

FREE ENTERPRISE

OPEN SEATING

AND THEN THERE WERE those who made it to the Open without tickets at all. Sidestepping the standard scalping route, these ticketless tennis lovers latched onto a long-standing, semi-sophisticated operation run by an enterprising bunch of U.S. Open ushers.

The scenario went something like this: Intrepid tennis fans were invited to place a late-night phone call at home to one solicitous usher who actually advertised his services with an off-season newsletter. During this phone call, said usher would present his sliding price plan (commencing at \$30 for the Labor Day weekend, on up); a password would also be provided for each match day.

Initial rendezvous instructions? Proceed, each tennis lover was told, to a specific gate and look for a certain hat number among the

ticket-takers. Admission essentials? Two plain white envelopes, one filled with money, one empty. At the designated gate, pass the designated ticket-taker the designated empty envelope along with the password (a name, like Don or Elvis) and the number in your party (as in "four for Don" or "four for Elvis"). The result? Swift, silent admittance to the sacrosanct tennis grounds of Flushing.

Inside, the formerly home-based usher (now on duty) greeted his client personally and accepted the second, loaded envelope. In exchange, the client was slapped with a sticker—a promotional sticker, say, for a defunct airline, which now identified him to other interested Tennis Center personnel. So bestickered, he soon found himself seated in a vacant spot—ideally, of course, at courtside.



At least for a while. If the seat's rightful owner suddenly appeared (as, inevitably, he did), the stickered guest was hurriedly shuffled off to another seat. "We must have gotten moved five times," admitted one exhausted tennis fan who availed himself of the unofficial Open-seating plan, about which Open officials would make no official comment. "I finally wound up

under the rafters in this space where the ball boys and girls sit when they're not working."

By the tournament's latter days, the fragile organizational structure that had held for a good number of previous Opens seemed to be fraying. "Today, things are gonna be a little different,"

the lead usher conceded by phone. "When you come over from the subway, Tony's gonna be there. The guy's name is Tony. He'll be wearin' a Yankees shirt, and he'll be sittin' on a pink-and-blue-and-gray blanket. He's gonna get you in. Once you're in, you're on your own. So everything's gonna be more or less the same except our faces won't be there. Inside." **GUY HAINES**