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## **Tennis-loving Midland opens its heart, doors to players**

*Dow Tennis Classic's 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary to draw 15,000 fans Jan. 28-Feb. 4*

**MIDLAND, Mich.** -- How many families can say they've had world-class athletes sleep in their spare bedrooms?

If you live in Midland, your chances are pretty good.

That's because this mid-Michigan city of 42,000 literally opens its doors each winter to dozens of professional tennis players who flock here to compete in the Dow Tennis Classic. This year marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary for the tournament, which runs Jan. 28-Feb. 4.

The Dow Tennis Classic is the largest women's event on the U.S. Tennis Association (USTA) Pro Circuit -- and the only tournament in Michigan this year. Past competitors include former world No. 1 Maria Sharapova, two-time Grand Slam Champion Li Na and rising American star CiCi Bellis.

The tournament takes place in the sprawling Greater Midland Tennis Center, the largest tennis center in the Midwest. Nearly 15,000 tennis fans are expected to attend the eight-day event this year.

"The support we receive from the entire Great Lakes Bay Region is amazing," said Scott Mitchell, Greater Midland Tennis Center's executive director and Dow Tennis Classic tournament director.

### **Community embraces players**

The USTA says what sets this tournament apart is how the whole community pitches in. Midland's longtime passion for tennis earned it the moniker of "Best Tennis Town" in the USTA's first nationwide contest in 2009.

Residents gladly volunteer as ushers, ticket-takers, tournament ambassadors and parking lot attendants. And more than 60 host families welcome visiting players, coaches and officials into their homes for the week.

Jacqueline Cako, currently ranked in the top 100 in doubles, has played in Midland for years and always has a place to stay with the Rielle family.

"It started out as helping this young girl pursue her dream to become a professional tennis player, and in the process she's almost become a third daughter to us," said Peter Rielle, a Midland resident.

“She loves playing the piano at the house or playing Mario Kart and baking brownies with the girls. She’s a great role model for them.”

Midland is home to The Dow Chemical Company and the title sponsor of the Dow Tennis Classic. Dow last fall committed to a three-year title sponsorship, a commitment that keeps the event in Midland through 2020 with \$100,000 in annual prize money.

“We are very proud and excited to be the title sponsor for the 30th anniversary of this iconic tournament,” said Karen S. Carter, chief inclusion officer at The Dow Chemical Company. “The elite female athletes from all over the world that will play in the Dow Tennis Classic illustrate how sports contribute to building a more inclusive society. Through our Pros to Schools outreach program, they also inspire our youth by showing the rewards of hard work and the relentless pursuit of excellence.

“Our community looks forward to hosting these players every year, and the impact they make locally is truly powerful.”

## **Raising the bar for women’s tennis**

And that impact extends far beyond the hard court.

Professional tennis players take the time to visit Midland schools to help educate students about tennis, the importance of health and wellness, and expose them to the diverse cultural backgrounds of players who hail from around the world.

“On average, we reach over 3,000 kids every year during tournament week through our community outreach programs,” Mitchell said. “The players love the chance to share their stories with the kids and, hopefully, inspire them.”

The tournament also has a tremendous economic impact on the local community, said Annette Rummel, president/CEO of the Great Lakes Bay Regional Convention & Visitors Bureau.

And players appreciate the way the community embraces them.

USTA Chairman, CEO and President Katrina Adams played in Midland in 1996. Although she lost in the doubles final, she said she left feeling like a winner because of the community’s kindness.

“The community’s support for 30 years is unmatched. It’s truly a gem in the Midwest,” Adams said.

This year, Midland’s very own tennis icon Anne (Miller) Borus will return to her hometown and compete Jan. 29 in a special “Legends Event.” Borus is famous in tennis circles as the first opponent Serena Williams faced in her professional career (Borus defeated Williams in that 1995 match).

Borus credits her family and Midland for her successful tennis career.

“It was the perfect storm of having two older brothers and wanting to be like them, falling in love with tennis, and then having a world-class facility and hugely supportive community to help me grow and thrive,” Borus said.

Seven-time Grand Slam doubles champion Liezel Huber, who won the doubles title here in 1999, will also play in the Legends Event. She has nothing but good memories of her time in Midland.

“I stayed a mile away with a host family, Miriam and Gil Harter. Twenty years later, we still keep in touch. Midland truly creates memories for a lifetime,” Huber said.

And the people of Midland? They’ll keep the home fires burning.

“Four of the former top 50 women tennis players in the world have slept in our spare bedroom through the years,” said Midland resident Bruce Rayce.

“Midland is full of people who could tell the same story. We just love tennis and we love this tournament.”

**--MORE INFO: Visit [downtennisclassic.com](http://downtennisclassic.com)**

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