

USTA losing points over 16s

By Jerry Magee

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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Gather 192 teenage girls together and what do you have, other than a lot of giggling? You have the USTA Super National 16s Hardcourt Championships, currently under way at the Barnes Tennis Center with more two-handed backhands than anybody could count.

Responsible for how well this event comes off are Ann Podney of San Diego, serving for the third time as tournament director, and Ralph Anderson, the referee. "Lots of nice players," said Podney.

She didn't say this, but some of the contestants are out of their element in a competition in which all the contestants have had to qualify through their USTA districts. Podney said she would favor reducing the field to 128, which still would make it as large as the Grand Slam tournaments.

As it is, a player who does not have a first-round bye has to win eight matches to become the tournament champion. That's a lot of tennis for a 16-year-old girl to get through in a week. A Wimbledon champion has to win only seven matches, and they play for a fortnight in London.

Podney further is concerned by the "points" system that the USTA is utilizing for the first time in determining which players are eligible. To Podney, it rewards players from affluent families who are home schooled and can travel about, collecting points in events in which players from less-landed circumstances are unable to compete.

"The Southern California Tennis Association is not wild about it," said Podney, who noted that the SCTA continues to prefer a system that assigns credits for whom a player might have lost to, among other factors.

When parents bring up this point, Podney said she replies, "You know, you're right."

The USTA's position, according to Podney, is that in time things will work out under the "points" plan. Podney, clearly, is not convinced. "It works against players who are not from wealthy families," she insisted.

Something clearly is amiss in how the USTA is going about developing young tennis players of promise. In the last two WTA Tour events, at La Costa and Montreal, three of the semifinalists were from Russia. At La Costa, one American, Lindsay Davenport, the eventual champion, made the semifinals. At Montreal, no Americans advanced that far. All right, neither of the Williams sisters played in either tournament, but it is difficult to identify youthful Americans of this gender capable of occupying the world stage.

A plan that could remedy this is being championed by Jack Kramer and Ted Schroeder, both of whom did pretty well when they were playing. "Instead of taking the kids to tennis, you take tennis to the kids," said Schroeder. He and Kramer favor the USTA forming a cadre of coaches who would visit various locales, working with players of promise at one place, then moving on to the next. Local coaches would be invited to participate.

"It would keep the kids at home and keep them in school and their parents could participate as well as the local coaches," argued Schroeder. When the USTA coaches would leave, the local coaches would take over. The plan would eliminate the high-performance centers such as the one the USTA maintains in Key Biscayne, Fla.

Meantime, there are others in the San Diego tennis community who oppose parents utilizing home schooling as a means of furthering the tennis futures of their offspring.

"As an educator, I'm very much against it," said Jim Lackritz, a member of the San Diego State faculty who has held high office in San Diego tennis organizations. "I believe education is more than just books; I believe education is learning to deal with people and situations that are both academic and social."

None of the girls whaling away at the Barnes Center is apt to become the next Jennifer Capriati. At 16, if

she is superbly gifted, a girl already is competing on a considerably higher level than a junior tournament. Consider that Maria Sharapova, the Wimbledon champion, is only 17 and already is a seasoned internationalist.

What is fun to me is to play "scout," to attempt to pick out of the Barnes field someone with a possible future. I have my choice: Caitlin Whoriskey of Boca Raton, Fla. She is not among the eight leading seeds, but she has the size and the clout to do some things. We'll see.

The tournament semifinals are Saturday at 11 a.m. and the final is Sunday at 11:30 a.m.