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Grand Slam Security: A Walk On The Wild Side

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Aussies Alert to Potential Dangers

By JOHN MARTIN
MELBOURNE, Australia – Each morning at the Australian Open, a ritual unfolds in a brightly lit corridor at the edge of Rod Laver Arena,.

About 20 men form an uneven line. Their shirts shout "SECURITY" in bold white letters across their backs.

Shortly before 11, the line dissolves. Dozens of players, bags slung across shoulders, step forward and begin following their escorts into the 63-acre Melbourne Park.

Matches are about to begin and players need to reach their assigned courts with no delays. A coordinated march begins.

This ritual — with variations — has become standard at the four major international championships.

Most of the time, it achieves at least two goals: matches begin on time, players avoid dan-



John Martin/World Tennis Gazette
'STAND ASIDE' Security Guard John Santa-Isabel leads Americans Jack Sock, second from left, and Taylor Fritz to their first-round match in the 2016 Australian Open.



John Martin/World Tennis Gazette
SECURITY STROLL: Accompanied by guards, Ryan Harrison, front left, and Nicholas Mahut approach court for first-round match at 2017 Australian Open.

gers unseen.

"The single goal for our team is to assure player protection at all times," said Colin Budge, 47, who manages a team of 70 security guards who serve as his eyes and ears across the park.

Budge's teammates rotate between courts and sidelines. They control access and monitor spectators.

Some guard the show courts of Rod Laver, Hisense, and the newly enhanced Margaret Court Arena

"Stand aside," said escort John Santa-Isabel one day in 2016's first week as he moved to Court 7.

"It's pretty cool," said Taylor Fritz, then 18, a qualifier from California who found himself trailing Security Agent 157.

"Stand aside," Santa-Isabel repeated as spectators parted obediently.

To Prevent Surprise Encounters, Security Guards Appear in Force

Walking beside Fritz, his opponent, 20th seeded Jack Sock, 23, of Kansas, seemed lost in thought. A second escort walked behind, eyes shielded by his sunglasses.

This year, Ryan Harrison of the United States and Nicholas Mahut of France retraced the path followed by Fritz and Sock. Nobody spoke, including the guards.

Whether at America's Super Bowl or Australia's Open, the world's security services are on edge. Escorts must watch for threats: Is a man approaching a player to offer a bribe? Is an autograph seeker holding a weapon?

This year, when a crazed motorist drove into a Melbourne shopping mall, mowing down pedestrians barely a mile from where afternoon matches were underway, the news shocked Sam Querry. "Where, when?" he asked *World Tennis Gazette*.

Nevertheless, Querry and Harrison expressed no fear, confident that security arrangements were visibly in place. Indeed, at Melbourne Park this year, players and officials strolled inside a newly constructed underground tunnel to reach the edge of more than a dozen outer courts.

In an age of sudden terrorist strikes and suspicious high-tech gambling, the tennis atmosphere grows uncertain.



World Tennis Gazette/John Martin

IMMIGRATION PROTEST: In 2015, an Australian woman jumped onto Laver Arena court carrying a banner calling for an "Australia Open" to migrants seeking asylum. Protestors surprised guards but were quickly surrounded, arrested on the court.

"It could be a threat from a person," said Budge of what his guards prepare for, "it could be things like evacuations, and they become evacuation wardens."

As a factor in major tournament planning, security alarms began sounding more than 20 years ago, the result of a stunning act of violence.

ence.

In 1993, a man wielding a knife stabbed Monica Seles of Yugoslavia as she sat on a changeover at a tournament in Hamburg, Germany.

Ranked number one in the world, Seles took two years to recover.

Over the ensuing decades, some interruptions were less serious. Nude streakers and fully clothed attention seekers raced across center courts at the major championships.

But last year in Melbourne, demonstrators protesting Australian immigration policies unfurled banners in the Rod Laver Arena. Two women jumped from courtside seats onto the court and into the hands of yellow-shirted security guards.

This wasn't new. In 2009, Roger Federer was the target of a shocking interruption during the French Open men's final. A self-styled "jumper" carrying a beret and a flag vaulted a courtside barrier and

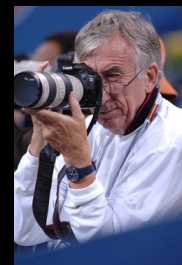


**Courtside Guard
2014**

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Editor: John Martin

Is Autograph Seeker Carrying a Knife? Or About to Offer a Bribe?

raced to Federer's side.

The intruder — he called himself Jimmy Jump — touched Federer's shoulder and eluded stunned security guards for several seconds before he was tackled and pinned.

Last year, after an early round match on the same court, a victorious Federer turned from shaking his opponent's hand at the net to face an exuberant teenager who had rushed onto the court and tried to take a selfie, an arms-length photograph of the two of them.

Embarrassed security guards quickly -- and belatedly -- spirited the young man off the court and issued a stern warning.

Federer was not pleased, perhaps recalling his narrow scrape six years earlier. Officials promised to be more vigilant.

In Melbourne, teams of Budge's security guards take up positions facing the spectator seats before and after matches and as soon as players begin changeovers

To escort players in New York, U.S. Open guards often take circuitous routes to avoid contact with crowds.



World Tennis Gazette/John Martin

FURIOUS: Federer complained to press in 2015 following French teenager's rush to his side.



Courtside Guard
2013



The New York Times/John Martin
'BEST DAY' EVER: American Michael Yani wept while escorted to his Wimbledon match.

Michael Yani, an American qualifier, was assigned to play on the Louis Armstrong stadium court in 2009.

Guards escorted him from the locker room in Arthur Ashe stadium "through the guts of Ashe, through kitchens and hallways I didn't even know existed," he said.

Fans approached for autographs and "security guards had to usher them away and take us into the side/back entrance to Louis Armstrong."

Returning from his match (he lost), "fans came running over to get my autograph.

"It kind of freaked the security guards out a little bit and they tried to block the fans out, but I told them it was ok, and signed every last autograph."

Not all escort duties involve security. Some require compassion.

Earlier that year, Yani qualified for the Wimbledon Championships.

A former All American at Duke University, he had won three qualifying rounds at Roehampton, a nearby facility. Reaching the main draw "was the best day of my life," he told this reporter afterward. "I said, 'okay, this is what I've worked for my entire life.'"

As he walked toward his first round-

Australian's Security Mission Statement: 'Stay Alert, React Quickly'

main draw match, Yani grew tearful.

A *New York Times* report noted: "If you looked closely, you might have seen mist forming ever so lightly in Michael Yani's eyes Monday as he moved through the crowd surrounding Court 9 at the fabled All England Lawn Tennis Club."

"I watched people looking at us," Yani said, Aware of his tears, security escorts patiently parted what Yani called a "Red Sea" of spectators "to get us to our court."

Yani lost his match yet experienced what he called one of "the most special moments I remember from the tour, and more specifically from being escorted to and from courts at Grand Slams."

"We don't push them, we don't rush them," said Budge. "We're there for the players."

To help two Americans, Coco Vandeweghe and Madison Bringle, reach Court 14, their Aussie escorts ducked behind a grandstand and walked beside a stand of giant trees.

"Not all our players like to have a highly visible security aspect around them," said Budge.

"The guards are there to be close enough to respond but far enough away



World Tennis Gazette/John Martin
INTO THE WOODS: Aussies escorting Americans to Court 14.



World Tennis Gazette/John Martin
GLANCE: Federer glares as French security guards remove teenager seeking selfie. Six years earlier, he faced intruder with flag, beret.

not to be in the way."

For Fritz, the world's top-ranked junior a year ago, his escort experience came as he nearly scored the tournament's most notable upset.

Rafael Nadal's loss in the first round took that prize. But Fritz, ranked in the top 200, forced Sock, ranked in the top 20, to take five sets to prevail.

When it was over, Fritz was asked how it felt to be escorted to court.

"Here it's probably more necessary," he said. "People are coming up asking for autographs. Stuff like that."

Then he chuckled. He had fielded few autograph requests.

"In the U.S., it's not so necessary," Fritz said. "because not a lot of people are asking." A reporter chortled: "Not yet."

Beyond autographs, of course, in the new atmosphere, Colin Budge's mission statement sounds universal, whether issued at Australia's Open or America's Super Bowl:

"My guys have to react very very quickly," he explains. "Not only are they watching the player but also looking at the environment around the player anything that could potentially harm the player."