

Tennis: Champions event not just for fun

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Many of the names are the same. But Jim Courier stressed once again on Tuesday that the Champions Cup Series event coming to Naples next year is a competition, not an exhibition.

"It is a legitimate tournament," said Courier, the former star player whose InsideOut Sports & Entertainment is running the four-event Champions Cup Series for former stars age 30 and older. "There is no predetermined outcome. This will be eight players who will be battling from day one to make it into Monday night (for the final)."

John McEnroe, Mats Wilander and Pat Cash were three regulars or fairly regular players in the Nuveen Series, a seniors event that was played eight times in Naples, the last in 2002. Courier will join them, along with Mikael Pernfors and Aaron Krickstein and two other players to be named.

Tickets are on sale today (649-7171) and run from \$15 to over \$100. There are holiday discounts — 10 percent off for series ticket packages and 5 percent for single-session tickets — if tickets are purchased by Jan. 1.

There will be 2 p.m. afternoon sessions and 7 p.m. evening sessions on Friday, March 10; Saturday, March 11; Sunday, March 12 and Monday, March 13. The final will be on March 13, with a third-place match also being played. The competition is all singles, although Courier said there is the possibility a doubles exhibition could be played earlier on Monday. A free kids day also will be offered, either on Saturday or Sunday.

Champions Cup Naples will be played at The Players Club & Spa at Lely Resort, which just got done hosting the Swingtime Tennis Classic this past weekend. Swingtime, which also includes a gala and a pro-am golf tournament, is a fund-raiser for the Tim and Tom Gullikson Foundation.

"I think Naples is a terrific market for this," Courier said. "It's clear that it supports events, including Swingtime this past weekend. I think that the tennis market here is ripe for this event."

A 3,000-seat facility will be set up for the tournament.

"We investigated some other venues, but quite frankly this is such a beautiful venue," said Courier, who played youth tennis in Naples in the early 1980s. "It really fits what we're trying to achieve for our fans."

Courier named First Serve, an educational program for children, and the Liberty Youth Ranch, a long-term children's home for Florida's orphaned, abused, abandoned, neglected and homeless children from ages 4 to 17. The ranch will be in Bonita Springs and was founded by Alan and Angi Dimmitt, who invested their life savings in the project.

"This is our first year, but we're planting roots here," said Courier, who announced the formation of the four-event series and the tournament in Naples two weeks ago. "We're going to be here for a while."

Of the 12 players listed on the Naples event's possible player pool, six remain for the final two spots: Todd Martin, Michael Chang, Goran Ivanisevic, Thomas Muster, Petr Korda and Brad Gilbert. However, Courier, who also plays on the Delta Tour of Champions in Europe, has received interest from overseas.

"To be candid, a lot of European players have been calling and asking and wanting to play," Courier said. "It becomes a tougher decision when you have more players than there are spots."

Courier said he has talked with Pete Sampras about playing in the series, but hasn't received any indication that Sampras would be interested.

Other Champions Cup Series events will be in Boston on April 27-30, in Memphis on Oct. 5-8 and back in Houston in November. Courier, who won the inaugural event in Houston almost two weeks ago, hopes InsideOut can grow the series to six or seven events, with sponsorships for each, in the future.