

International Tennis

Hall of Fame

Saturday, July 22, 2023

2023 Induction Ceremony

Press Conference

BRETT HABER: Good evening, everybody. Newport, Rhode Island, how are we feeling tonight? Welcome, everybody, to the International Tennis Hall of Fame induction ceremony. It is a pleasure to be here with you to celebrate the presentation of tennis' ultimate honor.

I'm Brett Haber from Tennis Channel.

As you know, induction into the International Tennis Hall of Fame is the crowning achievement for any tennis player. It is the cap on top of an extraordinary career.

Now, we have a wonderful night ahead for you as we celebrate the induction of two inspiring all-time greats. Join me in applauding for the first time the Class of 2023, Esther Vergeer and Rick Draney.

Those of you who have been with us before know that one of the great traditions here at the Hall of Fame is the annual gathering of the Hall of Famers who have traveled back from around the world to welcome the inductees. Join me in welcoming them home to Newport.

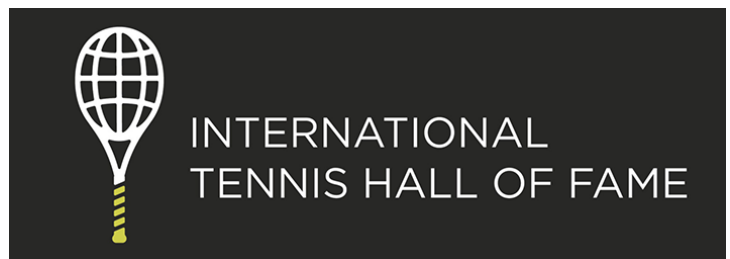
We start with the winner of 12 major titles in doubles and mixed. She was inducted in 1996 as a player, and again two years ago as a member of tennis' Original 9. Rosie Casals.

She, too, was one of the nine women who took a bold stand more than 50 years ago by signing those \$1 contracts to play professional tennis. Inducted in 2022, Judy Dalton.

He is a tennis journalist, author and globally renowned historian. From the Class of 2017, our friend Steve Flink.

An American athlete who had an extraordinary vision. In the 1970s he pioneered wheelchair tennis, developing the sport from scratch to what it is now, one of the most well-developed para sports globally, from the Class of 2010, Brad Parks.

She is a four-time Paralympic gold medalist, from the Class



of 2017, Monique Kalkman.

She is a former world No. 1 in both singles and doubles, a three-time US Open champion, Australian Open champion, and the winner of major doubles titles at both Wimbledon and Roland Garros. She was inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 2017, now serves as the honorary president of this organization, welcome home Kim Clijsters.

She is a four-time major champion, including singles titles at both Roland Garros and the Australian Open, from the Class of 2019, Mary Pierce.

She is a former world No. 1 and two-time US Open champion, both in her teens, from the Class of 1992, the great Tracy Austin.

We follow with another US Open legend, the winner of back-to-back titles in New York in 1997 and '98, a former world No. 1, from Australia, the Class of 2006, Pat Rafter.

In addition to our returning Hall of Famers, the guests of honor this evening need to be introduced. They will sit with their families in the audience for now and join this elite group onstage shortly.

First to introduce, he is the pioneer of the quad division of wheelchair tennis. He was a three-time ITF year-end world No. 1 in quad singles and winner of five British Open titles, plus seven US Open titles. Please welcome for the first time, the newest member of the Hall of Fame, from California, Rick Draney.

His partner in this Class of 2023, an extraordinarily accomplished athlete by any standard. She is, and I need to take a breath to rattle off these accomplishments, an eight-time Paralympic medalist, a 13-time ITF world champion and the winner of 21 major singles titles, 27 major doubles titles. When she retired, she had a winning percentage of 96% and was on an active win streak of 470 straight matches won. Ladies and gentlemen, from The Netherlands, Esther Vergeer.

If those credentials and people don't inspire you, prepare to be inspired even further. Now to help us get the evening

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started, please welcome to the podium our honorary president, Kim Clijsters.

KIM CLIJSTERS: Thank you. I'm very honored to be here today for the first times a honorary president. Induction into the International Tennis Hall of Fame is the ultimate honor in tennis. Today it will be presented to two very deserving individuals, and I'm so pleased to be here to welcome them in.

First, we would like to take a moment to recognize a very special guest. In 2021, the Original 9 of women's tennis were inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in recognition of the courageous actions they took to create an opportunity for women to play tennis professionally and to earn a living through the sport. I'm, of course, personally very grateful.

One member of the Original 9 was not able to travel to Newport for the induction in 2021. We were delighted to celebrate her today. Let's take a look at the video.

(Video Shown.)

KIM CLIJSTERS: It is my absolute honor and privilege to present the Hall of Fame medal to Judy Dalton.

JUDY DALTON: Thank you very much. I'm overwhelmed. I didn't think that it would be like this. It's the most amazing feeling. Doing the video in 2021 was rather strange. I did it in the kitchen of our apartment, so... It's a slightly different thing today (smiling).

First of all, Kim, I'd love to say thank you so much for presenting it. Congratulations on being president. It's wonderful.

I'd just like to say how honored I am to join this elite group. I feel that what we did as the Original 9 was something unique. To be honored all together, I would have loved to have been here, but this is nearly as good. In fact, it's better really (laughter).

Thank you all very much. I hope you all enjoy yourself. Thank you. Thank you.

BRETT HABER: We congratulate Judy once again. We thank you and all the members of the Original 9 for all they did to help put this sport where it is today.

We would now like to take a moment to remember some very special people who have left a lasting impact on our sport. Sadly, since last we gathered here in Newport, the tennis world has lost three Hall of Famers. Let's take a moment to remember these legends.

(Video Shown.)

BRETT HABER: The hour has arrived to begin the enshrinement of the Class of 2023.

Over the years, just 264 people throughout tennis history have been the recipient of this, the sport's ultimate honor, Hall of Fame induction. Today we add two more inspiring champions to that roster.

First to officially present Rick Draney, we welcome the current director of wheelchair tennis for the USTA to give some messages on the video board, Jason Harnett.

JASON HARNETT: It was 1996, I was walking into the Racquet Club in Irvine, California. The player I was coaching at the time was by my side. As we approached the front court, I heard an enormous forehand being hit. I turned to see who it was that hit it. I looked at Steve and said, Who is that guy? Why does he look so serious?

Steve replied, Oh, you notice the forehand. Yeah, that's Rick Draney, and he is the best quad player in the world. As tough as he looks, he is really is a wonderful guy.

That was my first impression of Rick: big forehand and serious. Probably the way Rick wanted it. By the way, he won the US Open that year.

Couple years later in 1998 I joined the very first team of national coaches for wheelchair tennis at the USTA. It was in the same year of 1998 that I had my first taste as captain at World Team Cup. Here I am as this young coach in my mid 20s leading a team of older, more experienced players who were beyond motivated to win the historic inaugural quad World Team Cup event.

Rick helped me to understand: Say little, keep your eyes and ears open, but speak freely when you do. That is where trust is built. That is where our friendship truly began.

With Rick in the lead, our team won that inaugural quad World Team Cup championship in Barcelona, Spain.

Rick had speed that was world class, a forehand that stood alone within the division, and honestly the highest tennis IQ in an athlete I had ever worked with or known. Rick was a special athlete, not special to wheelchair athletes, but all athletes, period. Six US Opens, five British Opens, three year-end world championships, two World Team Cup championships, and a gold medal in quad rugby confirmed that.

He was exceptional and transformative. He taught me the art of constantly striving to improve. Everything that Rick did in his life surrounded the drive to improve, including improving the lives around him.

I didn't know Rick when he was 20 to 21 years of age, having survived an accident that would forever change the trajectory of his life. I didn't know how he was raised by his parents, how much religion had formulated his moral compass, or how driven he was to be exceptional at whatever he did. I learned all this later as our paths crossed and our friendship grew.

His innate ability to lead and to be a visionary led the quad division in its inclusivity at all levels of the wheelchair tennis game to greater heights than it had ever seen. He was the right person at the right time in history.

To engage the young, and old, to improve and love the game of tennis like all of us here do, he became the tournament director for the most historic and prestigious wheelchair tennis tournament in the world for the better part of a decade, the US Open for wheelchair tennis.

He gave of himself as a volunteer at the USTA and ITF over the last 35 years, creating opportunities for others within wheelchair tennis. Plain and simple, living a selfless life defines Rick as a human being. Others always first.

We were asked to list out the character traits of people in our lives that have had a transformative impact upon us. Heroic traits such as strength, integrity, honor, selflessness, truthfulness, perseverance, and the immensely important loyalty.

With very little reflection, it was clear that Rick possessed all of the traits of a hero, a hero for me.

Living a noble life with grace and dignity all the while focused on creating opportunities for others, that is a life built upon a foundation of integrity. That has been Rick's life.

In closing, what Rick has meant to myself, my family and to so many others over the last four decades is immeasurable. Our lives have been altered by his presence. He may feel he has lived a fortunate life in many ways, but it is all of us who are the fortunate ones.

Having him in our lives has altered the trajectory of our paths for the better. Ladies and gentlemen, I could not be prouder to present my friend, and now member of the International Tennis Hall of Fame, Rick Draney.

RICK DRANEY: This really is incredible. Jason, thank you

for your kind and complimentary words and what you meant to me through so many years.

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for being here to celebrate this occasion. I don't know about you, but I'm having a really great day (smiling). Thank you.

It's actually been a wonderful several days as we've been here at the Hall of Fame, doing everything that we've done. It is an incredible honor to be recognized as one of the newest members of the International Tennis Hall of Fame class. Thank you to the entire International Tennis Hall of Fame family for your efforts and kindness extended to me throughout the past several months, weeks and days to make this experience for me so personal and meaningful.

Thank you to my family and friends who were able to be here to share this with me. I am mindful of family and friends who were not able to be here with me in person as well, but who are with me here in spirit. I thank each of you for who you are, what you have done for me, what you mean to me.

Thank you to the current Hall of Famers who are here supporting us. I look forward to joining you very soon.

I express my heartfelt thanks to those who were involved in my nomination, selection and induction, and for the commitment and support of those who are devoted to preserving and honoring the significance, legacy and future of tennis.

From the first Class of 1955 to the newest Class of 2023, it is incredibly overwhelming to think that I am now one of 264 individuals in the entire history of this great sport to be enshrined.

Esther, congratulations on your career, your accomplishments, your impact, and your legacy. It is even more special for me to be inducted at the same time as you.

Unbeaten from 2003 until you retired. How incredible. I have to add one little sidenote, here. I was really hoping that technically I would get to be the inductee first between the two of us. That way I am going to claim that I finally am the one in 20 years to beat Esther (laughter).

That is now a part of my legacy.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am grateful for the journey that I have enjoyed. I am proud of the determination that allowed me as a quadriplegic with little to no hand function to develop a method of securing a racquet in my hand consistently and comfortably so I could play.

I am proud of the creativity and innovation, if you will, that prompted me to wrap my hand and wrist with the adhesive side out so I could make better contact with the push rim to move more effectively and efficiently.

I am proud of the many opportunities I had to share what I had learned and developed with other quadriplegics so they could participate in play.

I am proud of being an advocate and campaigner for possibilities and opportunities for growth of the quad division in the United States and around the world since I began playing in 1984. Wow, I'm getting old.

I am proud of my willingness to work hard and put in the effort to improve. I am proud of my successes and accomplishments on the court during my era. Through my involvement with wheelchair tennis, I am proud of the subsequent opportunities I had to honor tennis by seeking to give back to the sport that had given so much to me, like so many others had done before me.

I am proud of the occasions I had to volunteer for and even lead camps and clinics for youth and adults across the globe.

I am proud of the opportunity I had to work alongside tremendous organizations and a talented and dedicated volunteer committee to host the US Open Wheelchair Tennis Championships for nine years in San Diego. And, if along the way I had the opportunity to inform and educate, to encourage and motivate, and to even inspire others through my efforts, I am proud to have been able to do so.

I have sought to conduct myself on and off the court with integrity and respect for the sport and the division that means so much to me. I recognize that I am far from perfect, and I apologize for any offense that I may have caused along the way, although I still think I was right on a couple of those line calls (smiling).

Having said all of this, I fully recognize that whatever my constrictions, my accomplishments, my successes, my impact or legacy may be, I did none of this alone. I am thankful for the God-given talents, abilities and skills with which I have been blessed. I cherish the associations and friendships developed and that endure. I am grateful for coaches and mentors that guided my path. I am grateful for the governing bodies, leaders, sponsors and volunteers that do the hard work.

I treasure the memories. Oh, the memories. I humbly acknowledge that, because of all of this, I have been able to experience, accomplish and enjoy everything that I

have.

To each and every one of you, thank you for what you have given me. Today I am truly honored to be a recipient of the ultimate honor in tennis. Thank you.

BRETT HABER: What an inspiring speech, meritorious of an inspiring man. Rick, congratulations again on this well-deserved honor.

We are about to welcome the second member of the Class of 2023. She is an extraordinarily accomplished woman, and we welcome her to the International Tennis Hall of Fame. To present Esther Vergeer, let's hear from someone who knows her extremely well, her former coach, and coach to many accomplished stars, Sven Groeneveld.

SVEN GROENEVELD: I received a call from Marc Kalkman asking me if I would possibly be interested to speak to Esther Vergeer. I thought, Why me?

He said, We would like for you to work with Esther Vergeer.

I said, Well, I don't have any experience in wheelchair tennis. I have 20 years of experience working with men, female players on the WTA and ATP Tour, but wheelchair tennis?

He said, It's not about tennis. It's about Esther. Esther is contemplating whether she should continue her career or maybe end it.

So long story short, here I am today and speaking to you, Esther, and everybody, about Esther not only as a player but as a person and an inspirator that has played an incredible amount of tennis, undefeated for 470 matches, was ranked 668 weeks at No. 1, won four gold medals in singles at the Paralympics, has an incredible record that is almost not reached by anybody. Who knows, maybe one day somebody will break this.

Esther inspired me. She led me to believe that anything is possible. Because it was inspirational to be with her on court but also off court, to see her interact and to lead and inspire the people that are watching her, but also that she helps in her foundation.

She's an incredible, powerful woman that has overcome incredible hurdles and even beat cancer. She has a wonderful family with an incredible daughter, two daughters with Marjin, that has incredible inspirational family bond.

We worked together for over three years. I remember the

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first time we sat together at the National Centre in Amsterdam where she had to play the Masters Series. It was my first tournament with Esther, and she was already undefeated for seven years.

Mind you, no pressure (smiling). Esther got to the final, was down a set, and got into the tiebreak. I was sweating bullets. I was afraid that this was going to be her defeat in seven years the first time.

But no, she showed up, showed her strength and determination, no fear, incredible power and will, and overcame again and won the championships.

From there on, I was able to witness her development. We focused on Esther, her tennis, off court about increasing her strength, and even created a new wheelchair specifically made towards her body. This led her to win her fourth gold medal at the Paralympics in London.

I'm so proud of being part, a small part, of Esther and her life as a tennis player, but more important as a mother, as a friend, and as an incredible woman.

Ladies and gentlemen, it's a great pleasure to welcome to the stage the new Hall of Famer, Esther Vergeer.

ESTHER VERGEER: Okay, I haven't said anything and I'm already crying (smiling).

Congrats, Rick. We made it. We did it.

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guests, fellow tennis enthusiasts, and of course my family, today I stand before you as a humbled and honored individual filled with gratitude as I'm inducted into the prestigious International Tennis Hall of Fame.

I take you back to March 15, 1989. I'm laying on my stomach in a hospital bed. I hear a lot of beeps, see a lot of tubes, I'm in a lot of pain. Imagine, an eight-year-old girl, 12 doctors and nurses standing around my bed. They take off the blanket, rip the Band-Aid off my back, and they speak difficult medical language, which I do not understand.

I don't get an explanation of what's happening, no idea what this is about.

Before the doctors leave the room, they say I must lay on my stomach for a while. The days after that go by slow. No desire to eat anything. I'm still in a lot of pain and I have no movement in my legs. I'm eight years old, paralyzed from the waist down.

During my rehab, I was introduced with tennis. And what a joy was that. I saw that I sometimes could hit the ball harder than the girl next to me. I saw that I sometimes could move faster than the boy next to me.

Tennis gave me confidence. Tennis was making me laugh. Tennis was making me take back control over my life, believing in myself, trusting that everything would be all right. I have never felt more comfortable than I have on a tennis court.

It's an indescribable, almost magical feeling. Tennis transformed me into the very essence of who I am today. A testament to the power of perseverance, resilience, and determination.

This moment is not mine alone. It reflects the unlimited support, dedication and love that has surrounded me throughout my tennis career. It's a celebration of the sport that has shaped my life and incredible people who have walked this path with me.

Thank you to my family, whose belief fueled my dreams and provided the backbone of my success. I know that they have enjoyed watching me, but I'm also sure that in all those years there were times for them that it was stressful, or that they feared me traveling the world by myself. Thank you for never stopping to support me.

Thanks, Marijn, for making me the strongest person out there physically and mentally. I love you.

And to my daughter, who is the sweetest girl in the world.

Thank you to my coaches who saw potential in me, who gave me the push and the compliments when I needed them the most. You guided me towards success.

Thank you to all the other wheelchair tennis players, role models like Monique Kalkman, Chantal Vandierendonck, who are also proud inductees of the International Tennis Hall of Fame. You opened the door to opportunities in wheelchair tennis for me.

Also a big thank you to my opponents, such as Sonja Peters, Korie Homan, Daniela Di Toro. Battles with them on court have always been intense and challenging. Their skills and passion for the game have pushed me beyond my limits and forced me to constantly strive for improvement.

We have witnessed each other's strengths and weaknesses, knowing that every match was an opportunity for growth.

I accept this honor, and I am mindful of the responsibility it carries, a responsibility to inspire the next generation of tennis players, wheelchair tennis players included, to foster a love for the sport and create pathways for individuals who dare to dream.

With the Esther Vergeer Foundation, we work hard every single day to give kids with a physical disability a chance to play sports nearby their homes, just like every other kid.

We guide them all the way from hospital beds to sporting clubs. We will continue to do so until it's guaranteed that all those kids have an opportunity to play sports, to enjoy the benefits, make friends for life, and build on their confidence.

To every aspiring athlete, I say this: your journey on court is not just about hitting the ball, it's not just about counting your trophies, it's about chasing your dream. It will teach you some beautiful lessons: discipline, patience, the ability to adjust to any situation, and to recover from setbacks.

Remember, the people you surround yourself with can have a big impact on your mindset, your aspirations and your achievements. So choose wisely and surround yourself with individuals who uplift you, inspire you and bring out the best in you.

Embrace the growth that tennis brings not just to your game but to your character.

In closing, I express my deepest gratitude to the International Tennis Hall of Fame for this prestigious honor. Thank you, and let's celebrate the power of tennis together.

BRETT HABER: Esther, we all add our congratulations. You have inspired an immeasurable number of people. We know now as a member of the Hall of Fame, you will inspire even more.

Ladies and gentlemen, have you been inspired by these two remarkable members of the Class of 2023? What a night it's been here in Newport. We offer our utmost and heartfelt congratulations to the newest members of the International Tennis Hall of Fame.

This celebration will continue throughout the night and the rest of the weekend as we honor the Hall of Famers. Esther and Rick, we remind you this is your home away from home and we hope you come back often, every year, as you get a chance to welcome the new Hall of Famers going forward.

Thank you so much for being with us.

