

# GATEWAY TO



With her victory at this year's U.S. Open, Esther Vergeer extended her streak to 378 straight singles wins.

# SUCCESS

by Richard Dedor  
photos by Mark Cowan

St. Louis welcomed some of the world's best tennis athletes for a topnotch competition.

**F**or the 30th year, athletes from around the globe came to America for the U.S. Open USTA Wheelchair Championships. More than 250 matches took place in St. Louis, September 1-6.

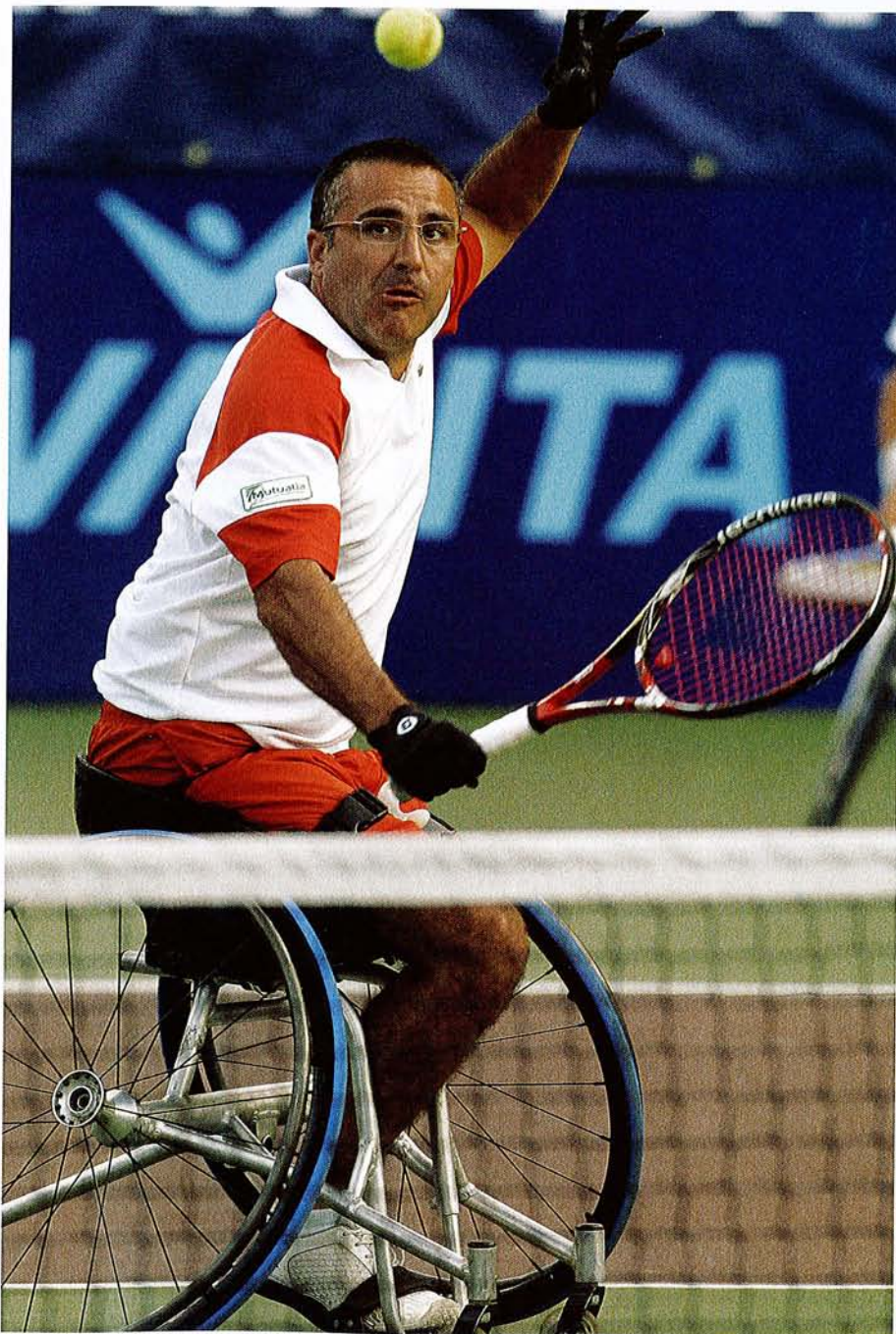
The best players in the world were on hand to battle it out for the last of three ITF Super Series titles on the 2009 NEC international wheelchair tennis tour. Just after the conclusion of this event, some players had to catch planes to New York for the final Grand Slam of the year at Flushing Meadows.

In previous years, this event was called the ROHO Gateway Classic, but in 2009 the ITF (International Tennis Federation) and the United States Tennis Association (USTA) bumped it up to National Championship status; ROHO remained the title sponsor.

For someone like me who had never been to, worked at, or even seen wheelchair tennis in person—let alone an event with the world's best athletes—this was a display of sportsmanship, camaraderie, kindness, and athleticism.

Melissa Keim, vice president, marketing, for The ROHO Group, said, "This

Stephane Houdet returns a volley during Men's Open action. Houdet faced a tough opponent in past U.S. Open winner Shingo Kunieda and lost in two sets.





Super Series title elevates the exposure of a larger range of athletes, wheelchair and able-bodied. More exposure to wheelchair tennis and wheelchair athletics is a good thing for everyone involved. Plus, one of three Super Series events in the world is serious business."

## Men

The quality of play was topnotch right from the start. Some players had only been competing a few years, while others had been around for decades. But each came into the tournament with visions of winning.

Zach Beaulieu (Champaign, Ill.), who is still working his way up the rankings, played a tough draw, eventually losing in the round of 16 to Maikel Scheffers (Netherlands). When he wasn't on the court, Beaulieu was watching and trying to find ways to get better.

Beaulieu has been involved in tennis most of his life. After Beaulieu's accident, his father put together a tennis program in Augusta, Maine, to help him learn the sport and stay active. Beaulieu attended the University of Illinois-Champaign on a partial wheelchair basketball scholarship, but recently decided to focus solely on tennis.

"I found a sport (in tennis), and it's amazing," Beaulieu says. "It's different from basketball because you're pushing yourself through the mental battle to get better."

He attributes much of his success to one of his mother's friends who helped pay for Beaulieu's club memberships and racquets.

Many athletes have stories just like that. Someone put a racquet in their hand; someone told them about tennis. Whatever the case may be for Shingo Kunieda (Chiba, Japan), he keeps on winning.

In the final match of the Men's Open, Kunieda faced a close first set against Frenchman Stephane Houdet but was able to win his third consecutive U.S. Open title, 7-6, 6-1. Kunieda also won the

During the Men's Open championship match, Shingo Kunieda topped Stephane Houdet, 7-6, 6-1, for his third consecutive U.S. Open title.



In men's doubles play, Paul Moran (shown here) teamed with Yoshinobu Fujimoto to face Martin Legner and Stephane Houdet. Moran/Fujimoto lost, 6-1, 6-2.

doubles title, teaming up with Robin Ammerlaan (Soest, Netherlands).

Seeing Kunieda win yet another men's title provides more motivation for Beaulieu.

"Watching every match helps me get better," he says. "And competing against the top guys is always a chance to learn more."

### Women

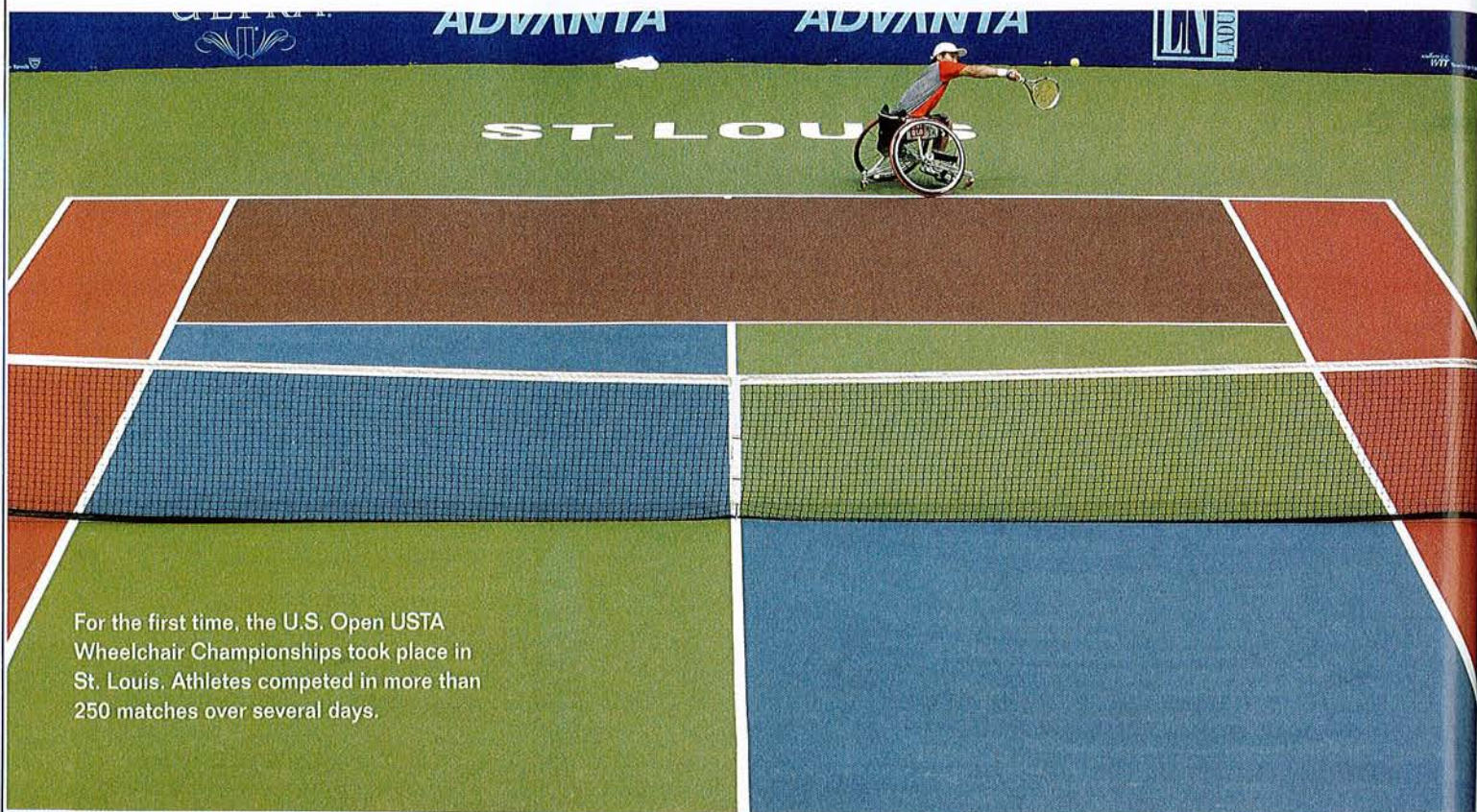
Dana Mathewson (San Diego), now at the University of Arizona, has played at previous U.S. Opens but returned this year to, like Beaulieu, get better.

"I'm still new on the tour," Mathewson says. "Playing matches like this still scares me a little bit."

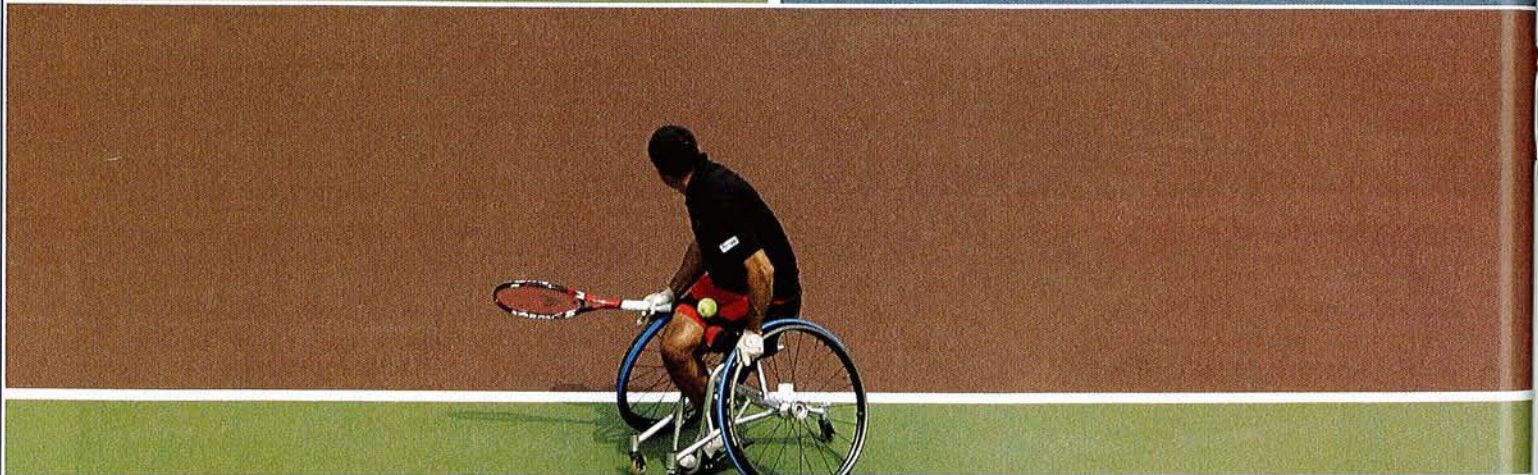
In the second round, Mathewson faced a tough Korie Homan (Netherlands), and lost, 6-0, 6-1. Even though she didn't go any farther, Mathewson is a rising American star.



Robin Ammerlaan took on Shingo Kunieda in the Men's Open quarterfinals; Kunieda, the eventual champion, won this match, 6-0, 6-2.



For the first time, the U.S. Open USTA Wheelchair Championships took place in St. Louis. Athletes competed in more than 250 matches over several days.



Mathewson could be seen smiling and chatting with her fellow competitors. In addition, she was watching and learning.

Who better to learn from than the world's best woman's player: Esther Vergeer (Netherlands). She hasn't lost a match in so long, she can't remember when it was.

If you're counting, she's won five Paralympic gold medals and a week after this Super Series event earned her fourth U.S. Open title in Flushing Meadows. Her

Korie Homan returns a ball against Esther Vergeer, who defeated Homan, 6-0, 3-6, 6-1, for the women's title.

New York title extends her singles winning streak to 378 straight victories.

In the Women's Open Singles final, Vergeer faced off against Homan, who took her to a third set for the sixth time in the last two years. The two have had 41 career meetings and are currently the top two women in the world.

Vergeer's streak remained intact, as she won, 6-0, 3-6, 6-1.

Even with the newest trophy on her mantel, she isn't satisfied. "I want to be the very best, and I know I'm not at my top yet," she says.

When she's not winning titles, Vergeer spends her time involved with The Esther Vergeer Foundation, which organizes sports clinics for kids with disabilities. As a youngster, Vergeer tried wheelchair tennis, and it gave her back her smile. Now she is working to give a smile back to other kids.

## Quads

David Wagner (Portland, Ore.) and Nick Taylor (Wichita, Kan.) have won the last two Paralympic gold medals. They are striving for a three-peat in London in 2012.

In 2003, Taylor thought of the pairing, and the idea seemed like a good one. History agrees. The two are the world's No. 1-ranked doubles team. For each of them, their career highlight has been teaming up and winning the gold medals.

Before Wagner found tennis, he was a three-time national table tennis champion. But he started to want more—to be outside. Before his accident he had been an avid outdoorsman; basketball, golf, and water-skiing were among his athletic pursuits. Then he found tennis.

"The second I got in a tennis chair and taped on the racquet, I couldn't get enough," Wagner says.



And as for London? "We'd be going for something pretty special," Taylor says. "It's going to be difficult with the younger players, but we're going to go for it."

Wagner won double gold in St. Louis, also taking the quad singles title

A former table tennis champion and Paralympic quad doubles gold medalist, David Wagner earned the Quad Division championship over Johan Andersson as well as the doubles title with Nick Taylor.

from Johan Andersson (Virso, Sweden).

## Lettered

The U.S. Open attracts athletes who aren't necessarily "elite" players but who just want to compete.

One of the best examples was Aleki Fualau (Fenton, Mo.). The day before his competition was scheduled to begin, he was watching matches and asking anyone and everyone to hit around with him.

"I don't want to lose sight of the fact that it's important to keep people who just want to play," says James.

Some of the players are fortunate enough to make a living on the tennis tour, but for those in the A, B, or C divisions, this is something they are working toward or they just enjoy playing recreationally.

"Here is a bunch of people who still have to work. But they can play with their

peers," says James. Coming and playing here is how they use their vacation time.

St. Louis native Paul Moran said it best: "I told somebody (after my accident) that I used to be a good athlete. They said, 'No, Paul. You are a good athlete.'" **S'NS**



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