



## HOW ASIA IS BECOMING THE NEW HUB OF GLOBAL TENNIS

In an exclusive interview with Tennis Digest, Asian Tennis Federation President Yuriy Polsky discussed his main achievements during his first year in office, strategic partnerships with Grand Slams, and how Asia is turning into one of the most promising regions in global tennis.



**Mr. Polskiy, you've been heading the Asian Tennis Federation for your second year now. What do you consider your major accomplishments during this time?**

– I believe the key achievement is uniting the national associations across Asia. They now closely collaborate with each other either directly or through the Asian Tennis Federation. We've completely removed the political aspect from our work and are solely focused on tennis development, which is our primary mission. We managed to unify the professional calendar. Challenger-level events, ITF Tour, World Tennis Tour, and lower-tier tournaments are now seamlessly aligned. We've agreed with all national associations across the region to align the tournament calendar for it to entail good reasoning in terms of logistics between the tournaments, and this is a huge step forward.

For example, if several tournaments are held simultaneously in East Asia, we avoid scheduling similar events in other regions. This way, players can compete against the strongest opponents in one location, rather than spreading out across regions playing in similar tournaments, which would result in a weaker draw. This ensures that the primary goal for players – gaining strong competitive experience – is achieved.

On the other hand, we have addressed the shortage of tournaments for entry-level players. In general, their number has increased by 1.5x across Asia, especially in junior ATF and ITF events. This allows players to gain valuable experience without having to leave the region or incur significant expenses.

In addition, we've strengthened our collaboration with the Grand Slams. We now work closely with the Australian Open and Wimbledon. For example, the qualifying stages of the junior French Open are held in Kazakhstan and China, with the final stage taking place in Japan. This has opened up an additional pathway to the Slams—something that was once an unattainable dream for many players.

And now, through the wild card draw and with the support of the FFT and the ATF this is an additional opportunity to finance high-level tournaments. In other words, they are an excellent platform for competitive experience in their own right, but there is also the opportunity to receive funding through the ITF. Successful players are awarded ATF ranking points, which are converted into World Tennis Numbers. As a result, the overall ranking of participating players increases, giving new stars the opportunity to prove themselves.

**What areas of Asian tennis development required your particular attention in your early years?**

– Initially, a lot of attention was paid to players traveling outside their countries and increasing competition in Asia. We wanted them to compete more with each other so that we retain the best players in the region and the rest would have the opportunity to compete with them. We have also significantly increased the number of tournaments. We are working to ensure that Asian players see tennis as a potential professional career, otherwise many of them, and this is one of our biggest challenges, see tennis more as a hobby. Tennis is an opportunity to get a free college education, which players take advantage of, and as a result, many of them never return to tennis. Moreover, they settle in the countries where they receive their education, which are the UK and the US. This is a big problem for Asian tennis as a whole.

## What do you think is the biggest challenge for tennis in Asia in the coming years?

Asia currently holds tremendous potential for growth. It is the fastest-growing region in the world in terms of both income and population, and the number of people taking up tennis is rising at an impressive rate. In China alone, millions of new tennis enthusiasts emerge each year—especially following the outstanding performance of Chinese players at last year's Olympics, where they captured both gold and silver medals.

South Korean players have also made remarkable progress, and India continues to produce a large number of talented athletes. Naturally, Kazakh players have distinguished themselves as well, consistently delivering strong results. Japan and Taiwan, too, remain steady sources of top-level talent. Our overarching goal is to ensure that the most promising players successfully transition into the professional ranks and advance through the appropriate tournament levels at the right time.



To support this, we are working closely with the ITF to expand the number of high-level junior tournaments in the region. Three additional ITF events—at the 200, 300, and 500 levels—have already been approved. This will significantly reduce travel costs for Asian players, who will no longer need to go to Europe or North America to earn ranking points; they'll be able to compete closer to home.

At the same time, the perception of tennis as a viable professional career is gradually improving. We are actively fostering this shift through outreach on social media and our website, as well as by organizing educational sessions for coaches, players, and their families. It's a massive undertaking, but one with enormous potential. Tennis must be recognized not merely as a recreational activity, but as a serious career path—and treated with the commitment and professionalism it deserves.

## What are the prospects for tennis growth in Asia, and what needs to be done to attract a wider audience? Are there any countries that you think could become leaders in Asian tennis in the future?

Today, I believe that Central Asia—particularly Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan—holds significant potential for tennis development. These countries are actively investing both attention and resources into the growth of the sport. I also see great promise in Western Asia, especially among the Gulf nations. Qatar, for example, is making substantial investments in tennis, and Saudi Arabia is following a similar path with impressive momentum. Iran, which has historically been a strong sporting nation, also has the foundations to thrive in tennis.

India, meanwhile, has seen a slight decline in its leadership position within South Asia in recent years. However, I am confident that it will quickly regain ground. The country is currently undergoing a transitional phase in the management of its national tennis federation, and once stability is restored, I believe Indian players will begin achieving more notable results, particularly with the support of both the federation and the government.

And of course, East Asia—comprising Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and China—continues to grow at a rapid pace. The number of players from this region breaking into the top 100 of the ATP and WTA rankings increases year after year, further solidifying its status as a powerhouse in global tennis.

## How is the ATF supporting young talent and fostering an environment for their development?

The ATF is currently implementing several key initiatives aimed at supporting young talent. First, we offer wild cards to promising players based on their rankings, giving them access to higher-level competition. Second, we select top players in the 14&U, 16&U, and 18&U age categories to join ATF development teams, which receive funding to participate in premier tournaments across Asia and Europe. Last year, for example, we sent a number of players to prestigious events such as the Orange Bowl and Eddie Herr—tournaments where they not only earn valuable ranking points but also gain crucial international experience.

Additionally, we've introduced a new component: the Intercontinental Cup, an under-12 international team tournament in which the best teams from Asia compete against their counterparts from Australia, New Zealand, and Oceania. Starting this year, we are planning to expand the tournament to include teams from Latin America and Africa, and possibly even Europe—negotiations are currently underway.

By the age of 12, these young athletes will already be exposed to world-class competition, giving them an invaluable head start. This kind of early experience builds confidence and helps them understand the level of dedication and improvement required to compete with the best in the world—and to keep pace with them as they progress in their careers.

### **What measures need to be taken to improve the performance of Asian players in world tournaments?**

I believe it is crucial to cultivate strong competition in Asia starting from the age of 12. Traditionally, players and parents from historically strong tennis nations such as Japan, Korea, China, and India have been hesitant to travel abroad for tournaments. As a result, players become accustomed to specific playing styles, conditions, and surfaces, which ultimately puts them at a disadvantage compared to their European peers. In Europe, the geographic proximity and logistical ease allow players to regularly face high-level competition from a young age, which in turn fosters a more diverse and adaptable style of play.

To address this, the ATF has introduced international team and individual competitions starting from 12. We are actively developing the U12, U14, and U16 categories to ensure that Asia's top young players are exposed to strong international competition early on. This helps them adapt to a wider range of playing styles and prepares them to compete confidently against any opponent in the future.



### **How would you assess cooperation with other regional associations and its impact on the development of tennis?**

We are currently collaborating very closely with Oceania—particularly with Australia and New Zealand, which are regional leaders. We've also established strong ties with Europe. For instance, we now host European tournaments on Asian soil, a result of extensive discussions aimed at fostering deeper inter-regional cooperation. Similarly, since last year, we've been holding Asian Series events in Europe, including in Azerbaijan. In regions where geographical borders converge, we strive to organize dual-access tournaments—giving Asian players easier entry into European events and vice versa. This approach helps enhance overall competitive standards.

From a logistical standpoint, it also offers players cost-effective opportunities to gain high-level match experience. Since two years ago, we've been actively working with Latin America, where tennis has seen significant growth over the past five years. Our goal is to maintain that momentum and foster strong competition for our top talents. Last year, we also launched collaboration with Africa, signing MoUs with each of these regions. This has enabled us to create new joint tournaments—such as the 12&U Intercontinental Team Cup, which brings together the best young teams from across the globe. It's a tournament of exceptional quality and an unforgettable experience for every participant.

We also invest in coach education, organize interregional competitions, facilitate referee exchanges, and initiate joint conferences and seminars to drive tennis development. Through these efforts, we actively share best practices on growing participation, increasing profitability, and attracting new audiences—particularly those who may not have previously been engaged with the sport. In other words, by openly discussing these key areas, we are able to identify practical, cost-effective solutions that support the growth of tennis and enhance its overall appeal to the broader public.

### **What challenges did you encounter as president of the ATF, and were you able to resolve them?**

One of the most significant challenges I encountered as President of the ATF was the initial lack of cohesion among member nations. Communication between countries was virtually nonexistent, there were no collaborative projects, and the ATF had largely fallen short of fulfilling its leadership role. Many committees—and even the Board of Directors itself—served merely symbolic functions, with no meaningful decisions or strategic initiatives being discussed or enacted.



Today, the situation has changed dramatically. All members of the Board are now actively engaged, regularly participate in events, and respond enthusiastically to new initiatives. Our proposals are consistently supported, and both Board members and national federations across Asia are eager to contribute to the implementation of our projects. This level of engagement represents a major breakthrough. As a result, everyone is involved in the process and, more importantly, can see that progress is no longer just a matter of words—but of real, tangible action.

I was especially encouraged by the financial contributions made by two members of the ATF Board of Directors. Their support is a clear demonstration of trust in the organization and confidence that these resources will be directed toward the meaningful development of tennis in the region.

Naturally, we are committed to living up to that trust. It's a reciprocal effort—while we work diligently to reach our goals, we are fortunate to have the backing of those who believe in our mission. Ultimately, it is this spirit of collaboration and mutual trust within the ATF, along with the shared commitment of all its members, that enables us to achieve real and lasting progress.

### **How would you assess the current state of tennis facilities in Asia and possible steps for its improvement?**

Today, Asia faces several infrastructure-related challenges. One of the primary issues is the insufficient number of tennis courts in certain regions. In Western Asia, for instance, access to courts is often limited for the general public due to uneven distribution. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan continue to face difficulties in ensuring broad accessibility. While infrastructure is being developed and the sport is gaining momentum in these areas, the facilities are not always built with the requirements of international tournaments in mind.

For example, instead of constructing four courts that would allow for high-quality events, only three top-tier courts are built—suitable for professional-level play, but insufficient to support junior and youth tournaments. Even when these venues are well-designed, with amenities ranging from locker rooms to restaurants, the absence of an additional court hampers our ability to create a sustainable competitive structure. As a result, the foundational layer needed for long-term tennis development remains fragile.

That is why we are now actively working with federations across the continent to maximize the use of existing infrastructure. It is essential that facilities be fully utilized—to host tournaments, run training programs, and ultimately create an environment where tennis is in demand, with waiting lists of aspiring players eager to get on court.

Another significant challenge is the lack of clay courts across Asia. These surfaces are critically underrepresented in the region. To address this, we are actively working with Roland Garros and the French Tennis Federation (FFT) on a dedicated junior tournament series. The goal is to highlight the developmental benefits of clay courts, particularly for young players, and to promote their use for both training and competition.

A third issue is the existence of world-class tennis centers in certain countries that remain underutilized because they are not open to the public. A notable example is the national tennis center in Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan—a facility capable of hosting ATP 500-level tournaments. Until recently, it was closed to broader participation. To unlock its potential for regional development, I met last year with the President of Turkmenistan, together with the President of the International Tennis Federation. During our discussion, we unanimously agreed that this center is a true jewel, perfectly suited to hosting international events and fostering youth tennis for players from Turkmenistan and across Central Asia.

Following that meeting, we received full support from the government. Now, tournaments and training camps are held there regularly—12 weeks each year. We are even considering holding the ATF Annual General Meeting there this year, both to showcase the facility to international players and to provide local athletes with invaluable exposure and experience for their growth and development.

## **What is needed to promote women's tennis in Asia and create equal opportunities for female athletes?**

Women's tennis is evolving rapidly across Asia. Many parents view it as a safe, non-contact sport—one that is often associated with prestige and the development of discipline and good manners. We actively communicate these attributes, particularly in regions where cultural or religious norms may restrict girls' participation in sports.

Naturally, it is essential to increase the number of female coaches and officials. We are working to address this by drawing on the experience of the Kazakhstan Tennis Federation (KTF), where a strong emphasis is placed on supporting women in both coaching and officiating roles. As you may know, our referees Meruert Kaukeeva and Yulia Ignatchenko hold ITF Silver Badges at the international level and are among the top officials in Asia. Their achievements serve as powerful examples of how a structured, strategic approach can successfully promote female participation—not only on the court, but also in the broader ecosystem of tennis administration and development.

## **How do you see the future development of ATP and WTA tournaments in Asia and their impact on the region?**

In recent years, we've witnessed a steady expansion of ATP and WTA tournaments across Asia. The region is poised to welcome even more elite events, with a Masters tournament expected to debut in Saudi Arabia. The ATP event in Doha has been upgraded to 500, while Hong Kong has successfully hosted an ATP 250 event for the past two years. This coming September, Shenzhen, China, will host the final stage of the Billie Jean King Cup, where the world's top eight women's teams—including Kazakhstan—will compete for the prestigious world championship title.

Singapore has also resumed hosting a WTA event. While it is not the WTA Finals, the return of a WTA 250 tournament is a positive development. Moreover, the WTA Finals themselves will now be held in Saudi Arabia. Tennis is clearly gaining ground in Asia—not only because the region offers the infrastructure and resources, but also because it is home to a rapidly growing and engaged audience.

And of course, our own Almaty Open ATP 250, held annually in October, remains a crown jewel of the Asian tennis calendar. Players arrive with confidence, knowing the event is run to the highest standards, and they genuinely enjoy the atmosphere. Fans and spectators alike embrace the event as a true tennis festival. Altogether, these efforts help strengthen the region's tennis ecosystem—bringing in new sponsors, attracting fresh audiences, and setting the wheels of long-term development in motion.

## **What personal qualities and professional experience help you successfully lead the Asian Tennis Federation?**

Working at the Asian Tennis Federation requires, above all, a deep appreciation for cultural diversity. As someone born and raised in Kazakhstan—a country where many nationalities, languages, religions, and traditions coexist—I've learned the importance of unity in addressing challenges and resolving conflicts. My approach has always been to focus on what brings people together, rather than what sets them apart.

I speak five languages and am currently learning Chinese, with plans to expand my linguistic abilities further. For me, engaging with people from different countries and backgrounds is a personal source of motivation. I find it deeply rewarding to truly understand others—their cultures, their mindsets—and to identify the common ground where our interests align. That's where the foundations for meaningful collaboration are built. In tennis—as in any major initiative—you cannot achieve lasting success alone. It takes collective effort, shared vision, and mutual respect. And that is precisely where we place our focus: on building together, across borders and cultures, to move the sport forward.

