



# State Tennis Centre has an ace up its sleeve

Tennis in Queensland is serving up a new image and a lot of it is coming from the hands of one of Australia's all-time greats.

A man whose playing skills helped make Australia a tennis heavyweight in the past is still playing a key role in building its future.

Former Wimbledon and Australian and US Open singles champion, Ashley Cooper is part of a dedicated team developing a new home for the sport in Queensland

As president of Tennis Queensland, Ashley believes the 23-court State Tennis Centre and its 5500-seat roofed stadium will be the best of its type in Australia.

It will be part of an 11ha Tennyson complex incorporating a housing estate with riverside apartments.

"All the courts will have good Grand Slam surfaces," said Ashley.

"There will be hard courts, clay and grass courts.

"It will host a major international tournament leading into the Australian Open and probably a dozen other events of various standards.

"We've been without a focal point for tennis since the demise of Milton in 1992. Now we have a state-of-the-art focal point."

He said the complex would have a national training centre and accommodation for players, with

work due to begin on the complex early next year and hopefully to be completed by the end of 2008.

Ashley Cooper was the Wimbledon and US Open singles champion in 1958 and took out the Australian singles title in 1957 and 1958.

He also won four Grand Slam doubles titles – three with Neale Fraser (US Open 1957, Australian and French titles in 1958) and one with Mal Anderson (French title 1957).

Davis Cup success for Australia also came his way in 1956 and 1957 and he was part of the team beaten in the 1958 final.

Ashley was introduced to the sport as a small boy when he accompanied his parents, both school teachers and keen tennis players, to games in the Mildura, Gippsland and Eildon Weir areas of country Victoria.

"I used to have a hit between matches," he said.

Later he competed in school events and at 13 became the Victorian schools' 14-year and under champion.

"In those days all tennis was played on grass and ant-bed courts," he said. "There were no hard courts, but now there are hard courts and synthetic grass courts.

"It's been quite a change with bigger

and more sophisticated racquets and the game is certainly faster."

Ashley turned his attention to improving tennis court surfaces after leaving the world's centre stage as a player.

He realised tennis was suffering in Australia because many of its ant-bed and granite courts were decaying.

"There was a need for maintenance with the old courts," he said.

"Life got busy and many of these courts were not being maintained and fell into ruin. Tennis was not being played."

In 1969 he began building acrylic hard courts, some of them on old ant-bed surfaces. He believed the new approach to building courts would inject life into an ailing sport – and he was right.

"Acrylic courts do not need rolling, watering and bagging," he said.

Ashley has been involved in tennis court construction for 25 years. Now he has a new role as an administrator.

He helped found Tennis Brisbane in the late 1980s to better co-ordinate the sport in the city, and for the last eight years has been with Tennis Queensland – the last two as its president.



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Ashley is proud Tennis Queensland and the State Government have joined to provide regional Queensland tennis centres with 10 million over three years to help rebuild and renovate facilities.

He said the number of international players coming from Australia had declined in recent years and facilities needed to be upgraded to get the sport back on track.

Australia once had a three-month calendar of international events, but this has slumped to one month and with a world-wide surge in major matches it's now difficult for Australia to expand its calendar.

"Tennis received a big boost in South America and eastern Europe and a lot of players come from these countries now," said Ashley.

"They provide players and players

provide events. There are tournaments all year around the world."

He said young people now had a lot more sports to attract their attentions.

"When I was at school there was tennis, cricket and football, but now they've got a dozen to 15 sports to choose from," said Ashley.

"It's harder to get to the top in tennis, but the rewards are greater. Now the 100th ranked player can earn a good living."

He said top young players in Queensland included Bernard Tomic, a world 12-year and under champion.

Bernard, now 13, and Isabella Holland, 14, have won 18-year and under International Tennis Federation events.

Ashley sees seven or eight as the ideal age for children to begin playing tennis as they then have enough

strength to control the racquet.

On past and present comparisons he regards Lew Hoad as the greatest player on any given day in his time, but agrees in terms of 'today's champions', time was on the side of Roger Federer to become the greatest Grand Slam winner of all time.

"He is only 24 and has four or five years left in him. He has a great attitude," said Ashley.

He said tennis was a popular social activity which could be enjoyed by people of all ages, even 80-year-olds.

Ashley and his family, including four daughters and 10 grandchildren, recently spent a week at a Sunshine Coast resort to mark his 70th birthday.

"We had a family week playing tennis – husbands, wives and little ones," he said.

