



Sports

Make Way for Clay

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The 2008 tournament meant victory for Jelena Jankovic—and the end of an era for the Porsche Tennis Grand Prix. Starting in 2009, the players' favorite tournament will take place earlier in the year—April 25 to May 3—and will be played on clay. Tournament director Markus Günthardt and his team have their work cut out for them until the big premiere at the Porsche Arena.

Laura Ceccarelli didn't get much sleep the night before the final. The WTA tour supervisor tells the journalists who have gathered for the closing press conference what kept her awake: she was mulling over her concluding statement, trying to come up with something different to say than in years past—but to no avail. “Please forgive me for being boring,” she says to the round, “but I just couldn't think of anything to criticize. This tournament simply leaves nothing to be desired.”

Markus Günthardt, for one, is prepared to “forgive” her. On the contrary, he is obviously anything but bored and leans back in the armchair next to her in visible contentment. And the tournament director has every reason to be satisfied: the Porsche Tennis Grand Prix is a success story without any “ifs,” “ands,” or “buts.” This year's tournament had promised grand-slam level tennis from the start, featuring the best starting field in the event's history, including eight top-ten players, all medalists from the Beijing Olympic Games, and the entire lineup of the U.S. Open quarterfinals. The 37,000 spectators who attended the tournament's 31st edition were not disappointed: with exciting matches and spectacular rallies galore, it more than lived up to their high expectations. As the local daily *Stuttgarter Nachrichten* put it, “It doesn't get much better than this.” Even top-seeded Serena Williams's disappointing first-round defeat by Na Li of China couldn't dampen the crowd's enthusiasm. On the contrary, it was just further proof of the tournament's sterling lineup. The top players are well aware that they have to give their very best in Stuttgart from the very first round. Despite—or maybe even because of—that, they're always happy to come back. Elena Dementieva, for instance, was there for the eighth time. “Winning in Stuttgart is one of the sweetest victories of any tennis ▶



career,” says the Olympic gold medalist from Russia. Besides the athletic challenge, what Dementieva appreciates most about the Porsche Tennis Grand Prix is the care and attention that the event’s organizers devote to making the players feel at home. “They do everything to make sure we’re happy.” Günthardt plans to keep it that way. “The key word is fun,” he says simply, summing up his recipe for success. “The players walk around the grounds smiling, without any of the usual reluctance to mingle with fans. You can tell right away that they feel comfortable with us, and that makes us happy, of course.”

Indeed, the tennis pros appear to have developed a real liking for Porsche’s hometown. When stars like Jelena Jankovic talk about Stuttgart, their eyes shine. That they can get behind the wheel of a Porsche when they’re here as often and as long as they like may have something to do with it, but it’s not the only reason. Nearly every player goes home with tales of memorable moments: Dinara Safina will be telling her friends back home in Moscow about her encounter with a local vintner in Untertürkheim, and Dementieva will be waxing enthusiastic about the hip boutique she fell in love with during a shopping excursion. As the local Sunday weekly *Sonntag Aktuell* put it, “When you think about it, the team behind the Porsche Tennis Grand Prix should actually be getting stacks of thank-you letters from the folks at City Hall.”

Stuttgart on view: Olympic gold medalist Elena Dementieva gets in some window-shopping

Full speed ahead: Na Li of China ousted Serena Williams from the tournament in Stuttgart—and became a new Porsche fan



Sweet temptation: Dinara Safina took a Cayenne on an excursion to the vineyards of Untertürkheim

The people at Porsche don’t need thank-you notes to tell them they have a winner on their hands. The team in charge of the tournament can be proud of the success they have had so far, and have every reason to be optimistic about the future. That future begins on April 25, 2009, when the Porsche Tennis Grand Prix will for the first time be held in spring and on clay courts. Two pretty big changes, but the organizers are positive they will master the challenges. Like Porsche itself, the tournament “has a proud tradition, and at the same time it always looks ahead to the future,” says Porsche’s head of communications, Christian Dau, who goes on to point out that Porsche has been sponsoring tennis longer than any other company in Europe, and is second to only one other company in the world on that count. “You don’t just give up a tradition like that.” And even without official letters from Stuttgart City Hall, Porsche does get recognition for its commitment—the kind that matters most: the players again rated the Porsche Tennis Grand Prix as their favorite tournament in 2007. The honor comes with a crystal trophy, and the CEO and chairman of the WTA tour, Larry Scott, escorted the prize to Stuttgart himself. As the distinguished national daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* saw it, Scott’s first official visit to Stuttgart was the greatest compliment he could have paid: “The organizers can consider the fact that Larry Scott went to the trouble of flying to Stuttgart himself as a sign of the highest esteem.”

It stands to reason that the man at the head of the WTA would like the new framework—for starting next year, the Porsche Tennis Grand Prix will kick off the clay-court season in Europe. “It’s great for the players. After all, weather conditions in Europe often make it very difficult to prepare optimally for playing on clay courts,” said Scott during a press conference at the Porsche Arena. Continuing his line of thought, Günthardt added, “The French Open takes place in Paris four weeks after our tournament. It’s the high point of the clay court season, and Stuttgart is the ideal opportunity for players to prepare for it. We have exactly the same surface as they do at Roland Garros, the same balls, the same lines. What we don’t have is problems with wind and rain.” The players seem open to this line of reasoning, as well—at least reactions to the new date and the new surface have been overwhelmingly positive so far. “I picked up Venus Williams from the airport and Elena Dementieva from the train station,” says Günthardt, “and both of them asked me about next year’s tournament before two minutes had gone by. That’s a good sign.”



Confidence, not feet of clay: WTA boss Larry Scott, Markus Günthardt, and Anke Huber (from left)

Jankovic, the winner of the 2008 tournament, is one player who is determined not to miss the dawning of the new era at the Porsche Tennis Grand Prix—even though it hasn't been that long since the last one was ushered in. “When we moved to the Porsche Arena two years ago, it was the beginning of a new chapter in our history. We face a similar challenge now,” says Günthardt. “We will be the only tournament in the world played on indoor clay courts. That makes us special, but it also means we have a responsibility to become even better.” Günthardt is convinced that the tournament will benefit from the change and that audiences will get to see even more exciting tennis. But there's still a lot of work ahead for Günthardt and his team before the premiere can take place in the Porsche Arena. Just preparing the center court for operations is a big job. The team went through the dress rehearsals this year: a prototype of the new clay court was built in Schleyerhalle, a nearby event venue, and put through a series of rigorous tests. Athletic director Anke Huber was satisfied with the results: “The court is getting better every day.”

The Porsche Tennis Grand Prix won't be the only one with a new face in 2009—the entire Sony Ericsson WTA Tour will have been transformed. The main innovation: to give the players more time to rest, there will be only 54 tournaments in 31 countries, which means the curtain call for several distinguished events. The prize money will also be increased to the record sum of \$86 million. In addition to the four Grand Slam tournaments in Melbourne, Paris, Wimbledon, and New York, the new tour will include

20 premier events—and the grand prix in Stuttgart has been designated one of the tournaments in this top category. “We're delighted at being promoted,” says Günthardt, relegating the thought of the enormous challenge that the “upgrade” brings with it to the back of his mind for a moment.

The biggest job will surely be building three courts containing 140 metric tons of clay each—not in a few weeks, but in a few days. But Ceccarelli, at least, doesn't seem concerned about the tight schedule. “If they can do it anywhere, it would be in Stuttgart,” she says. “I'm positive the Porsche Tennis Grand Prix will manage to come out on top on clay, too.” That might very well mean she'll be hard put to come up with something new to say to journalists in 2009, as well. But when she had to decide which tournament to visit as a supervisor, Stuttgart or Rome, the Italian picked Stuttgart without a moment's hesitation. She does have one request during the press conference, though: “Please don't tell that to my countrymen.”