

# The Ojai: Truly a Place Where Champions Are Discovered

By Steve Pratt

Sometime this week before you head into picturesque Libbey Park during the 113<sup>th</sup> playing of The Ojai Tennis Tournament and settle in to watch your favorite Pac-12 men's team, or perhaps your favorite Pac-12 women's player, do yourself a favor and stop by the huge draw boards right outside the Media Room and check out the first name atop the Boys' CIF Interscholastic Division draw.

The name you will likely see there should be Irvine-University High's Gage Brymer, an integral part of this year's event because Brymer so proudly represents a link to Ojai's rich past, its present – and perhaps most importantly – its future.

Run your finger through the draw following Brymer's progression to a possible finals appearance at Libbey Park on Sunday morning and try and catch one of his early-round matches played somewhere in Ojai.

This year Brymer is attempting to become the first player in almost 80 years to win three consecutive Boys' Interscholastic titles in a division that began in 1899. The last player to do it was none other than tennis Hall of Famer Bobby Riggs – known then as Robert – playing for Franklin High from 1934-36.

“It's an honor to come back to Ojai and try and do something no one has done in so long,” Brymer said. “Ever since I won last year and heard it had been since the 1930s that a player had won three straight, I've had it in my mind to come back to Ojai and win it again.”

Brymer has been playing at The Ojai since he was 13 and in 2009 he lost a memorable boys' 14s final to Ventura's Brendan McClain. That was the same year Brymer sat mesmerized looking through the fence at the amazing UCLA players and decided then and there that he wanted to be a Bruin eventually signing a letter-of-intent to play under another Ojai past great, UCLA Coach Billy Martin, assuring Ojai fans they'll be seeing much more of Brymer over the next four years.

“We remember players like Tracy Austin, Michael Chang and Sam Querrey starting their careers at The Ojai as juniors,” said Alan Rains, a longtime tournament official past president of the Ojai Valley Tennis Club. “And most of the time with players like that you realize there is something special there. The Ojai truly is a place where tomorrow's champions are discovered.”

Just look through the list of names of past champions in the updated Record of Events book on sale at the merchant booth this year and you will surely get lost in 50-something pages of names that represent a who's-who in the history of tennis' greatest players. It's simply what makes The Ojai so great.

In 1928 Bill Tilden played and won The Ojai at the peak of his popularity during the “Golden Age” of sports in the 1920s. There are even stories past how Tilden slept under the eucalyptus trees during the warm late April nights in Ojai. His victory came just one year after Big Bill won the first Pacific Southwest Championships in 1927 in Los

Angeles. That event became known as the longest running professional event in Southern California before it was sold for \$3 million last fall to a group of investors in Bogota, Colombia.

The Ojai became a place where even an astronaut was first discovered as a very good tennis player as many recall that Sally Ride played the tournament as a junior in the late 1960s.

Ride of course later became the first woman in space, serving on two shuttle missions. According to her biography, Ride was coached by a former world No. 1 player, four-time U.S. National and two-time Wimbledon champion Alice Marble starting at the age of 10. Looking through The Ojai Record of Events and there is Marble's name under Women's Open champion in 1933.

Ride played two years for Swathmore College in Philadelphia, and that's the name of the school next to her name as a finalist in 1970 of the Women's Independent Colleges singles championship as she lost to Pam Richmond of Arizona State.

Ride returned to Southern California to train for a professional tennis career, but just a few months later gave up that dream to discover a whole new world.

Before she was a member of the "Houston Nine" Julie Heldman was turning heads at The Ojai playing for Stanford, and winning the Intercollegiate singles title in 1963. The "Houston Nine" was a group of women's players who in 1970 left the USTA to play in the Virginia Slims tournament in Houston. The tour was so successful that it later merged with the USTA and became the current WTA Tour.

In 2006, the buzz around The Ojai centered around a lanky teenager from Thousand Oaks who was mulling over the prospects of a pro tennis career, or to play collegiately for USC. Sam Querrey of course has gone onto a successful pro career and is a member of the U.S. Davis Cup team. Interestingly, Querrey never won an Ojai title, having lost in the final of the Men's Open in 2006 to Zbynek Mlynarik and in the 2005 and 2006 Open doubles final with his coach Grant Doyle.

One could truly spend hours poring over the 113 years of winners and finalists of The Ojai Record of Events, which has been updated in book form for the first time this year since the 100<sup>th</sup> event in 2000. Looking back at 113 years of Ojai champions is enjoyable, but perhaps not as much as dreaming of what next 113 years will hold.