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# Sports

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## COVER STORY

# Partnership has yet to go up in smoke

Virginia Slims  
sponsorship  
of women's  
pro tennis  
has profited  
both sides

By Doug Smith  
USA TODAY

It would seem the marriage of a sport that demands a healthy body to a product believed hazardous to one's health would be a troublesome union at best.

Not so in the case of women's professional tennis and Virginia Slims. Manufacturers of the cigarette are marking

the 15th anniversary of founding the women's pro tour with the \$1 million Virginia Slims Championship of New York, which begins Monday in Madison Square Garden.

Since the first such tournament at Houston in 1970, the relationship between the seemingly odd couple has been cozy (except for a four-year separation) and mutually satisfying. Slims, a product of Philip Morris, says it has helped foster a positive public image; the players have found it particularly nice to their pocketbooks.

"As everyone can see, women's tennis has come a long way," said Rosie Casals, winner of the first Slims-sponsored event. "The Slims is synonymous with women's tennis. They have been tremendously important, not just financially, but in every other way."

Total prize money for the inaugural tournament — with nine participants — was \$7,500. In 1971, the circuit began with 20 tournaments, 23 players and \$500,000 in purses.

This year, the Virginia Slims tour includes more than 500 players from 29 countries, competing for more than \$14 million in prize money. Since the tour began, 17 players have won more than \$1 million.

But the tour also ignited a series of picketing and protests by anti-smoking activists across the USA. "We'd like to see

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# Slims lit up women's tennis

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someone who's not selling death put on the tournaments," said Mark Pertschuk, legislative director of Americans for Nonsmokers' Rights in Berkeley, Calif. "It can't help but encourage kids and other people to think cigarette smoking is socially acceptable."

Not surprisingly, those who have been involved with the development of the women's pro tour are quick to pat the hand that helps them.

"We have gotten bad press because we're sponsored by a cigarette company," Chris Evert Lloyd said. "That's the bad side of it, but I can't say anything bad about them. ... They don't cut corners, and they really care about the women."

"The Virginia Slims people have a lot of class and they were fun to work with," said Billie Jean King, who retired from the tour in 1984. "I don't smoke; I don't encourage others to smoke."

What King has encouraged is the elevation of women's tennis.

In 1970, she became outraged by the disparity in prize money offered to men and women pros (men received 12 times as much). So King led eight women players and urged Gladys Heldman, founder of *World Tennis* magazine, to help them start their tour.

Heldman raised \$5,000 and found a willing contributor in Joseph Cullman III, then Philip Morris chairman. "She only asked for a pittance (\$2,500)," said Cullman, now chairman emeritus. "Just enough to get the ball rolling."

Once the venture showed promise, Cullman quickly extended the relationship. "The Virginia Slims was the first brand developed essentially for women smokers," he said. "We had recently come out with it then, so I saw an ideal way of promoting women's tennis and of promoting Virginia Slims in a positive way without getting into the pros and cons of smoking."

The tour's success encouraged creation of the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) in 1973, with King as president.

A year later, Jerry Diamond, a San Francisco public relations expert, became the WTA's executive director and promptly negotiated a three-year TV contract with CBS. "At the time, women's tennis was the No. 1 sport going for women's audience," Diamond said.

As the Slims tour grew through the late '70s, other major sponsors — including Colgate-Palmolive, Toyota and Avon — came calling on the WTA.

But, after eight years, Virginia Slims "discontinued their sponsorship because of a difference of opinion with the WTA over format and direction," said company press releases. Diamond contends the differences involved money — WTA wanted more, with larger prizes for big events.

From 1978-1982, Avon sponsored the women's winter circuit; Colgate the rest of the year. Virginia Slims resumed year-round sponsorship in January 1983.

"The WTA offered worldwide sponsorship and said they would allow us to change the format," said Ellen Merlo, Philip Morris group director of marketing and promotions.

Slims seems committed to maintaining the association. "We're on a two-year pact which expires at the end of 1987," Merlo said. "We hope to renew for another two years."

Merlo said there's no way to say whether association with women's tennis has increased sales, but Virginia Slims "has experienced steady growth ..."

The decision to stick with what's now called the World International Association (WITA) is sound, Diamond said. "Women's tennis reaches a select market with demographics very strong to their product," he said.

There are concerns, however, that the success King and the other pioneers worked hard — and without immediate rewards — to attain has produced an era of indifference among too many players, primarily the young ones.

Diamond left the WTA in 1985 because he sensed the organization going in a new direction. "The gap between my thinking and the thinking of the younger players was too wide apart," he said.

Said former player Mary Carillo, now a sports commentator for USA Network: "Today's players don't always cooperate with the media or sponsors. They withhold information about injuries and the trainers are told not to cooperate. My biggest gripe with the tour now is that it has become so insular, too self-serving."

King said the game has become a part of big business and the "frame of reference of the younger players is totally different from ours."

"They don't have to do as much," King said. "They make millions of dollars, have a coach, their parents or an entourage doing everything for them. It's very difficult for them to understand what's really important. It's really important that they be educated."

The educational process has begun, with veterans such as Martina Navratilova and Lloyd lecturing on off-court responsibilities.

"We've already had two courses for the girls (18-and-under) at the French and the U.S. opens," said Lloyd, WITA president. "We never had this problem before, but the players are getting younger and younger."

"You can't blame them for being single-minded and wanting only to play tennis. But it's also sort of sad in a way. Some of them don't even know what Billie Jean means to the game or what Gladys Heldman means."

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