

Sport Homepage

Tennis

- Video and Audio
- UK Results
- World Results
- Calendar
- Men's Rankings
- Men's Tour
- Women's Rankings
- Women's Tour

- Australian Open 2006
- French Open 2006
- Wimbledon 2006
- US Open 2006
- Skills
- Rules and Equipment
- Get Involved
- Archive
- Tardis Tennis 606

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Fun and Games
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Tennis hits the dancefloor



By Jonathan Overend
BBC Five Live tennis correspondent in Madrid

Here's a normal day on the tennis circuit: wake up, talk forehands and backhands over breakfast, sit through a day and a night of tennis, listen to a series of millionaires talk in press conference cliches and then go home.



Students provided the on-court action at a Madrid university

Next day it happens all over again.

Don't get me wrong, it's a fantastic sport when it's played and presented well, but it happens every week for 11 months a year in pretty much the same format. That can get rather monotonous.

The tennis top table - or at least sections of it - recognises the need for change.

Executives such as Etienne De Villiers at the ATP and Larry Scott at the WTA want tennis to be more entertainment driven, hence new features in 2006 such as electronic line-calling, on-court coaching and pre-match TV interviews.

But as one of tennis' major investors told me last week, "Hawk-Eye has been the first innovation since the introduction of the tie-break!"

The stars are really aligning in terms of the opportunity for the sport to progress

Larry Scott
WTA chief executive

The sport needs to evolve to attract new audiences and, in search of such evolution, I found myself heading out of Madrid on the road to nowhere at approaching midnight last Friday night.

Twenty minutes later, on arrival at one of the city's largest universities, I was met with neon lights and nightclub security. No picnic hampers and rugs but glow-sticks and wristbands.

The muffled thump of heavy beats could be heard. Welcome to Night Tennis.

Finally someone has created an ingenious way of connecting and engaging with tennis-curious 20-somethings.

This was essentially a club night with big-name DJs, but

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the central focus was the ultra-violet tennis court and the short, sharp matches involving university players.

With music pumping, the rallies would ensue in an eerie blacked-out atmosphere. The balls, being naturally fluorescent, were easily seen by the players and the lines - made with reflective tape - stood out like a futuristic vortex.

Skillful video engineers projected live images and graphics onto a huge screen on one side of the arena. Around the court, party-goers stood with beer in hand, stepping back as the players stretched out for wide shots.

It worked. It really worked.

With the tennis over, the court became an instant dancefloor as Darren Emerson and Groove Armada took to the decks.

"It's probably one of the most unusual gigs I've ever played," said former Underworld man Emerson. "But at the end I wanted a knock-up on the court!"



It's probably one of the most unusual gigs I've ever played

DJ Darren Emerson

Crucially, the man in charge of this dynamic experiment wasn't a greying board member trying to get down with the kids, but a 28-year-old marketing man more familiar with the clubs of Ibiza and South Beach than tennis clubs.

Dean Taylor, sponsorship and marketing manager at Sony Ericsson, has struck potential gold with his concept.

"The more I look at tennis, the more opportunities I see to present it in a new and experimental way," he said.

"Tennis fans love tennis, and I wouldn't want to change that, but we want to find ways of getting a new audience and by blending tennis with music, creating a visual and audio spectacular, I think we achieved that."

Nine hundred revellers packed the university hall on the Friday night. They were hooked in by radio promotions, campaigns on campus and targeted media hits. The plan is to now take it on the road.

"We want to refine it and then take it to places where people perhaps aren't aware championships are taking place," said Taylor.

"I think the first event worked really well - 900 young people who weren't necessarily tennis fans came to watch tennis. Unbelievable!"

It came at the end of an exciting, experimental year on the Sony Ericsson WTA Tour. Chief Executive Larry Scott said: "I think we've innovated more in 2006 than we have in the last five years put together at least.

"We've got the coaches more involved, brought in the

electronic line-calling, broken boundaries in terms of players availability before and after matches, and the reaction that we've gotten from fans, from TV broadcasters and the players themselves has been terrific.

"It's a very exciting time for the sport and by bringing in a younger target audience than tennis has traditionally been associated with, the stars are really aligning in terms of the opportunity for the sport to progress."

Under the aligning stars, the next Night Tennis event is planned for Miami in the new year; perfect as the Sony Ericsson Open coincides with the Winter Music Conference and the invasion of worldwide DJ talent.

A pre-Wimbledon event in London should be the target after that with the aim of getting ATP and WTA players competing and perhaps some eventual TV coverage.

We danced, we peered through the gloom and, in UV light, perhaps we saw the future.

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