

Tennis Heaven

Have you ever wondered where Martina Hingis or Jennifer Capriati live? Or where Pete Sampras gets ready for Wimbledon and how Andy Roddick got his big break? Welcome to this sneak glimpse into the world's finest tennis facility, Saddlebrook, the brainchild of the late, great Harry Hopman. It's soon to be home of the WTA and may host Olympic tennis one day. Australian ALICE HANSEN coaches there and writes that you don't have to be a star at Saddlebrook to be treated like one.

It's early morning and dew blankets the immaculate golf courses. The palm trees and cypresses spell calm. The lagoons separate areas of lush grass as in a perfect patchwork. The scene is beautiful and silent; until suddenly the serenity is shaken. The clock hits 8am and immediately the crisp thwak of tennis balls being struck on every Grand Slam surface brings the perfect painting to life. Welcome to Saddlebrook- a place that continues to redefine the concept of tennis heaven.

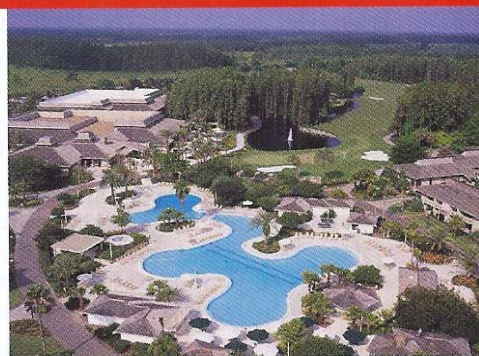
Nestled on 480 acres of secluded countryside in Florida, the resort is home to the world-renowned Harry Hopman tennis program. Something of a mecca for the tennis industry, the program attracts enthusiasts from literally hundreds of countries and has

recently been chosen as the site for the new WTA headquarters and as a possible venue for Olympic tennis action in 2012.

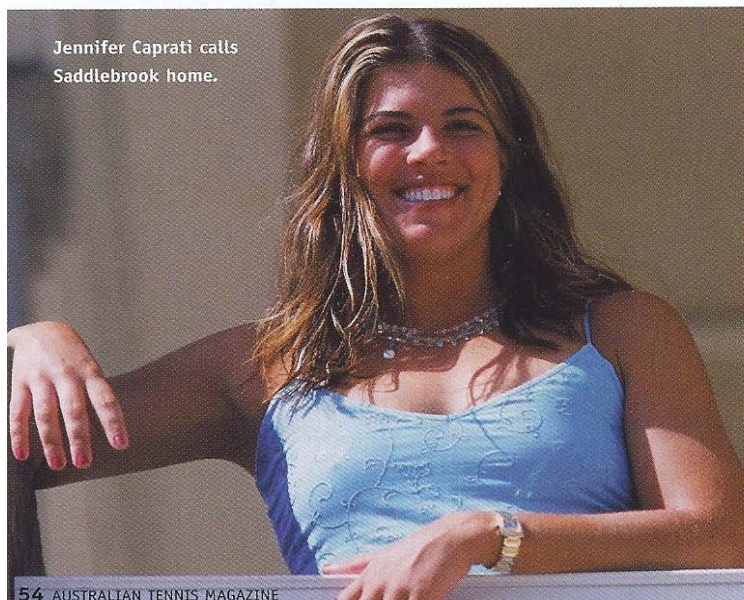
Hopman, history's most accomplished Davis Cup captain with 15 victories for Australia, established the academy in 1975 and spent the last years of his life building it into one of the world's most respected tennis programs. Even today, it continues to support the unique teaching style and disciplined work ethic that Hopman embraced as he transformed good Australian tennis players into champions.

Several big names call Saddlebrook home. One-time Australian Jelena Dokic recently bought a home on the property. Australian and French Open champion, Jennifer Capriati, and world number one Martina Hingis also live here. Pete Sampras, Jim Courier and Andy Roddick in the past have found their niche on Saddlebrook soil while others stop by to warm up for Wimbledon on two perfectly maintained grass courts surrounded by a traditional white picket fence.

"It truly is the world's finest tennis facility," said Saddlebrook's director, Howard Moore. "What sets Saddlebrook apart from all other tennis camps and academies worldwide is the beautiful resort setting." One of its greatest assets is its ability to accommodate every player of the game, Moore says. From touring pros to



Jennifer Capriati calls Saddlebrook home.



ANDY LYONS, ALLSPORT



six-year-old beginners, Saddlebrook resort welcomes tennis players of every background, age and ability to join their growing tennis family. The resort even has its own high school for those serious juniors who seek to continue their education while simultaneously honing their tennis skills.

Adult programs are open to players who have never held a tennis racquet through to the elite level. During June, July and August the junior summer camp swings into action and spreads tennis fever onto every court of the resort. To witness the Harry Hopman junior program at full capacity under a scorching Florida sun is a sight to behold. More than 40 courts become alive with the sound of excited young feet sliding across predominantly clay courts as instructors challenge their players with innovative drills.

Wandering between the rows of courts you see players and recognize accents from nations all over the world. From Egyptians, to Columbians, to Asians, to Australians, people come from near and far to form the web of the

extensive program. Many of the teaching pros are also of international representation, which serves up a foreign flavor. The camp becomes a truly cultural experience.

For five hours every weekday and weekends, the juniors are exposed to top-notch instruction, rigorous fitness work outs, sport psychology talks and undergo video analysis. The average camper stays for a week while some opt for a month or two of serious training. Rated by the USTA as 'ultra intense' the Harry Hopman camp has a reputation for hard work and perseverance.

The student to coach ratio never exceeds four to one, allowing coaches to get a good feel for each player's specific areas that require attention. "For me, this is the best job in the world and the setting is incredible," says Bo Weibull, a Saddlebrook coach of five years from Sweden.

In line with the importance Hopman placed on a tennis player's physical fitness, Saddlebrook prides itself on professional fitness training. Pat Etcheberry, one the world's best tennis trainers is

also based here. Many leading pros including Andre Agassi, Sampras, Courier, Marcelo Rios and more recently Jennifer Capriati and Monica Seles have turned to Etcheberry to assist them in reaching peak fitness.

"By this winter we will have an entire new fitness facility complete with a movement-specific area to improve footwork and agility, and also a weight room area sporting the newest equipment on the market," explained Etcheberry.

However, Saddlebrook is not just dripping sweat and tears, but a balance of on-court intensity and off-court fun and relaxation. There's movies and shopping trips, go-cart racing and time at the beach. Great swimming pools and spas. Two championship 18 hole golf courses await, one of which was designed by the great Arnold Palmer. Or there's always massage therapy as an alternative to unwind.

No wonder some – like Capriati, Hingis, and Dokic – decide they don't want to go home.

Alice Hansen, once Tasmania's top junior, attends college in the USA and in summer coaches at Saddlebrook. ■



Andy Roddick is among the many pros who train at Saddlebrook.

ETRA SHAW, ALLSPORT