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By Danielle Lao

Being a Southern California native, I always felt the pride in growing up and competing in one of the best tennis sections in the United States. Although I knew I was a part of something special, I did not grasp the full appreciation for Southern California's tennis culture until my final year of college.

It was at The Ojai tournament, where I suddenly realized and absorbed its full effect. Unfortunately for me, I had not played any of the Ojai events before my collegiate career, so it took me a few years to gather a greater appreciation to what it all really meant to me.

Entering my last year of college, I was not sure whether I would be hanging up my rackets or not after the season. Because of this uncertainty, I knew there was a possibility that I would be experiencing many lasts as a tennis player, so I did my best to soak in everything I could as a senior.

I have always heard from past players I idolized how magic happens at the Ojai. Many of them have their greatest, and most memorable moments at Libbey Park.

I wish I could tell a miraculous story about how I had won The Ojai in the most dramatic fashion, but my moment of elation happened a little differently. Having lost in the earlier rounds, I had plenty of time to wander around, watch matches, and take in the atmosphere as a spectator.

In hindsight though, this was a blessing in disguise. Without having to worry about the typical routine that goes into preparing for a match, I could sit back and actually observe all that goes into The Ojai. There are countless people that open their houses to the players competing in the tournament and a great number involved in the planning and preparation that makes the tournament run smoothly.

Above all, what still amazes me today is all of the people that continue to return to the tournament, as players and as spectators. To say the least there is something special at The Ojai that keeps bringing people back to help, compete, or watch.

I was really feeling the good vibes and energy from the town of Ojai, and instead of rushing back home to Los Angeles, I opted to stay until championship Sunday. On Saturday night, I asked my coach West Nott if it was possible to get a hit in the following day. Because it was championship Sunday, all the big matches had been moved to Libbey Park, so if I wanted to squeeze a hit in, it would have to be very early.

I was determined to practice, so I dragged West out at 6:30 a.m. to hit on Court 1. (He was a great sport, by the way). Arriving at the courts at 6:15, Libbey looked so different empty. As the sun got higher on this quiet and beautiful morning, West and I ran around the whole court, exchanging heavy ground strokes.

At around 7, I started to hear whispers as the tournament directors and officials filed in to organize themselves. By 7:30, the whisper turned into a chatter as the volunteers began to come in and situate themselves and to squeeze fresh Ojai orange juice.

As 7:45 rolled around, the chatter evolved into what sounded like the entire town being awake. As West and I sat on the benches watching the busyness of the tournament, we talked about how awesome it was that we gradually heard the town of Ojai wake up, on championship Sunday, while playing on Court 1.

It was all of a sudden overwhelming when I combined the warm energy I was feeling to the realization of how much history this tournament has. Legends like Pete Sampras, Billie Jean King, Arthur Ashe, Jimmy Connors, and Michael Chang have been in that draw at some point in their life.

There was something special about playing at a place you know many champions before you have experienced great moments. Then and there I finally understood what keeps bringing people back to The Ojai. People return to honor how such community enthusiasm and Southern California tradition can bring together so many individuals from different generations under one sport, tennis.