

Sports/Jeff Greenfield

WILL APPLES BOB UP NEXT?

“... The Cosmos made it after eleven years of obscurity. Can the Apples, New York’s World Tennis entry, be far behind?...”

It’s been one of Billie Jean King’s favorite fantasies for years: a packed Madison Square Garden, with 18,000 fans screaming for their favorite team, drowning out the National Anthem, clapping hands and stomping feet as the New York Apples battle for another World Team Tennis championship. Outside, as scalpers work the crowds, the price for a \$10 ticket is bid up to \$25, \$50, \$75. Inside, each point brings the crowd to its feet, and a huge national television audience follows every game.

On Friday, April 21, Billie Jean had a chance to measure the distance between fantasy and reality. It was opening night of the Apples’ 1978 season at the Garden; it took place not in the main arena, but in the more intimate Felt Forum. It was officially a sellout—not the 18,000 the main arena can accommodate for tennis, but 3,773—and thanks to the first night of Passover, there were at least 1,000 empty seats. The crowd, remembering the etiquette of Forest Hills, maintained a polite silence throughout the match against the Anaheim Oranges. This at times gave the Felt Forum the air of a lecture hall, rather than that of the site of a big-league sports event. The press was not very noticeably present; the *New York Times*, which hadn’t mentioned the Apples’ opener that morning, used a photograph to report the match and did not include the outcome in its caption.

It’s a long, long way to those packed houses that so far exist only in the imaginations of Billie Jean King and the New York Apples organization. Yet, for all of the obstacles between the team and big-time sports success, there are hints that this still-unfamiliar concept of team tennis just might become permanent. “My attitude is the same as it was four years ago, when we started,” says Apples owner Sol Berg, who made a fortune developing instant coffee, and who has bankrolled a few million dollars’ worth of Apples losses since 1974. “If I can see progress, if the indicators are positive, I’ll stay with it.”

What are these indicators? First, the



attendance has been going up year by year. In 1976, the Apples (then known as the New York Sets) averaged 3,564 fans for their matches. Last year, they drew 4,939. They’re still not near the break-even point, which comes somewhere between 6,000 and 7,000 fans per game, but they’re getting there. Second, the Apples have moved completely out of Long Island’s Nassau Coliseum, where spectators rattled around like a dozen ball bearings in the hold of a supertanker. This year, they will play sixteen home games in the Felt Forum and six in the Garden’s main arena. With a Felt Forum rental of \$3,500 per night and a \$9 average ticket price, the Forum events can generate a decent profit on a nightly basis. The main arena at the Garden costs \$35,000, and while the Apples have never drawn more than 15,000 (two weeks ago, against the Los Angeles Strings, with Chris Evert and Ilie Nastase), the potential profits are enormous, especially given the small size of the teams—six people, including the coach—and the fact that except for King and Vitas Gerulaitis, the players command nothing like superstar salaries.

Then there is the slowly increasing exposure of the Apples. Despite winning two straight championships, the team is largely unrecognized by the New York sports fan, who is

surrounded by nine other major-league sports teams. This year, the team will spend \$200,000 on television advertising; 4 of its matches will be telecast on WPIX, 10 more on the Garden’s cable-TV outlet, 2 more on Home Box Office, and 26 on radio. The need for aggressive promotion is stressed by the Apples’ front office, clearly a first-class operation. General manager Ella Musolino is a 36-year-old veteran of six U.S. Opens under Bill Talbert; vice-president Bill Goldstein, 31, comes out of California’s legal-services program; public-relations man Marty Appel, 29, was in the New York P.R. office for nine years, three of them as director.

“Our biggest challenge,” says Ella Musolino, “is to get fans into the arena *once*. Those who come once tend to come back. And we also have to educate the public, which is used to tournament tennis. They have to learn that the rules, the ideas, are different.”

Indeed they are. The format of World Team Tennis is unsettling to most tennis fans, who are used to the five-set epic battles between Jimmy Connors and Bjorn Borg, and to watching a losing player battle back to deuce. Each match consists of five sets, one each of men’s singles, women’s singles, men’s doubles, women’s doubles, and mixed doubles. There is no “deuce”: If both players get three points, the next point wins the game. At the end of the five sets, the team with the most *games* wins, so a 6-to-4 loss is far less damaging to the losing team than a 6-to-0 loss. Finally, if the losing team wins the last set, the event goes on until the leading team wins one game or the trailing team catches up.

“You don’t have any leeway,” says Billie Jean King. “You can hardly breathe. Sometimes the tension is so great you can go out of your gourd.”

This format, which traditionalists scorn as much as they do the multi-colored WTT court, is actually an inspired idea. Its advantage was clearly evident on opening night, when the Apples took what seemed to be a comfortable lead over the Oranges. Then, in men’s singles, Vitas Gerulaitis gained a 5-to-2 lead in his set against Cliff

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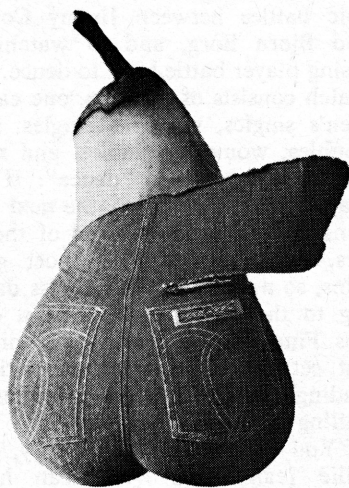
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Drysdale and had four set points, which could have given the Apples an eight-game lead in the match. Instead, Drysdale won four straight points and took four games before losing the set. This left the Oranges only six games behind, and when Rosie Casals and Francie Durr took Joanne Russell and Mary Carillo 6 to 2 in the women's doubles, they were only two games short of forcing a "super-tie-breaker" to decide the evening. (The Apples won the next game to wrap it up.) Thus, there is no such thing as a sure win to make the end of the match anticlimactic.

Apart from an exciting, if unfamiliar, format, World Team Tennis has most of the best women players in the world; only Evonne Goolagong is absent this year. It has not yet succeeded in drawing or holding the best men players, because the prizes on the European summer circuit don't make it worthwhile for Jimmy Connors or Bjorn Borg or Guillermo Vilas to commit themselves to WTT play. As Apples owner Sol Berg says candidly, "With those prizes, they'd be nuts to devote themselves to World Team Tennis." Still, the chance to watch a Billie Jean King up close is something no tennis fan ought to pass up casually. When she is passed at the net, she hollers, "Ah nuts!," shakes the racquet, and lectures herself like a parent scolding an errant child. She has always talked a blue streak on the court; it's something special in the intimate confines of the Felt Forum.

The coed aspect of World Team Tennis is charming. Men and women are fully equal, there is no distinction in the importance of the matches, and the mixed doubles make the league the only professional team sport in which men and women compete against one another.

It will clearly be a long haul until the Apples are a profit-making, secure franchise, but, as Sol Berg says, "You look at the Cosmos and you say, 'They made it after eleven years.' Can New York's World Team Tennis entry be far behind?"

For now, it is a still-struggling format offering first-rate tennis in an unfamiliar package trying to make a place for itself in the hearts of New York sports fans. It's been a long, difficult, and frustrating battle. "It really irritates me sometimes," King says, "when people ask me where I'm living and how serious the league is. I'm a New Yorker, and we're a championship New York team. I'm tired of the oh-yeah-you're-here-too stuff we get from fans. But we're gonna stick around here—and we're gonna make it."

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