

BY ELISA BIRNBAUM

FAREWELL TO THE NATIONAL TENNIS CENTRE

IT IS THE END OF AN ERA. AN ERA LASTING ALMOST THIRTY YEARS, MARKED EQUALLY BY THE VICTORIOUS AS BY THE DEFEATED, BY ITS IDIOSYNCRATIC CHARACTER AS BY THE ENDEARING FANS WHO FILL THE SEATS YEAR AFTER YEAR. WE NOW BID ADIEU TO THE CURRENT HOME OF THE CANADIAN OPEN IN TORONTO AND ANTICIPATE THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW VENUE. FOR, IN 2004, THE TRADITION OF TENNIS WILL CONTINUE AS THE NEXT ERA BEGINS - WITH THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A NEW STADIUM, THE REXALL CENTRE.

It was 1976 when Yugoslavia's Mima Jausovec and Argentina's Guillermo Vilas christened the National Tennis Centre as the stadium's inaugural champions. Since then, the Centre has been through many changes and challenges and the memories reveal as much about the people who streamed through the gates, than it does the champions who fiercely battled on the courts below.

Rene Simpson, a 10-year veteran who hung up her professional racquet in 1988 is one such champion. Currently captain of the Canadian Fed Cup Team and the Under-16 Junior Fed Cup Team, she remembers coming, at the age of sixteen, to watch the Centre Court dazzle with a young shining star by the name of Carling Bassett. At the time, the idea of competing with her one day was, as Simpson recalls, "so far beyond anything I could imagine." In 1998, however, that dream became a reality as the two endured an intense match up, which saw Bassett struggle hard to counter her feisty opponent.

The younger players of Ontario share fond memories of the stadium matches as

well. Nineteen-year-old Diana Srebrovic, an up and comer on the WTA Tour, remembers well her excitement when, at the age of 11, her parents brought her to York University for a match involving one of her heroes at the time, a commanding Mary Pierce. She often thinks back to that one evening eight years ago and the game that helped inspire her career.

Enjoying an ice cream, Wanda Zentil relaxes in between matches with her friends and tennis partners, Gladys Brocklehurst, Gitte Kirsch and Betty Jane West. The women began watching the Canadian Open back when it was held at the Toronto Lawn and the Cricket Club. They then witnessed the very beginnings of the National Tennis Centre when the tournament moved to York University, a venue it's been calling home ever since. Zentil recalls watching the likes of Chris Evert, Jimmy Connors and Martina Navratilova battle for titles back when they were the reigning king and queens of the courts. As the gals wax nostalgic about the many facelifts the Centre has undergone - from the rise in number of concession stands to the expansive lists of sponsors - Brocklehurst, remembers a time when the courts were fashioned not only by the "frillier dresses reminiscent of Gussy Moran but by wooden racquets and the explosive personality of McEnroe."

The \$45 million stadium to be built just a few minutes west of the current site at York University, will boast a 12,500 stadium court seating capacity, show courts with more comfortable seating, improved amenities and the Rexall Sports Nutrition Centre. As an added bonus, the new Centre will estab-

lish year-round training facilities for Ontario and national athletes. This is a most welcome addition for the rising tennis stars of the province. In fact, had these facilities been available to her when she was younger, muses Sonya Jeyaseelan, who this year played her 11th Canadian Open, she may have spent more time training at home instead of adopting facilities and a residence in Florida. Transforming the venue into a first class facility will, according to Rene Simpson, "provide a better and more inspiring environment for the players and coaches alike both of whom will find training more enjoyable."

At the closing ceremonies of the 2003 Rogers AT&T Cup, Helen Kelesi, Canada's former champion once ranked as high as number 13 in the world, handed over the Tennis Canada flag to a rising junior star, 12-year-old Brittany Wowchuk of Oakville, Ontario. As the proverbial torch was passed from the athletes of the past to those of the future, the flame of courage and competitive spirit embodied in the players who have graced these courts over the years, was likewise transferred from the stadium of today to the one of tomorrow. And, what better way to bid farewell to the Centre and to herald in a new era than by having the ageless warrior Martina Navratilova play the very last match on Centre Court. Winning her seventh Canadian Open title with her doubles partner, Svetlana Kuznetsova, Tournament Director, Stacey Allaster, could not have scripted the finale any better. "Having Martina play the closing match is a dream," she beamed. Some dreams, it appears, are still yet to come.