



THAI TENNIS ORGANIZATION

courts sponsors, sparks excitement

If you attended the Legg Mason Tennis Classic, watched the U.S. Open, or follow tennis in any way, you've probably wondered who all those people were in the sea of bright red t-shirts, cheering for Pardon Srichaphan and bringing a whole new level of excitement to the game...

The Thai Tennis Organization in America is growing at a record pace and is contributing to the area in many ways. Last week, this organization and its title sponsor, Singha Beer, brought a \$50,000 women's Professional Event to Northern Virginia. It was the first time in twenty years a women's professional event was held here.

While some organizations are started by a host of people, this one was started by just two: friends Thanakorn Duangmanee (George) and Kitiphan Srisawat (Nick), who played tennis together before forming the group. What these two have achieved with the help of countless others in only a few short years is nothing short of miraculous.

Nick and George initially attended the Legg Mason to see Thai superstar Paradorn Srichaphan. There, they met a young Thai Tennis player who wasn't ranked very high, who had taken a bus from New York to D.C to try to qualify for the tournament. The player was heading back on the same bus (an eight-hour ride!) to try to qualify for the U.S. Open.

Then and there they decided that there should be a way to help up-and-coming Thai players meet expenses. So, they started the Thai Tennis Organization in America (TTOA) in 2002.

The organization is a non-profit organization whose goal is to promote tennis growth and education to the minority community in the U.S.

Initially, they attempted to find sponsors and began selling the famous red shirts at tournaments. Red is associated with luck in the Thai culture.

While more and more people were getting involved, and as the fan base following the Thai players grew, the two felt like they still needed to do something more.

So, George and Nick began looking at options, asking themselves what was missing in Northern Virginia... The answer? Women's Professional Tennis.

The two contacted Alan Schwartz, President of the USTA, and inquired about hosting a \$10,000 Women's Event, which is a smaller professional level event. They were put in touch with the right people and were told they needed to put in a bid to host the event — something they had no idea about. So, they filled out the necessary paperwork and were disappointed when they got a call saying all of the \$10,000 events were taken for this year and next and, unless someone cancelled, there would be no way of getting an event.

They were told that a \$50,000 event had opened up on the schedule in October, and asked if they'd be interested in that. Being the end of summer, it was hard enough to plan a local tournament for October, much less getting the financing and securing all the necessary elements to put on a \$50,000 professional event. In fact, it would seem impossible. "We just didn't want to wait a few years, we wanted to make this happen now," says George.

With a part-time staff composed entirely of volunteers, and less than two months to put the whole thing together, it did indeed turn out to be a daunting challenge. "We're just lucky we had a good group of people who really care about tennis."

Nick and George asked the USTA for two weeks to try to get a title sponsor. Through many connections, they got on a plane and flew to Thailand to meet with the owner of Singha Beer. Singha, which is the most popu-

lar Beer in Thailand and is making its way into many fine restaurants in the U.S., had been very supportive of the Organization — helping supply t-shirts. However, supplying t-shirts and sponsoring a huge tennis event are two different things, and would prove to be a huge financial commitment.

George says he spent the first half hour of the meeting thanking the owner for his support when Nick just

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(l-r) T Sangkhavasi, Nick Srisawat (President TTOA), Vinh Do, George Duangmanee (Managing Director TTOA)



Photo by Andrew Riddle

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Photo is by Andrew Riddle

Brenda Schultz-McCarthy(Former top ten in world) greets Alan Schwartz (USTA President) at the Thai Festival



TTOA at the Mercedes Benz Cup in Los Angeles

came out and asked about sponsoring the \$50,000 event. “You don’t get the chance to speak with the owner of Singha Beer everyday, and we might never have gotten another chance,” Nick laughs.

The owner liked the idea and even sent over a team of twelve from Thailand to help with the event, demonstrating their commitment. “Singha is a very loyal sponsor and is extremely supportive of any endeavor they get involved in. Not only did they send the team over to help with the event, but they even flew over equipment from Thailand at great expense when things got tight on time, and shipping by boat would have taken too long. They are a first-class organization in every way.”

“We see this as a long term relationship and are so proud to be associated with Singha.”

Even JetBlue Airways, which has never sponsored such an event before, became a major sponsor of the challenger.

Besides just the tennis tournament, the organization held an extraordinary Thai Festival the weekend before the event. It was a great way to get the community involved, as over 10,000 people came out for some tremendous Thai food, and a

whole host of elaborate performances. The festival featured 30 vendors, traditional Thai food, and all-day stage performances. Singha Beer provided the largest Singha Beer Garden in the United States and the famous Thai Kickboxing Team from Las Vegas, NV showcased their talents. They also sported many cultural and art exhibits, displayed for everyone to see. The Royal Thai Embassy took a leading role in organizing and promoting the Thai Festival.

The Thai Fans are known for their cheering during events and supporting their players in a fun way. When asked about the excitement generated by Thai fans, Nick responds, “The game is changing, the clothing is changing, the rackets — everything. If you go to a Davis Cup match, there’s cheering between points — a real excitement and support of your favorite player. Why can’t we cheer like that at all the tournaments?”

The Thai Tennis Organization in America is growing by leaps and bounds, and the excitement they generate at events adds a tremendous amount to the sport. The tournament was a huge success in year one and, as both Nick and George say, just wait until next year!



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Singha Beer USTA \$50,000 Tennis Tournament and Thai Festival

Laura Granville def Lucie Safarova 6-4, 6-2



Laura Granville

Lucie Safarova

