

SPORTS

# Banking on Greatness

*BNP Paribas has tennis in its DNA.*

BY CAROLYN HORWITZ



■ BNP Paribas has been involved with tennis since 1973, when it financed construction of box seats at Roland Garros Stadium, site of the French Open. Now, the French bank is the sponsor of that Grand Slam, as well as the Davis Cup, Fed Cup, and tournaments in Rome, Istanbul, Casablanca, London, and other cities. But its signature event is held right here in the Coachella Valley, the BNP Paribas Open, the fifth-largest tennis tournament in the world.

Like all tournaments the bank sponsors, the Open offers equal prize money for women and men: The 2018 singles winners, Naomi Osaka and Juan Martin del Potro, each took home more than \$1.34 million.

It's a posh event in many ways. Larry Ellison, who took ownership of the tournament in 2010, has reportedly pumped more than \$60 million into improvements to the facility in just the past couple of years. In addition to the state-of-the-art Stadium 1 — the world's second-largest dedicated tennis stadium (after Arthur Ashe in New York) — the extensively landscaped venue includes Stadium 2, which opened in 2014, numerous practice courts with public viewing, luxury shopping, and concessions by the likes of Spago and Moët.

I sat down with Jean-Yves Fillion, CEO of BNP Paribas North America, in the bank's impressive suite at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden — sushi from Nobu, heated toilet seats that automatically rise when you approach — and talked sportsmanship, sponsorships, and Slams. Then we watched Roger Federer battle past Croatia's Borna Coric into the final.

**Are you a tennis fan? Do they even let you work at BNP Paribas if you're not?**

Yes. Irrespective of anyone liking it or not, tennis is part of the DNA of this bank. Everybody jumps in and, you know, gets with the program. Which I think is probably because the values of tennis match pretty well with the values of the bank. If you think about it, tennis is played around the world. This bank is a European leader but with a global presence. I think that's a good match.

**Why does tennis fit so well into the bank's corporate culture?**

Tennis has simple values, such as dedication, hard work, self-improvement, team spirit. It's about remaining humble and being very competitive. It's pretty much what this company's about. It's about respecting diversity, not only men and women but a lot of other dimensions of diversity, including geographical origin or ethnic origin. I think that matches pretty well what this firm is about. It's a firm that is a lot about diversity and inclusion.

**Where do you live?**

I'm French-born but I've spent most of my time in the U.S. I lived in Chicago; I lived in Los Angeles for 11 years. I moved to New York in '99. I was going to say I recently moved to New York; I recently moved to New York 20 years ago.

**It sounds like you did some interesting things in L.A. I've heard you financed Reservoir Dogs.**

I did. I was on the [Paribas] film team. We did a few independent films at the time. The team was financing anywhere between 12 and 15 independent movies a year. It was way back when, you know, late '80s until the late '90s. And we did a few independent films with Quentin Tarantino. And one of them was the one that probably, you know, propelled him.

**That was a good call. But back to tennis: The BNP Paribas Open is often referred to as the fifth Grand Slam. Is there any discussion of actually making that official?**

I'm not aware of any talk of making it a Slam. Obviously it's a decision that is taken at the highest level of the tennis authorities. From where I sit, I just look at it as a unique experience. I don't think it needs any additional, you know, qualifier. I think it's superb the way it is.

**Your company also sponsors the French Open. Is there any sensitivity on the side of the French about the investments being made in Indian Wells?**

I love the French Open. I go to the French Open. I take clients to the French Open. I've never heard, never seen that. Anytime I go to a tennis tournament, I really look at who's playing, I spend time with the fans, with the

ball kids, with people from the media. I haven't heard anything about comparing Indian Wells to the French. The French Open has a lot of good things to it, by the way. Paris can be seen as pretty luxurious.

**Well, it's no Indian Wells. Why do you think people like this tournament so much?**

What's unique here is the proximity and intimacy and kind of natural friendship. Because of the very friendly design, because of the seamless flow when you go from one stadium to another. How accessible the players are ... You can approach the players walking from the main court to the practice courts. [The players] come over here pretty often, in the suite. They come up and chat and say hi. ... Sort of a tennis paradise, if I may say.

**It is. It's very opulent, you know. You can have the fanciest food here, champagne.**

I think the team — Larry and [tournament director] Tommy Haas — have taken this tournament to a pretty unique place. And then I think the point arises, you know: What is the right balance between providing very high-end services and quality and just making sure you stay connected with the real world? Which I believe so far, from what I'm seeing, it's been a real success. But it's always a balance.

**How do you achieve that balance?**

We love sponsoring the large tournaments, you know, high-end, amazing players, highly televised. And we get a lot of attention from the media. But the bank is very deep into tennis [as a] sport. We do family tennis, club tennis, handicap tennis, at a national or regional level.

We leverage tennis as well to try to contribute to the community. For instance, in New York, we've become the title sponsor of a charity called City Parks Tennis. It's co-chaired by Billie Jean King and John McEnroe, and it provides tennis training, coaching, tournaments in the summertime across the five boroughs of New York City to kids who without this would probably not have any vacation. I go there with my team and spend time with the kids and give the trophies away. The final day of this

tournament is actually at the U.S. Open; it takes place the day before the U.S. Open starts in the facility there. ... It's just a wonderful moment for me. It's as rewarding as handing out the trophy to Roger or Serena or Venus.

**Does this involvement in New York mean that BNP Paribas wants to take on sponsorship of the U.S. Open?**

I think we are very happy with what we do. We do already a lot worldwide and across the regions we have presence in. I think we're just trying to make sure that what we're involved in, we do a good job with. I mean, the tournament that is the landmark tournament for BNP Paribas in the U.S. is the BNP Paribas Open. This is the one we've been focusing on.

