

# Anyone for tennis?

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**The Lawn Tennis Association wants people in the UK to recognise tennis as more than just Wimbledon. It is looking for a sponsor to 'own' the game by backing all domestic events and nurturing much-needed home-grown talent with initiatives for school children. By Louise Jack**

It's June, it looks like it might rain; it must be Wimbledon. During the championship fortnight, as many as 460,000 souls will pass through the gates of the All England Lawn Tennis Club and coverage will be broadcast to almost 750 million homes. It is a British institution that causes an annual wave of enthusiasm for tennis, prompting thousands to dust off their racquets. For many, Wimbledon is British tennis.

But the governing body of tennis in Britain, the Lawn Tennis Association needs to attract people to the sport, both to play and take an interest in, for more than just a month each year.

Recently, the 30-year relationship between the LTA's headline event at the Queen's Club and Stella Artois ended, leaving the organisation able to overhaul its commercial strategy. Rather than engage with a series of sponsors to support separate aspects of UK tennis, in a fragmented way, as has been its custom, the LTA is now seeking a lead sponsor, which will, in its words, "own" British tennis.

On offer, together with the glamorous Queen's Club championship, are a number of smaller tournaments, the Davis and Fed Cup teams, an elite junior teams programme, national county clubs and schools competitions and community initiatives for parks and schools. The price tag is £24m over four years.

The LTA says the change of strategy has been designed to lead to "unprecedented growth in interest, participation and competitive results which will all drive brand impact".

## Generating interest

Clifford Bloxham, vice-president of global sports marketing agency Octagon, says that while the timing is positive, in that there are good rivalries in both the men's and women's game, the number of companies that might be interested is limited. "The benefits of an event like Queen's are very different to the benefits of getting in touch with grassroots tennis. I don't think there are many brands that would benefit from both elements but, for the few that would, it fits really well. It's both a plus and minus," he says.

One result of this umbrella strategy is alcohol brands like Stella Artois are no longer suitable because of the associations with children and schools. But Bloxham feels that while the plan presents a number of challenges, it is at least a clear strategy, which sports' national governing bodies very often lack.

"The LTA is more switched on these days," Bloxham says. "Roger Draper (LTA chief executive) is a dynamic guy but he needs everything to fall into place. In terms of finding world-class British players, he needs a bit of luck."

Critics say that the LTA receives far too much money to be relying on luck. Its overall income for 2007 was £43.6m, £26.3 million of which came from "surplus", or profits, from the Wimbledon championships, which markets itself and is not a direct LTA property.

When he was first appointed in 2006, Draper, former chief of Sport England and himself a county tennis player, spent several months carrying out a consultation, which resulted in the Blueprint for British Tennis. Among its primary targets were to get players into the top 100 and to put as many youngsters as possible on track to reach the top 100.

LTA chairman Stuart Smith said, at the time of Draper's appointment, that the target was to have half a million youngsters playing tennis and five players in the top 100 by the end of 2008. But Britain has produced only one top 100 player in the period, Andy Murray, and he did not rise through the LTA system.

If one of the key requirements to drive enthusiasm for the sport is success in individuals, then any brand considering getting involved would worry that no matter how much money the LTA gets, it seems it cannot combat the paucity of talent in British tennis.

Some sports experts feel that the inherent problem is that tennis is as seen as a pleasant middle-class pastime, inaccessible to ordinary children looking for an exciting sport to follow or in which to take part.

## The sponsorship route

Chief executive of sponsorship specialist Synergy, Tim Crow, says the commercial strategy the LTA has come up with is "flawed". "The LTA does not need a commercial partner that will just chuck some money at it in order to be associated with tennis," he says, "A better idea would be to seek a marketing partner - a brand that has real expertise in marketing and would be able to create a buzz around British tennis."

Crow adds: "If I were Roger Draper, I would be beating a path to Nike and Adidas' doors. Who better? Who knows more about making sport exciting and attractive? I would be asking them to help me market tennis to British youth."

But the LTA is targeting the financial services sector for potential partners. It points to British athletics' long-term relationship with Norwich Union, now rebranding as Aviva, as the template for its commercial strategy.

MEC Access group account director Stuart Wareham agrees there is some sense behind this: "It is difficult for rational financial services brands to engage the public on an emotional level. Sponsorship can do that for them."

Further, he says that the lack of success in British individuals is a barrier. "Players carry an influence," he says, "Andy Murray already has a number of personal endorsements and that would make certain brands in certain categories think twice. It would put companies off if the sole "talisman" of British tennis is already carrying the name of their competitors."

And although the LTA profits from Wimbledon championships, it does not own the commercial rights, nor those of other big tennis events, such as the ATP World Tour Finals - which will be held in the UK.

Last week, the ATP, the governing body for the men's professional tennis circuit, announced a £17.5m deal with Barclays to sponsor the event, which will henceforth take place at the O2 arena in London, moving from its current home in China to be in a better time zone for its primary audience.

Despite the apparent drawbacks and the criticisms of its system, experts feel that it is likely the LTA will find a taker for its deal. The London 2012 Olympics may also have a bearing, with brands that cannot get a slot as an official partner because a competitor has taken it on, looking to do something else in sport. The LTA, with tennis, has more to offer than many of the other national governing bodies.

"It's about developing an infrastructure to help shape the sport from the bottom up," Wareham concludes. "Rarely does such an opportunity come up for a commercial partner that can make a real difference to a sport and that's attractive." New balls, please.

