

U.S. Tennis group supports same-gender couple teams

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(Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

The United States Tennis Association will make history Wednesday by adding same-gender couples doubles tournaments to its sanctioned list of competitive events in its popular adult division.

The first such event will be held at the Plaza Racquet Club in Palm Springs on March 7-8 and other sanctioned same-gender adult events will be added to the USTA calendar throughout 2015.

“We’ve always been about equality and our focus the last 10 years or so has been even more on diversity and inclusion, and this is another way of being inclusive,” said Katrina Adams, Chairman of the Board, CEO and President of the White Plains, N.Y.-based USTA. “And same-gender couples are a group that has not been a particularly represented part of our competitive and sanctioned events until now.”

Adams said that in 2014, about 92,000 players participated in adult events across all divisions. That’s an area where she believes there could be more growth, and Wednesday’s announcement will help that. To be in an adult couples event, the team’s combined age must be 80 years old, and there are divisions for 100 years old and 120 years old. Until Wednesday, though, all of those adult family doubles teams were husband and wife.

Kurt Haggstrom, the director of tennis at Plaza Racquet Club, said he’s thrilled to be a part of this historic moment.

“I think when you look around at what’s happening across the world and with more and more states allowing gay marriage, there’s just a growing acceptance of the LGBT community. And this is just another avenue of that acceptance,” he said.

And he added that in tennis terms, having the USTA involved in your event adds a ton of credibility.

“It gives it a sense of legitimacy and stature that other tournaments don’t have,” he said. “It’s like having your golf tournament sanctioned by the PGA. It’s a boost.”

Nabil Najjar is the longest serving board member of the Gay and Lesbian Tennis Alliance. The Rancho Mirage resident was the one who introduced the idea of having the Palm Springs event be the first of its kind sanctioned by the USTA in spring 2014, and he said he was surprised how quickly the USTA made it happen.

“I did not expect it to spread like wildfire, but it has,” Najjar said. “I thought it would probably take a year or two to sanction, but I’m shocked with how fast it happened.

“Now the ball is rolling and what’s going to happen now is that all the tournaments around the country will start to join on and when you go to enter a tournament online, let’s say, you’ll see the husband-wife division, and next to that, you’ll see husband-husband or wife-wife. It’s groundbreaking.”

One of the sport’s biggest icons is all for Wednesday’s announcement.

“This is a great and important step forward for tennis,” Hall of Famer Billie Jean King said in a statement. “Tennis is a sport that’s equally fun and beneficial for everyone, so it’s nice to know that going forward, we’ll enjoy a greater sense of equality between the lines in adult competition. The makeup of families in our world is changing, and I’m thrilled to see that tennis also is recognizing that change, and making it easier for same-gender couples to compete — and have fun — together on the tennis court.”

The 50-year-old Najjar echoes that sentiment. He will not only help with the organization of the Palm Springs event, but will also play in it with his partner Robert Girard, who is 68. They’ll participate in the 100-age division.

“For me to be on the court with him, to enjoy the sport that I love. It means a lot,” he said. “And I think all the couples in the world are going to love it.”

Shad Powers is The Desert Sun’s columnist for the Sporting Life. He can be reached at Shad.Powers@DesertSun.com and [@Shad_Powers](https://www.instagram.com/Shad_Powers)

Want to play in the event?

What: Palm Springs Domestic Partner Doubles sanctioned by USTA

When: March 7-8

Where: Plaza Racquet Club in Palm Springs

To enter: You can register now by finding the event at tennislink.usta.com. Entries close Feb. 25.

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