

## **Sustaining a Rally in Women's Tennis**

*Claire Atkinson*

For years, women's tennis has had more recognizable — and more marketable — star players than the men's game, like Serena Williams, Venus Williams and Maria Sharapova.

The Women's Tennis Association, now known as the Sony Ericsson WTA Tour, is trying to capitalize on that popularity with a \$15 million global branding campaign. The ads, which will be shown in 70 countries including the United States and Britain, aims to familiarize viewers with its new stars, like the French Open winner Ana Ivanovic; reacquaint them with older stars like the Williams sisters; and connect the dots between the various tennis competitions around the world.

In one of three TV spots, multiple players are shown, split screen, in everyday situations like drinking coffee or riding in a car in locations like Paris or Miami. The athletes have cellphones glued to their ears and suddenly spring into action, in tennis clothes, rackets in hand. A narrator concludes the spot by asking, "Are you looking for a hero?"

The campaign comes at a time when the audience for women's tennis — at least in the United States — has shown signs of slipping. Last year's final of the United States Open drew an average of 3.1 million total viewers, down from 3.5 million the year before, according to Nielsen Media Research, and the big American draws in the sport, especially the Williams sisters, are getting old — at least in tennis years.

Larry Scott, the chairman and chief executive of the Sony Ericsson WTA Tour, explained the marketing challenge.

"We're trying to convert casual or intermittent tennis fans," he said, "How do we get them more deeply engaged and follow the sport on a more regular basis and get an emotional connection to increase viewership, sponsor interest and measure return on investment, and help build the players so their equity goes up?"

And unlike in golf, which enjoys the halo of Tiger Woods, many tennis enthusiasts are only vaguely aware of tournaments held outside their own countries, except for the Grand Slam events.

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Mr. Scott aims to help change that by increasing the profile of the tour's year-end championship, to be held in Doha, Qatar, in November. The world's top eight singles players will compete for the title.

The TV campaign, which is accompanied by both print and digital components, was filmed entirely on location in Rome and draws inspiration from films like "Charlie's Angels," "Ocean's 11," and "Mission Impossible," according to the ads' director, Matthieu Mantovani. The campaign is from the Atlanta office of Grey, part of WPP's Grey Global Group.

B. A. Albert, president and chief creative officer of Grey Atlanta, spent her first week on the job in Rome. "It was gun and run," she says of the speed of production, which took place in three parts of the city to try to simulate other global locales.

While the campaign was unveiled at a party in London, ahead of the Wimbledon tournament (June 23 to July 6), American viewers will not see the ads until the start of the United States Open (Aug. 25 to Sept. 7). The TV ads will run on Eurosport, ESPN and CNN, while print ads will appear in The International Herald Tribune, USA Today and sports and tennis magazines. The United States Open will be shown on USA Network and on CBS.

While women's tennis has had numerous small-time promotions, this is the first major global effort from the nonprofit association, created in 1973 by Billie Jean King. Back then, the sport's best known sponsor was a cigarette brand, Virginia Slims.

One reason the association is starting its ad campaign now is simply that it has the money to invest in its own promotion.

"Larry Scott has succeeded in turning around the financials, gaining better TV deals and better packaging of the tournaments, and bringing players on board so they're not just committed to Grand Slams," said Daniel Kaplan, a tennis writer for the trade magazine Sports Business Journal.

In 2005, Sony Ericsson poured \$88 million into a six-year deal with the women's tennis association and committed \$10 million to \$20 million to further ad spending that mentions its association with women's tennis. Mr. Scott has also succeeded in raising revenue from television rights by 30 percent. The association's biggest TV deal is with Eurosport, an international sports cable channel, which renewed its contract in 2006 through 2010. No figure was available for the value of that deal.

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Separately, the organization secured \$42 million from a tennis federation in Qatar to hold the finale event for the next three years. The same deal was made with Istanbul to continue the event after 2010. In addition to such licensing revenue, a new global sponsorship chief just joined to help increase marketing partnerships and expand business into Asia, particularly China. The association just opened an office in Beijing.

Women's tennis made a historic stride last year. The organizers of Wimbledon responded to pressure from the association and the British government and finally agreed to equal pay for female tennis players in last year's tournament. Women had earned about 5 percent less prize money than men. Last summer, Venus Williams took away the Wimbledon winner's dish along with £700,000 (\$1.37 million), the same as her male counterpart, Roger Federer.

"Women's tennis is so far ahead of any other women's sport, it's like night and day," Mr. Kaplan said.

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