, Player Development and our other initiatives.

We need to be prudent and prepared. We need to recognize that, on occasion, disaster may strike – be it an earthquake, a hurricane, or other catastrophe. With this in mind, we have created a USTA Disaster Relief Fund into which, each year, we will deposit \$100,000. That money will grow and be earmarked to help rebuild tennis courts and tennis facilities in the United States and its territories should disaster befall us.

We need to explore ways to increase revenue through Membership. The Ratings Revenue and Marketing Opportunities Task Force is designed to look into how we might accomplish this.

Finally, we need to discover other avenues to keep us financially sound. We are fortunate to have some extremely creative Board members. They, along with strong Sectional representatives, and our Staff Liaison will serve on the Strategic and Creative Planning Committee. My hope is that this Committee can help us find, among other things, new ways to enhance our coffers so we can continue to enhance our sport.

Priority 3:

Our third priority is to **promote and enhance the youth-collegiate continuum** – from Ten and Under Tennis right up through college.

We must significantly expand the base of juniors 10 & Under playing competitive tennis on courts using the QuickStart Tennis format. To do this, we need to have an emphasis on fun and fitness. We have to make tennis affordable, accessible, and relevant to families and their kids. And, as you will learn this weekend, our 10 & Under Tennis initiatives are being designed to do just that.

To support the 10 & Under initiative, we have created a new Council – the Youth Growth Council - under which we have three Committees. To address the USTA's emphasis on penetrating the youth tennis market, a 10 & Under Task Force will focus on 10 and under players. This Task Force can help youth tennis reach a “tipping point.”

Jr. Team Tennis is the next leg of the youth-collegiate continuum. We need to have thousands of teams across the country where kids and their coaches focus on competing locally against players at their levels and where they concentrate on improving their skills rather than worrying about whether they make it to nationals. The most important thing is that these players have the experience and joy of playing on a team against other players of comparable abilities.

Given that we are about to introduce a new generation to tennis, there could not be a better time to have a Sportsmanship Committee. We now have a golden opportunity to educate and inspire youngsters and their parents to develop and exhibit a high degree of sportsmanship and an attitude of fair play and mutual respect on and off the tennis court. We need to build character one call at a time. It is just as important that, as we seek to create an environment from which championship players will emerge, we create one in which they can grow into championship human beings. After all, 99.99% of our players will not make the top 100 in the world professionally. It is imperative that they receive positive lessons from tennis that will serve them for a lifetime. Indeed, Patrick McEnroe, our General Manager of Player Development, has already begun this process for our most talented juniors.

Of course, our great hope is that the ranks of junior players will swell because of our 10 & Under initiatives. When they do, we must be ready to absorb them and provide them with affordable platforms close to home to develop quickly and fully by giving them opportunities to play against players across age groups in their communities and Sections. Therefore, we have added a second element to the Junior Competition charge -- to prepare an appropriate national tournament structure and rating/ranking system for the future which:

- a. is affordable and will insure that competitive tennis opportunities are available for all American juniors regardless of their economic circumstances and where they reside;
- b. supports the importance of a traditional American education and does not require students to sacrifice their academic careers; and
- c. creates an environment to generate a base of more and better American junior players to fill the ranks of collegiate programs, and for the most outstanding of these to become future professional champions.

Some may say that we cannot develop players locally. But many players, myself included, had the opportunity to develop faster in our local communities by playing against older, and frequently wiser, opponents. Imagine the possibilities if, as occurs in other countries, we had an accurate rating system in place that encouraged local competitive play on an affordable basis without the need to sacrifice one's education. Imagine a 50 year old drop-shotting and lobbing a junior player and thereby imparting the wisdom of point construction and strategic shot selection. And, I might add for all of you 50-somethings out there — enjoying every minute of it.

Of course, another critical part of the continuum is to maintain the strong partnership between the USTA and the Intercollegiate Tennis Association. Doing so will protect and promote collegiate varsity tennis to make sure that the varsity tennis pathway, and the enormous amount of player development that takes place on college campuses, remains vibrant. To supplement our Pro Circuit Events, we also need to expand our Campus Showdown programs to ensure that 15-17 year-olds are able to compete regularly and locally against older, stronger, and more experienced players.

For those that don't have the inclination, time, or skill for college varsity tennis, we want to continue to grow our successful and innovative Tennis on Campus program. It's great fun, and it's a way to keep the hundreds of thousands of high school tennis players in the game through their college years and beyond, creating a powerful pathway to adult leagues and volunteering by keeping players involved that we might otherwise have lost.

To appropriately advance the youth-collegiate continuum, we will need support from the best and brightest from every Section to help us examine our current tournament structures and ranking systems. You will need to focus on how these tools can be supplemented or modified to help us create more and better players faster, while at the same time cutting the expenses that players, parents and coaches must incur to compete within the system. We also need volunteers in our Districts and at the grassroots to support our 10 & Under Tennis and Junior Team Tennis initiatives. If, together, we can do this, we can truly turn tennis into the Sport of Opportunity.

Priority 4:

Our fourth priority is to **build cross-cultural competence to insure successful diversity and inclusion.** This competence must be achieved at every level of our organization -- from the grassroots on up.

A major take away from the Diversity Summit held last year was that the USTA Family wants our Diversity and Inclusion initiative to be successful. We do not, however, necessarily know how to accomplish this. This is, at once, an equally honest and challenging assessment. There is sometimes a disconnect between our aspirations and what we are actually achieving with respect to Diversity and Inclusion.

To build cross-cultural competence, we must do many things. Most of all, we must embrace Diversity and Inclusion in the broadest of terms -- to respect not just differences such as gender, race, religion, national origin, and disabilities, but also differences in sexual orientation or preference, generational differences, economic differences, and differences in thinking style. As Andrés Tapia, our keynote speaker this morning, will tell you, we must move from "I tolerate your differences" to "I need your differences."

This term, we have more diverse Council Chairs and more diverse Committee Chairs and Vice Chairs than we have ever had before. And I've appointed over 100 new national volunteers this term, many of whom are from diverse backgrounds. A few of them are highlighted in the Annual Meeting Booklet.

But we must do more. We need to devise a strategy to research, target, and market to the diverse groups that we want to attract. To this end, we will have four Subcommittees of the Diversity and Inclusion Committee, each chaired by a Vice Chair of that Committee. The four target groups are Latinos, African-Americans, Asians, and the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender community. And we will continue our diversity talent search efforts for these and other groups.

I cannot stress enough the importance of diversity and inclusion to our long-term growth and health. We cannot be the sport of opportunity if there is not opportunity for all.

Priority 5:

Our fifth priority is to **leverage the USTA's commitment to education.**

Shortly after President Obama took office, he told a Joint Session of Congress that we must "Ensure that every child has access to a complete and competitive education" and that America will "have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world."

We've got a long way to go:

- *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert has reported that "American kids drop out of high school at a rate of one every 26 seconds." That's well over one million students dropping out every year.
- The U.S. was once the world's leader in the percentage of young people with college degrees. We've now fallen to 12th among 36 developed nations.
- You think our rankings in the pros are slipping? Our worldwide rankings in education are much more alarming. We are:
 - 10th in literacy;

- 17th in science; and
- 24th in math

The USTA already has in place a tremendous infrastructure that can support and promote this “college imperative.” As these slides illustrate, we have a rich array of delivery systems, programs, campaigns, and publications that touch youth of all ages.

We need to determine how the USTA can best promote the importance and value of every American youngster obtaining a college education -- and drive home the idea that tennis is the sport of opportunity for achieving this vitally-important goal. To this end, I have created a Tennis & Higher Education Task Force, which includes a number of brilliant educators. Working side by side with the Task Force will be the newly combined Advocacy and Public Affairs Committee.

By being the sport that promotes not only fitness and fun but also opportunity through education, we will attract many more people to tennis. By truly serving people, being the Sport of Opportunity, and spreading the word about the opportunities we offer, we will both fulfill and transcend our mission.

Imagine a single mother who has an athletic child for whom she has all the hope and aspiration in the world. If we create a world of true opportunity, when encouraging her child to play a sport, I think she (and many other parents) will choose tennis. By leveraging the USTA’s commitment to education, we can, we should, we must keep that hope alive.

As Nelson Mandela wisely proclaimed:

“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. Sport can awaken hope where there was previously only despair.”

Tennis can be that sport. And we can make sure that it is.

Priority 6:

Our sixth priority is to **have fun!** I have found that we have more fun and gain greater satisfaction when we do something well and that we are proud of.

We should have fun with the work we do. After all, we all are involved in a sport that we love. By doing so, we will both enrich the game and ourselves.

And since we’re dedicated to the greatest sport in the world, we should have fun and play tennis more often – at our meetings and during our free time.

In January, I asked each Member of the Board and the Executive Staff to make a commitment to be a frequent player -- to either play tennis at least 21 times in 2011, or to get a family member or friend who doesn’t play much tennis to make that commitment. Every one of them signed up. I’m asking each of you to make the same commitment.

Let's thrive these next two years in a playful, fun culture that takes full advantage of the creative and talented people who swell the ranks of our association and, together, let us leave a legacy of which we can all be proud.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen. We have a vision – to promote and develop the growth of people through tennis. We have our theme. Tennis: The Sport of Opportunity. We have our Six Priorities, which are on a Z-card you received at registration.

Together, at National and in our Sections, and with volunteers and staff working side-by-side, we must harness our resources so that we stand on the shoulders of the giants who came before us to reach greater heights, to build on what we already have in place, and to take our sport to a whole new, more rich and rewarding level. It is within our power to grow our sport to become completely inclusive. We can markedly expand the base of tennis players. We can create the environment for more American tennis champions. And we can ensure that, both on and off the court, and in the classroom, we are developing champions for life from every point of the compass.

I ask you:

If not now, then when?

If not us, then who?

I ask for your help and commitment to truly make Tennis The Sport of Opportunity for all.

Thank you.