

ADWEEK

New USTA Ads Focus on Next Gen Players in a Post-Serena World

The campaign, from Dentsu Creative, promotes the upcoming U.S. Open



"Spectacular Awaits" focuses on emerging superstars in tennis. USTA/Dentsu Creative

By T.L. Stanley

There's a Serena-sized hole in the professional tennis landscape, but marketers aren't dwelling on what they've lost—instead they're focusing on the next generation of potential scene stealers and trophy winners to draw fans to this summer's U.S. Open.

For a campaign launching this weekend, executives at the [U.S. Tennis Association](#) and agency Dentsu Creative also recruited an influential young voice,

TikTok's Cookiee Kawaii, to narrate the new ads and provide the soundtrack via her hit single, "Violin."

A 30-second hero spot debuting Saturday on TV and social media prominently features emerging stars like Coco Gauff, Carlos Alcaraz, Iga Swiatek and Frances Tiafoe under the tagline "Spectacular Awaits." A second commercial teases the event's high-profile celebrity sightings, premium food and drink offerings and on-site sponsor activations.

USTA officials said it's "definitely a challenge" to promote a U.S. Open without the marquee names that have dominated the sport for the past few decades. Serena Williams and fellow champion Roger Federer both hung up their racquets at the end of last season.

"There were a lot of expectations that we'd just fall apart in a post-Serena world, but we're excited about the new players and the energy around our event," Nicole Kankam, USTA's managing director of pro tennis marketing and entertainment, told Adweek. "Not to diminish Serena, who was a once-in-a-generation talent, and her influence not just in tennis but across sport, entertainment and culture was unprecedented."

'Social-first lens'

"Spectacular Awaits" will run for the next several months to promote the tennis and entertainment extravaganza, which kicks off in late August at New York's USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center. It was first coined as an ad concept in 2022, but has evolved to promote this year's three-week event.

"We wanted to insure we were really being contemporary and relevant," Kankam said. "We're trying to reach a younger, more diverse audience, so we developed the campaign with a social-first lens."

The music-driven work has "swagger," Kankam said, aiming to broaden the appeal of a sport that continues to bat back against criticisms that it's old, white and elitist.

Research, though, shows that the demographics for the sport are changing. People of color now represent 38% of American tennis players, up from 32.5% in 2019.

Participation among the Hispanic, Black and Asian American Pacific Islander populations have jumped by double digits over the past three years, per the Physical Activity Council.

Overall, interest in tennis has grown significantly since the pandemic, with 4.2 million people trying the game for the first time in 2022, according to the study, with beginners accounting for 18% of the total playing public. Even with the popularity of pickleball, tennis and its 23.6 million players outnumber that sport, plus badminton, racquetball and squash combined.

Sophisticated vibe

As part of the brief, USTA asked Dentsu Creative to search for an energetic piece of music with “pulsing rhythms” to power the spots, Kankam said. “We wanted a unique sound that was sophisticated and authentic and really highlighted a youthful energy.”



Players to watch dominate the new “Spectacular Awaits” campaign hyping this summer’s U.S. Open.

The agency came up with several options, with Kawaii chosen based on the success of her debut studio record—her single “Vibe” alone has racked up 100

million streams—her devoted TikTok following and her hometown roots in the tristate area. “Violin,” with its 40 million streams, was a strategic and tonal fit, according to the creatives.

The tennis league also wanted to amplify female voices as it celebrates the 50th anniversary of equal prize money for men and women, Kankam said.

Kawaii—born Vanice Palmer in Irvington, N.J.—will be involved beyond the initial 30-second commercials, extending into an ambassador role. The performer will work with the USTA to develop offshoots and content based on the “Spectacular Awaits” ads for TikTok and other platforms. She will appear at the U.S. Open, which starts with a fan-centric week of activity followed by two weeks of tournament play in Flushing Meadow.

Tickets for the event, which drew 900,000 people cumulatively in 2022, go on sale to the public Monday.