Tennis Hall of Famer Rosie Casals is a game changer

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The Desert Sun

When Simona Halep beat out Jelena Jankovic for the BNP Paribas Open women's championship at Indian Wells Tennis Garden in March — earning a whopping $900,400 payday — she could thank a local woman for paving the way to the riches now afforded professional women tennis players.

Tennis hall of famer Rosie Casals, a resident of Indian Ridge Country Club in Palm Desert — along with cohort and fellow hall of famer Billie Jean King and a small group of barnstorming players — fought to even the prize money field for women.

Forty-five years later, Casals can look back with pride on those challenging, frustrating, sometimes dark days when this group risked it all for the sake of the future of the women's game.

"Women's tennis is thriving," Casals said in a recent interview with The Desert Sun. "You look at the equal prize money. Halep made the same amount of money as (men's winner Novak) Djokovic. It's all good — it's nice to know that you were a part of all of that."

Casals was more than just a part of it — she was a true pioneer. She came of age at the dawn of the women's movement and had the great fortune of working side-by-side with King, who led the charge to attain pay parity with men.

Casals has always been up to the challenge — even in childhood.

'I don't remember when I couldn't hit the ball.'

When she was just an infant, her parents — who immigrated from El Salvador — did not have the means to raise Rosie and her older sister, so the girls were sent to live with their great aunt and uncle in a sketchy neighborhood in downtown San Francisco.

Throughout her life, she referred to these kindly relatives as mom and dad.

Casals got her first taste of tennis when she was about eight years old.

"My dad used to play at Golden Gate Park with a bunch of cronies — he was a good recreational player and he would play every weekend," she said. "He'd grab one of those rackets from the press and I'd say, 'I want to play, I want to play, can I go with you?'"

On occasion, he'd take Rosie to the courts where she'd sit and watch, fascinated. She wanted so badly to play.

"Eventually, he said 'OK, OK.' I would hit the balls ... I'd hit a million balls against the backboard. I don't remember when I couldn't hit the ball — it came so natural."

Casals got good — fast —and the white-collared crowd started taking notice. It doesn't matter what side of the tracks you come from — sports is an equalizer, especially if you're beating everyone in sight.

A group of girls who played Jr. Wightman Cup — the junior version of a team tennis competition for women — practiced at the park.

"All the girls that were good played every Monday and Friday, so they invited me to join them — but you had to have all white (clothes) to play," she said. "Some of the gals' parents gave me a couple of white outfits ... I can't afford to go and buy a dress, even though they were $10, $15. I didn't come from a well-to-do family and this was a well-to-do group. All these kids came in Cadillacs, Buicks. They had money — I think what I had was I could beat 'em."

She won the first tournament she played.

"I entered another couple of tournaments and won. I realized it was something that could take me out of my environment — living in what they called the Western Addition — about five blocks from the civic center. The civic center wasn't a great area. It took me away to different places, San Leandro ... down the peninsula, you got to see the other kids."

Teaming up with Billie Jean King

"I don't know where I'd be now — who I would be — if it wasn't for tennis," she said. "You played tennis because you loved it — it was a great way to compete and show your emotions. Builds character. Thanks to tennis, you learn how to win, you learn how to lose and that came quickly — you have to deal with that and growing up."

Casals said she was very fortunate to have friends at Golden Gate Park who raised money to pay for her travel expenses and tournament fees.

"I realized as I progressed through the juniors I was going to be a pretty good player," she said. "I always played up in my category. I would play my division and the next one up and I would win them both."

Her big break came around 1962 when she was playing a Pacific Coast tournament and made it to the doubles finals where she and her playing partner faced King (then Billie Jean Moffitt) and Carole Caldwell. King already had a Wimbledon doubles title under her belt.

Casals was impressed by the competition, each wielding a stack of racquets and sporting nifty Fred Perry outfits with embroidered initials.

"I thought, 'That's really being at the top (of the sport) — that really left an impression on my mind," she said.

"We lost something like 7-5, 6-4. We came close."

About two years later, in 1965, Casals faced King in the finals of a tournament at Cal State Los Angeles.

She said King beat her quite handily, but a post-match conversation proved to be a turning point in Casals' career. King asked Casals to play doubles with her at Wimbledon.

"'Yeah, of course I'd like to play.' I was still in high school — I would be graduating in '66."

In the early summer of 1966, Casals traveled to England. Casals was 17. King, 22, and by then a Wimbledon veteran, instilled a sense of history in the teen.

"I remember her taking me on the weekend (before the tournament started) and she said 'I always come here, walk through the locker room, through center court and I sit here — that was her favorite tournament — she transferred that feeling and that love," Casals said. "It's like being in church — it's sacred, it's special — and it's always been like that."

Casals got to play on the hallowed ground of Center Court that year.

"It was a great experience and it just confirmed this was what I was meant to do. I am meant to play tennis."

"We lost in the round of 16 — of course I was disappointed. ... I think it was my lack of experience in being there. "We came back the second year and won — in '67 and '68."

Casals and King would go on to win five Wimbledon doubles championships; Casals teamed with Ilie Nastase to win two Wimbledon mixed doubles titles.

Going pro

In 1968, King, Casals, Ann Jones and Frankie Durr became the first women tennis professionals when they signed a contract with George McCall and joined McCall's National Tennis League.

"We played with Rod Laver and Ken Rosewall and Pancho Gonzales — all the pros that I'd seen when I was a kid," she said. "It was an unbelievable opportunity to learn from them."

Casals said she received $25,000 as a pro that year.

Their actions eventually ended the "shamateurism" that prevailed in the sport at the time. As amateurs, the women and men got paid under the table for tournament expenses.

"Finally, we said 'Why do we have to do this?' — along came George McCall. He tried to get Margaret Court, Virginia Wade and those guys, but they looked at us like we had prostituted ourselves — we had a lot of friction from that and we said, 'Look, we're being above the table — you guys are taking it under the table — we're taking it and stating that we're pros.'"

When Wimbledon opened the tournament to pros that year, the winners were, for the most part, contract pro players. King and Laver won women's and men's singles, respectively, and King and Casals won women's doubles — defeating Durr and Jones in the finals.

All of the tournaments would soon open their doors to the pros.

"All of a sudden, tennis was changing and, for us, there were more tournaments, we were being somewhat accepted and it brought us into 1970 where we still had the problem of the men wanted a 10-1 ratio in prize money."

The Original 9

American players King, Casals, Nancy Richey, Peaches Bartkowicz, Kristy Pigeon, Valerie Ziegenfuss and Julie Heldman and Australians Kerry Melville Reid and Judy Tegart Dalton — dubbed the "Original 9" rebelled against the U.S. Lawn Tennis Association.

The women approached tournament chairman Jack Kramer, who ran the Pacific Southwest Tennis Tournament in Los Angeles, and asked for equal pay.

"He said, 'No, I won't give you equal prize money — I don't care if you play or not,'" Casals said. "We asked Gladys Heldman to represent us — she was editor, publisher of the World Tennis magazine.

Heldman, after talking to Kramer and getting nowhere with him, decided to put together a tournament in Houston. She enlisted the help of Virginia Slims' Philip Morris and the women's tennis club that operated in Houston.

"So we played our first tournament at the Racquet Club of Houston — those women were the ones who stuck their necks out — raised the money. It was the first Virginia Slims — which I won — and the prize money I think was something like a $7,500 purse — first prize was $1,600."

Casals earned more money that payday than the men's winner made that year at the Pacific Southwest Tennis Tournament.

Virginia Slims Circuit

Heldman, with the assistance of Philip Morris, put up $5,000 to allow the "Original 9" to sign token $1 contracts to set up their own tour of eight tournaments — sponsored by Virginia Slims.

"They spent a lot of money on branding and they branded women's tennis. For that, I'm grateful to them because they gave us an opportunity to become the best tennis players in the world, to have the best circuit in the world.

The U.S. Tennis Association was running its own tour at the time, but couldn't compete with the money being spent by Virginia Slims, and eventually that tour folded and the players including Court, Wade, Yvonne Goolagong and Chris Evert joined the Slims circuit.

She credits Virginia Slims with helping put women's tennis on the map.

Post pro-tennis career

Casals, who retired from professional tennis in 1988, moved to the desert with her longtime partner, Connie Spooner, in 2001.

Casals and Spooner — who've been a couple for 36 years — tied the knot on a cruise on 12/13/14, Spooner's birthday.

Casals relishes the freedom to live her life in the open.

"Coming up on the women's tour, you couldn't really declare you were gay or not, because you would hurt the tour," she said. "It was a little difficult, even though your tennis players know who you are and what you are. Then again, it was a touchy subject. We were trying to accomplish something. Now, nobody cares — a few people do — but now, it doesn't matter and it's a nice thing to see in your lifetime, things have grown and changed so much."

Casals has continued to stay involved in tennis and has spent the ensuing years running Sportswoman, Inc. — a sports marketing company specializing in sponsorship event management and promotions development she established in 1982.

One of her recent events was held at the BNP Paribas Open — an annual fundraising and awards dinner held in memory of Annalee Thurston, a groundbreaking woman executive who was King's assistant in the '70s and served as manager of the Indio Chamber of Commerce. She died in 2007 at the age of 55 after suffering a brain aneurysm.

The event was attended by the who's who of tennis royalty, including Chris Evert, Martina Navratilova, Tracy Austin and Charlie Pasarell.

The evening's honoree, Peachy Kellmeyer, who became the first tour director of the fledgling Virginia Slims circuit, praised Casals — a famed serve-and-volley specialist — for the impact she's made not only on the game of tennis but in the lives of others.

"I'm taking a lot of courage to say this with so many No. 1 players in the room — Rosie has more natural ability in my mind than anyone who ever played the sport," Kellmeyer said. "I had a little note here — if Billie Jean was here, I might not say that," she said, as the crowd erupted in laughter.

"Rosie is the only player I've ever seen in tennis who could hit a half-volley behind her body as she charged to the net like a roadrunner. Rosie was not always seeded No. 1, but she has always been ranked No. 1 on the giver list. No one has given more than Rosie, personally, to me. I only received one prize money check in women's professional tennis — and that was because Rosie carried me to the finals of the Virginia Slims of St. Louis."

Casals' most recent project is a tennis tournament she established in memory of beloved local teaching pro Jackie Cooper, who was diagnosed with cancer in December 2012 and died May 23, 2013, at the age of 68.

The Rosie Casals & Jackie Cooper Tennis Invitational, debuting April 26 at Indian Ridge Country Club in Palm Desert, will feature a round robin pro-am competition with local pros and juniors, a doubles

shoot-out and barbecue dinner. Cost is $200, inclusive. Proceeds benefit the Tory Fretz & Jackie Cooper Junior Tennis Fund.

The fund, established in 2014, provides grants and financial aid to junior players for tennis-related expenses and to organizations that create opportunities for juniors.

Cooper, who served as director of tennis at the La Quinta Resort from 1978 to 1995, joined Pasarell to help get a struggling local ATP tennis tournament off the ground — now known as the BNP Paribas Open, the fifth-largest tennis tournament in the world.

"He was very influential in helping a lot of the young juniors. He would donate his time to help them and that was his passion."

Casals said she wants to continue that outreach to juniors, however, there's little local funding.

"Through this tournament ...I felt I wanted to raise awareness — I'd like to raise money and to do something for the valley," she said. "I love kids and being able to do my part — I don't have lots of money — maybe Serena (Williams) can give me a loan — and we can do a lot more.

"There's a lot of talent here in the valley and we have a lot of tennis courts — we've got a lot of pros — but it takes money to make programs work and establish them."