

TENNIS SOLIDARITY

Match Points

The recent U.S.-Ukraine BJK Cup tie in Asheville was a unique and unifying event that mattered beyond sport.

BY JEFF JOYCE

Living in Asheville, N.C., and being so involved in tennis both as a USTA volunteer and local leader, I've been honored to help coordinate three Fed Cup ties that have been played here. In 2018, the U.S. hosted the Netherlands; in 2019, we played Australia; and this past April, Team USA met the Ukrainian team, in what is now called the Billie Jean King Cup.

While each tie was highly competitive and patriotic (the Williams sisters and Coco Vandeweghe led the U.S. to victory in 2018, and Ash Barty and her Aussie teammates defeated the U.S. in 2019), the tie against Ukraine was, without a doubt, one of the most awe-inspiring and emotional tennis events I've witnessed.

Right from the start, even well before Russia marched across the Ukrainian border, we were hit with challenges. First, back in the fall, the ITF changed the dates from February to April, and the

new dates fell during Holy Week, with Easter Sunday following Friday and Saturday play. It was also Spring Break week for area public schools. On top of that, Covid continued to linger. So, our Local Organizing Committee (LOC) was forced to come up with creative solutions for community involvement and for making this tie a success.

With Spring Break, we couldn't rely on public schools to send students to the tie, so our focus changed to promoting the sport for vulnerable populations. We partnered with camps being run during Spring Break by local parks & recreation departments and the YMCA, which resulted in more than 300 mostly underserved kids ages 6 to 12 attending a fun Play Day. We also held events for local wheelchair players, with the USA Wheelchair Team in attendance. We had events with the NC Abilities Tennis Association and with

Try Tennis for new players. We offered middle and high school Play Days, an NJTL Play Day, and a brunch targeting the LGBTQ population.

After the invasion, no one knew if the Ukraine delegation would be able to come to Asheville. But with the incredible collaboration of the USTA, ITF, LOC, Asheville Buncombe Regional Sports Commission, and Harrah's Cherokee Center Asheville, pieces began to fall into place.

The first thing we did after Feb. 24, while seemingly subtle, was to change the wording from the "USA vs. Ukraine" to the "USA hosts Ukraine"—we wanted it to be a "welcoming" from Team USA and the Asheville community. With Covid concerns, we scaled back the team dinner. More than 130 volunteers took care of everything, including driving, hospitality, operations, community events, ushers and ticket takers.

The competition started on Friday, April 15, with U.S. players Jessica Pegula and Alison Riske winning their singles matches. On Saturday, Ukrainians Dayana Yastremaska and Katarina Zavatska played inspired tennis, winning both singles matches. The deciding doubles match was won by Pegula and Asia Muhammad, advancing the Americans to the finals. But throughout all five matches, you could have mistaken this for a tie being played in Kyiv, as the Asheville fans cheered both the amazing fight and determination of the Ukrainians, and the grace and dignity of all the players. It was truly inspirational.

Even now, weeks later, I'm amazed and proud of what transpired in Asheville, both the uniqueness of the event itself, but also the collaboration that made it happen. Once again, tennis showcased how it can truly unify. The score may simply show one "winner," but in Asheville that weekend in April, everyone came out on top—the players, the fans, the countries and the sport itself. ■

We welcome your opinions and comments. Email info@tennisindustrymag.com.

Jeff Joyce served as Volunteer Coordinator for all three Fed Cup/Billie Jean King Cup ties held in Asheville (2018, 2019, 2022). He's been a longtime USTA volunteer at the local, state, section and national levels.



Ukrainian players each received a blanket with the flags of both countries.