

Started 39 years ago to create a safe haven, the US Gay Open was the “first LGBTQ tennis tournament ever,” Paul Mabe, President of the Gay Lesbian Tennis Federation (GLTF) proudly said. To put in perspective the importance of this tournament for the LGBTQ community, you have to look at when it was created. In 1980, as explained by the GLTF website, the AIDS epidemic claimed thousands of lives and the gay community realized that a healthy, active outlet was needed to nurture the community. Gay sports provided that vehicle on top of creating a safe haven when discrimination was at its peak, and the GLTF became one of the largest organizations of its kind.



For the 39th edition of the US Gay Open, the GLTF had to find a different venue as Golden Gate Park is currently under construction. “We really wanted to keep the tradition alive, so we did everything we could to make the tournament happen and we are glad that San Francisco State University served as our site for this year’s US Gay Open,” Mike Kalvoda, Tournament Co-Director explained. To this, Mabe added that “it was so rewarding seeing people hang out after their matches. Tennis might not be a team sport on the court, but it’s a team sport off the court, and the US Gay Open is exactly that.”

A former Los Angeles resident, Mabe recalled a perfect story to exemplify the meaning of the long standing tournament. “Two players came to the front desk to ask which court they were going to play on, once we told them, they looked and saw a couple of players already on, so they asked if they could kick them out,” Mabe laughed. “They told me they saw a kid around 10 years old and figured he wasn’t part of the tournament. I went with the players to the court and then realized he was one of their opponents,” the energetic and funny current [resident of GLTF] recalled. “It was so cool to see people share their sport with the community and family, as he was playing in the tournament with his dad,” Mabe said with his usual upbeat tone.

A place where everyone can be themselves, the US Gay Open, once again was a huge success with 105 participants. During the three-day event, participants were treated to lunch, snacks from Cliff Bars, Honey Stinger, Nunn Electrolyte, and an entertaining dinner banquet at the Mexican family-run eatery Don Ramon’s, in downtown San Francisco. “We want to make things special for our players,” Kalvoda said. “We have people coming from Bali, Australia, Spain for the tournament which is extremely gratifying to have such a wide range of people. We’re a 100% volunteer organization and the entire Board of Directors delegated duties so it’s a credit to everyone!”

As the biggest signature event for GLTF, they have big plans for their 40th year anniversary. “I hope that people continue to grow the game and community,” Mabe told USTA NorCal. “We will continue to offer an environment where everyone can compete in a comfortable setting and still be one of the few tournaments that offer certain draws (D level).” Kalvoda noted that he would like to see more women participate in the tournament.

To understand how far the GLTF and the US Gay Open have come, you have to see where it came from. After the Gladiator, San Francisco’s first gay sports newspaper, included a call to the gay community to create the Gay Tennis Federation with an invitation to come to the 15th Street tennis courts. Two days later, 13 players showed up for a beginners’ clinic and set play for the GTF’s tennis ladder. A year later, the GTF had more than 100 members with programming and the United States Gay Open. As an inclusive community, both Kalvoda and Mabe would absolutely welcome straight people if they wanted to join in on the fun. Kalvoda remembered a fun event that happened in Los Angeles that showed the inclusiveness of the community. “We started having straight people playing in GLTA events and when I asked them why, they replied: ‘You have more fun!’,” the vibrant volunteer said still laughing about it. To conclude why this tournament means so much to the LGBTQ community, Mabe reminds us that, “there are no other tournament called the US Gay Open!”