

# The last goodbye

U.S. Open marks the swansong for ex-bad boy Agassi

By HOWARD FENDRICH  
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Beneath the stands of Arthur Ashe Stadium, 5-foot-tall posters of U.S. Open champions decorate the otherwise spartan hallways leading to the door Andre Agassi will step through to reach center court for the final time.

There, on a wall between photos of Pete Sampras and Andy Roddick, is a shot of Agassi from his 1994 triumph. His blond hair is long, his face is unshaven, his shirt's a loud purple, and his accessories include a pinkie ring, a dangling earring and a chain necklace, all gold. The getup says "rebel," and that was certainly his reputation for the first decade or so of his pro career.

The Agassi who will play in his last U.S. Open — indeed, his last tournament — looks quite different, from the bald pate on down. And his reputation has changed as much as his appearance.

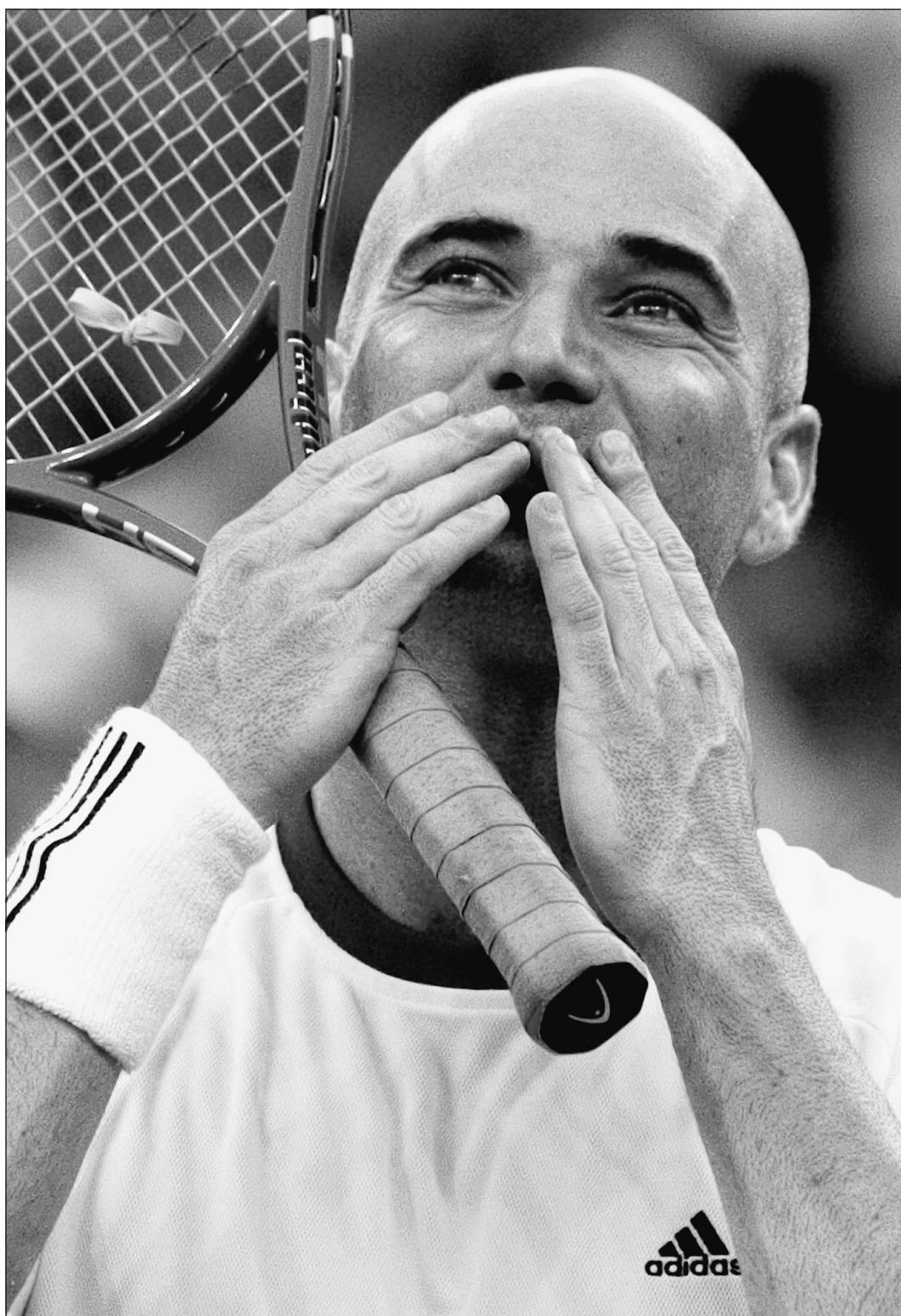
He leaves the game as an elder statesman, not merely because he's 36, but also because of his success on the court and his demeanor and extensive charity work off it. Through all the in-the-public-eye parts of his personal life (Barbra Streisand; Brooke Shields; Steffi Graf) and ups and downs of his professional life (career Grand Slam; No. 1 in 1995; No. 141 in 1997; back to No. 1 in 1999), he's been one of tennis' most dynamic and popular players.

Which is why, even though there are a myriad of intriguing plot lines to follow when play begins Monday at Flushing Meadows — Can Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal meet in a third consecutive Grand Slam final? Will Roddick thrive with new coach Jimmy Connors? Can Maria Sharapova win a second major title? Will Serena Williams, whose sister Venus withdrew with a wrist injury, shake off the rust of a six-month layoff? How will instant replay's Grand Slam debut go? — all eyes will be on Agassi.

It's why U.S. Tennis Association TV ads promoting the tournament feature him with the tagline, "The Legend." It's why the plan is to showcase him against Andrei Pavel of Romania in the only center court match Monday night, a person at the USTA told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity, because the schedule hasn't been officially announced.

All that, even though hardly anyone expects the unseeded Agassi and his troublesome back to leave New York with a Grand Slam title to add to the eight he already owns. Agassi included.

"I hope when I get back to the familiar sights and sounds of Arthur Ashe Stadium that something takes over," he said, "but I don't know what to expect."



Gregory Bull/Associated Press file photo

Once the long-haired rebel of tennis, Andre Agassi has matured into a beloved former champion. He'll take his final bows at the U.S. Open, which begins Monday.

## U.S. OPEN TENNIS

**Schedule:** Play begins Monday. The women's singles final is Sept. 9 at 7 p.m. CDT, the men's singles final is Sept. 10 at 3 p.m.

**2005 men's singles champion:** Roger Federer of Switzerland.

**2005 women's singles champion:** Kim Clijsters of Belgium, who withdrew this year because of a left wrist injury.

**No. 1-seeded man:** Federer, bidding for a third consecutive U.S. Open championship and his third major title of 2006.

**No. 1-seeded woman:** Amelie Mauresmo of France, also aiming for a third major title of 2006.

**Television:** CBS, USA Network.

pect. That's the part of it that's pretty hard to get my arms around."

He needs cortisone injections to deal with the pain and allow freedom of movement, and whatever soothing effects the shots provide last only weeks

now instead of months. There's also the matter of match practice, of getting into a groove by facing top competition in a string of outings before a big event. He doesn't have the benefit of that, either, having pulled out of two events this month.

Still, it's quite clear that it's not about wins and losses at this point. It's about saying, "So long," for Agassi and for everyone else.

"There's a lot of great feelings associated with what I'm going through. There's real excitement. There's sadness in knowing that a big chapter of your life that you've poured yourself into is coming to a close, and there's excitement for the future, for the next stage, the next adventure," Agassi said.

"You're saying goodbye to a job, you're saying goodbye to people you've done it with, but you also are in position to take the next plunge in life. And, you know, I've just never done this before."

It's not surprising that Agassi himself, along with the USTA, TV executives and fans, would like to see him make one last

good showing. Perhaps something akin to Connors' fist-pumping parade to the 1991 U.S. Open semifinals at age 39, considered so thrilling to this day that rain delays prompt producers to dust off the old footage.

But other players want Agassi to go out on a high, too.

"Oh, yeah, I would love to see him win many matches. That's the first thing I think every player looks at this time around: Who does Agassi play? Where is he in the draw?" two-time defending champion Federer said. "He's got a tough draw, there's no question. But I still hope he's going to have a good run like last year."

By making his exit here, Agassi is coming full circle: His first major tournament was in New York as a 16-year-old in 1986. Two years later, he reached the Open's semifinals, and in 1992 he won his first Grand Slam title at Wimbledon. He would add U.S. Open titles in 1994 and 1999, four Australian Open titles and the 1999 French Open title, making him one of five men to win all four majors.

them:

- A tour of the ballpark.
- A chance to throw out the first pitch.
- An opportunity to call the game for three innings in the fantasy radio booth.

"He was excited," said Ron, the son-in-law. "He wouldn't stop talking about it."

Then, Jim got very ill. Or, rather, his illness finally got the better of him.

He had been diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukemia in 1982. He still tried to serve in Desert Storm.

"They sent him back with an armed guard," Sue said, "because they knew he'd try to find a way back in."

That's the kind of soldier Jim was.

"He never flinched," Sue said.

And on July 25, when his time came, he didn't flinch then, either.

Sue and Bethany were both in the hospital room. Jim took off his oxygen mask and asked his wife for a kiss.

"A minute later, he was gone," Bethany said.

As the two women were leaving the hospital, stunned and grieving, Sue got an idea. "We have to find a St. Jude kid to use the Fantasy Day," she said.

Bethany smiled. A kid at a baseball game? What could possibly be better?

So the Legans called Jason Potter, the Redbirds director of marketing.

"You're not going to believe

this," Potter told a colleague, when he got off the phone, "but the man who won the Fantasy Day passed and the family wants to give it to a St. Jude patient."

"You're not going to believe this," the colleague said, "but I just got a call about a boy who was diagnosed with cancer and needs a pick-me-up."

So it was that this past Friday morning, Sam Farris, 10, awoke at Target House, underwent a round of blood work at St. Jude, and waited on a hospital bed to be told he could go back to his home in Mantachie, Miss.

"I have a surprise for you first," said his mother, Teresa Farris. "A BIG surprise." Sam played shortstop and pitched for the Mantachie Wildcats this spring. He's a good little player.

But teammates wondered why he ran so slow. His mom wondered about his persistent cough.

"The doctors found a tumor the size of a brick in his back," she said.

"Now we know about the running, anyway," said Sam, rolling his eyes.

The kid is always cracking jokes like this. He's wry and smart and funny.

"Just like Jim!" said Sue Legan, who came to the ballpark Friday to meet Sam and his family.

It was one month to the day since Jim died. It was warm and emotional.

"I know now this is why Jim

won," Sue told Sam. "You'll have a big time tonight."

So Sam got the tour, and met the players, and called a fantasy game in between — you don't see this every day — bites of cotton candy.

"My husband had one of those, too," said Sue, admiring Sam's Redbirds cap. "You look every bit the ballplayer."

They took pictures. They talked baseball.

They talked about life and how it can brush you back, and how the key is hanging in there.

Then came time for the ceremonial first pitch.

"I wanted to come see you do this," Sue said. "I feel like my husband is seeing it, too."

John Webb, the Redbirds pitcher, volunteered to catch the ball. He lost a younger brother to cancer a couple years ago.

Sam started the long walk to the mound. The picture of Jim went up on the big screen, and remember how minor-league baseball is measured in moments?

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To reach Geoff Calkins, call 529-2364 or e-mail [calkins@commercialappeal.com](mailto:calkins@commercialappeal.com). You can hear his radio show, "Sportstime with George Lapides and Geoff Calkins," from 8-10 a.m. Monday-Friday on WHBQ-AM (560).

# Golfing sibling yields to talent

Irwin resists, then follows sister's lead

By COLIN DONOHUE  
Special to The Commercial Appeal

Innate talent has to be unearthed, discovered. It bubbles to the surface only when sculpted and cultivated. Of course, to riff on an age-old adage, if undeveloped skill goes unnoticed, and no one is around to witness it, does it really exist?



Abby Irwin

German-town High golfer Abby Irwin would affirm it does.

Still, it's an important question because Irwin's afternoons could just as easily have been spent weaving through the crowded hallways of Memphis malls rather than enjoying a good walk spoiled on flowing fairways.

A simple case of stubbornness borne of sibling rivalry could've resulted in unfilled promise for this part-time shop-a-holic.

"I've been around golf because of my sister for a really long time," Irwin said, "but I always hated it."

How easily a golf career could've been derailed before departure. Why the unwavering recalcitrance?

"I think mostly because I wanted to be different than (my sister)," she said. "It's always the younger sibling rivalry and everything, but I was trying so hard to be different."

Her sister is Beth, a golfer whose shadow continued to cast itself longer as she moved from the links in Germantown to the courses at Mississippi State University.

Abby, now a top Shelby-Metro girls' golfer, decided 3½ years ago that following her sister's path wasn't as ruinous to her life as she thought.

"I just kind of sucked it up and realized it's OK to be like her," Abby, 17, said. "And I loved it."

Despite being around the game for several years, Abby's initial foray into the sport was little more than a lark.

She and a group of friends were discussing their plans for the ensuing summer months before the start of their freshman year in high school.

One prescient confidante, perhaps realizing Abby's inherent skill, suggested they take golf lessons.

"I had always been told I had a natural talent," she said. "Luckily for me it was fun because I was the best in the group of the people I took lessons with."

Her dedication manifested early.

She would leave school at 2 p.m., hustle to the golf course and begin a round by 3:30 p.m. most days of the week.

Her progression has been so rapid that now she's the No. 1 golfer at Germantown, among the boys and girls.

"She's probably the best golfer I've coached," said Germantown golf coach Mike Kent. "Since I've been here, historically she's been one of the best golfers in the area."

As a junior last year, Irwin won the District 15-AAA and Region 8-AAA tournaments and finished fifth in the Class AAA state tournament.

This year she's finished third and tied for second in two matches.

She's a consistent golfer, commonly hitting fairways and greens in regulation. She's short off the tee, but strong with her irons. She also shored up her short game this summer.

Germantown's next match is at 3 p.m. Tuesday at Cherokee

## PREP GOLF TEAMS TO WATCH

### BOYS

**Bolton:** After an area-best third-place finish in the Class AAA state tournament last season, junior star Jack Belote returns to anchor a Bolton squad looking for its second straight team appearance at state. Sophomore Ryan Woods and seniors Derek Pickett and Drew Griggs round out spots 2-4.

**Evangelical Christian School:** ECS returns a pair of All-Metro performers in seniors Jonathan Fly and Wes Carver. Fly was a finalist last season for BOP boys golfer of the year following his runner-up finish in the Division 2 state tourney. Throw in experienced senior Bobby Bruce and juniors Will Garner and Chris Thomas, and ECS could be the most talented team in the area.

**Houston:** Junior Jacob Crowl appears set for a breakout year after his medalist finish in last week's Richard Whaley CPA Panther Invitational at Quail Ridge. Crowl's presence, combined with that of All-Metro returnee Paul Zampini, seniors Ray Chaudoin and Kevin Carver and talented newcomer Cory Gaylord, will keep Houston atop the heap in Region 8-AAA.

**Memphis University School:** As usual, the Owls lost a ton of talent to graduation from a team that finished an area-best third in last year's D2 state tourney, including Texas signee Bobby Hudson. However, MUS does return a pair of All-Metro performers in senior Daniel Brown and sophomore Drew Frisby as well as a solid supporting cast led by seniors Adam Bomar and Dev Varma.

**White Station:** Senior Zach Smalley and junior Preston McClellan, both All-Metro selections in 2005, give White Station the most talented 1-2 punch of any city school. Now it's up to Spartan head coach Ed McDugle to develop some depth to go with them.

### GIRLS

**Bolton:** Even after the graduation of 2005 BOP winner Kellye Belcher (Indiana), there's enough talent here for the Lady Wildcats to qualify for state as a team for a third time in four years with All-Metro returnees Ashley Wathen (senior) and Ashley Averitt (junior) both returning.

**Germantown:** A finalist last season for BOP girls golfer of the year, senior Abby Irwin, who finished fifth in last year's Class AAA state tourney, leads a Red Devil squad that has enough depth this season with senior Julia Fenton and sophomore Sarah Hall for a return trip to state.

**Houston:** They may be young, but Houston freshman Natalie Mitchell and sophomore Sarah Watkins have stood out early this season for a Mustang girls team that hasn't qualified for the Class AAA state tournament since 2003.

**Southern Baptist Educational Center:** The Lady Trojans boast an ace up their sleeve in senior Lauren Spurlock, a 2005 BOP finalist who finished an area-best sixth individually at last year's D2 state tourney. Junior Lauren Steele and sophomores Bailey Fleming and Kendall Wright round out a talented supporting cast.

**St. Agnes:** A BOP finalist as a freshman last season, St. Agnes sophomore Sarah Mathews, the 2005 West Region champion, returns to anchor a Stars team that lost four seniors to graduation. If St. Agnes is to repeat as West Regions champs, the Stars will need big contributions from freshman Anne Mason.

— Jason Smith

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## CALKINS

much."

Jim was Jim Legan, the soldier in our story, who celebrated his 69th birthday and Father's Day at AutoZone Park this past June 19.

The Legans lived in Jackson, Miss., but they came to Memphis all the time to visit their daughter and son-in-law, Bethany and Ron Shelton.

And they always stopped at the ballpark. There's just something about the place. Jim loved the spaces and the sight lines and the way it made him feel.

But he especially loved the kids. A kid at a baseball game? What could possibly be better?

So, sure enough, when Jim and Sue said they were coming up for his birthday, Ron went down early to buy tickets.

"I stopped at the team store and bought him a shirt for a present," Ron said. "They were selling medallions, too, to win a Fantasy Day at the ballpark. I said, 'What the heck?' and I bought a couple."

Jim won the Fantasy Day. No, he didn't believe it either. "Really?" he said.

Really. "Really?" he said. Jim rose to the rank of Lt. Col. with Army Special Forces. He wasn't prone to giddiness.

"But he smiled," Sue said. "He kept going over the list of all the things he'd won." Among



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