

The unsung heroes of the Australian Open

The Age

Two things are certain in January. Melbourne swelters and tennis fever hits.

Crowds gather at Federation Square, hypnotised by telecasts of action unfolding barely a stadium's roar away. Masses swarm along the banks of the Yarra, carving up a path in the sandy gravel underfoot as Rod Laver Arena becomes a mecca for devoted tennis fans.

But there's another group of devotees – an unassuming bunch. Decked out in matching uniforms, flapping caps and wraparound sunnies, the 300 plus Aviva ballkids chosen to work at the Australian Open each year often blur into the deep blue background. After all, that's what they're trained to do.

For 15-year-old Shae Sloane this will be her fourth and final Open. Shae received the Ballgirl of the Year award in 2007 – making her one to watch as the finals roll out in Rod Laver Arena. As a ballkid, being assigned to centre court is “all you ever really want,” says Shae.

But before they reach centre court, aspiring ballkids attend selection trials at Melbourne Park, and if successful, weekend training sessions in the lead-up to the tournament. It's a rare opportunity for a 12 to 15-year-old, to see the world's best players in action, develop their skills and make new friends.

Shae remembers hearing that “one mistake could be the end” during trials. With up to 2000 applicants each year, the Australian Open is regarded as having the best ballkids of all the Grand Slams.

For fourteen-year-old Kyle Sultana this will be his first Open. He began playing tennis at the age of six. Kyle remembers rolling tennis balls down the hallway and “running, catching, throwing and running some more” in preparation for trials.

Kyle also chose to jog for 20 minutes, three times a week. It paid off. This year, he'll be in the action, servicing the players at the net. With a sheepish grin he says that “the taller kids usually get assigned to the baseline”.

Supervisor Michelle Batsas works with the ballkids in try-outs (April/May), training (August/November) and throughout the two-week tournament in January. Batsas looks for kids who demonstrate a positive attitude, team skills, coordination and confidence on the court.

Each year, a team of 20–30 supervisors cares for more than 300 ballkids, keeping them healthy and ensuring they appear on 24 courts as rostered – morning, noon and night. They watch and grade the ballkids, assigning the most competent to the higher profile courts as the tournament progresses.

Each ballkid is assigned a court for the day, spending 45 minutes on court and 45 minutes off; 30 minutes on the hotter days. “For two weeks we become their family”, says Batsas.

If it sounds like an easy job, think again. When temperatures soar into the high thirties, it can be closer to fifty degrees on court.

When Kyle volunteered at the wildcard playoffs, a ballkid fainted five minutes into the first game. Jelena Dokic heard him fall against the blue screen, took his hand and guided him off court.

Elite athletes are physically conditioned to endure extreme conditions, but 12-year-olds are just discovering how to keep hydrated and free from blisters. There’s even a nurse to bandage blistered feet.

As the crowd begins to stick to their green plastic seats, ballkids keep their arms stretched high, chasing wayward tennis balls and dodging 200km+ serves until the final point is called.

Both sets of parents see a boost in confidence and self-esteem as one of the key benefits of becoming a ballkid. “Kyle’s smile is always very broad during training and the lead-up to the Open”, says his mother, Marcia.

Shae’s father, Brandon still marvels at how rare it is for a teenager to play such an important role in a world-class event. “I sometimes wonder if the players’ confidence rubs off on the ballkids”, laughs Brandon, “We were much more nervous than Shae”.

Shae says she’s now more excited than nervous. She stays focussed by enjoying the game and cheering on the inside. “It’s an exciting atmosphere”, says Shae, “Seeing how the players take the pressure is really amazing because you’re up there with them”.

Batsas remembers when a shy ballgirl was assigned to a Serena Williams game. “She was nearly in tears when she came off the court, saying it was the most amazing experience she’d ever had”, says Batsas. It’s hard to imagine interacting with your favourite players at any age.

American James Blake is the nicest player Shae has met so far. He’s a favourite with the ballkids, “always saying ‘thanks’ for ball service and ‘please, can I have my towel””, laughs Shae. Her worst experience involves being yelled at by a player, but she’s far too professional to dish the dirt.

Kyle admits that he’ll probably be nervous during his first game, but with 10 training matches under his belt and the wildcard playoffs, he feels well prepared. “The umpires keep an eye on you as well, asking you to stand next to them, if you’re too close to the play”.

The crowd often gets behind the ballkids, cheering when they catch a misfired shot or gasping when one gets caught in the crossfire. In Canada, a ballboy was invited to warm up with Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario, when Martina Navratilova was late to court. The crowd gave him a standing ovation.

Last year, a ballgirl tripped over, rolling her ankle on court; for the next week she was a mini-celebrity. Reporters began asking after her and “the girl who tripped over” was even invited to appear on a breakfast show.

“I always tell the ballkids they are the second most important people in the event, says Batsas. “And it’s true”. Without them, there’d be chaos on court.

© Emily Weekes