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At 75, Balics chasing U.S. tennis crown

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Anneke Balics is a steel-willed, golden-hearted woman who has seen her life's journey wind from incredible daring during World War II Holland to tender caring in her Davis back yard.

She has taught herself five languages, worked for the European Atomic Energy Commission, helped the UC Davis physics department keep its books straight and mothered both an accomplished daughter and an opulent current-day garden that rivals the colors of her years of adventure.

Spend any time with the 75-year-old whirlwind and one feels a transfer of energy that can only be described as uplifting.

At a time most folks are settling in, pursuing a quieter, less demanding lifestyle, Balics is globe-hopping, playing in senior- division tennis tournaments. And this competition is serious — you see, Balics is the fifth-ranked player of her age on the planet.

Get to know **Anneke Balics**, and nothing surprises you.

"I remember as a teen my family, as part of the underground resistance in World War II, would help Allied soldiers return to England," Balics recalls. A letter of gratitude her father Willem received from President Dwight Eisenhower hangs proudly on her hallway wall.

"We knew it was dangerous."

The youngest of five children in the Smit family of Meppel, Holland, Balics' adventures as a child provided a framework for physical activity that carries her to this very day.

Pointing to another wall in her home, Balics laughs when talking about her 70-year-old ice skates:

"These are what I used to wear," she explains, looking at a pair of blades on which sit slight, wooden supports and leather ties. It's hardly the image one thinks of picturing today's comfy, ample skates.

"I would sit in my kitchen, put these on and walk out the back door and travel for miles — over frozen flooded fields, down canals, across lakes. I would skate all day and go very, very far."

Skating put young Anneke in tip-top shape. It would help her play many other sports in Holland, including field handball.

"It was like soccer, but with a smaller ball and we passed it by hand. Girls back then just didn't play soccer," Balics explains. "And I played field hockey."

Surprisingly, it wasn't until later that the United States Tennis Association's No. 2 player took up her favorite game:

"I was in my 20s. Never had a lesson. Loved the game and eventually taught my friends and (partners) to play. You know, I really don't remember exactly when I picked it up."

But Balics stuck with the sport and with each passing decade became stronger, more proficient ... almost unbeatable. Then in 1986 — the year she and ex-husband Louie split — Balics entered her first age-specific competition.

"It is very exciting," understates the right-handed power player. "In those first tournaments I was out quickly. It took a while for the rankings."

The travel, meeting new people, the exercise, the motivation. All contributed to Balics' youthful approach to everything she does. The older she got, the more accomplished she became on the court.

Seeded No. 1 at the recent European Championships in Austria, Balics was disappointed in her showing and felt she blew a golden opportunity.

"I had a bye in the first round and a walkover. Then, after a win I lost to the European champion," Balics says, blaming a grueling week-long schedule that included doubles play.

And national championships at the three biggest tournaments also have eluded her. Last year she was a finalist at the clay event in Houston, finished second for the indoor title in Kansas City and lost the hard-court crown in Monterey, but managed to keep her No. 2 USTA ranking.

Now — with the hard-court nationals again due in September in Monterey — Balics is feeling some pressure.

Not because of her age. She's not slowing down. Retirement isn't in the near future. The concern revolves around a new gun coming to town.

"That (Monterey tournament) would be a nice title," Balics says. "And if it doesn't happen this year, the competition gets very tough next year."

Whipper-snapper Dorothy Matthiessen, a young 74-year-old phenom from Pasadena, will be entering Balics' 75-80 age group.

"She just never loses. I have hopes, but she's just a little, slender woman with a big serve. She is half my size and I have to look twice to see her ... but she seems to win everything."

For now, Balics' nemesis is Mary Boswell, the No. 1 player, who topped the Davis dynamo in Kansas City and Monterey.

"I want the gold. Maybe I can meet Mary again and this time beat her," Balics says. There's no smile ... a serious tone takes over.

To win, she'll need to rely on her court speed. At 75, Balics still gets to balls people half her age wave at. Her serve is powerful and she remains imposing as she charges the net. Her backhand belies her age.

Balics first came to California in 1963 to be near her brother Bernardus, then a law student in Berkeley. While in the Bay Area, Anneke Smit met Louie Balics, a landscape architecture student from Hungary. They married and eventually moved to Davis. Louie had done his undergraduate work at UCD and would work nearby in the tomato industry.

Balics' only offspring, Bernadette, operates an ecologically friendly landscape design firm in Davis. Looking out at the tennis diva's back yard, one understands quickly that Bernadette comes by her vocation honestly.

Balics' home is surrounded by a garden of plenty. The roses, lilies and zinneas provide a rainbow of pastels for the orange and grapefruit trees. Look closer. There are apricots, tangerines, plums and pears, too.

Balics loves her gardening ... so much so that she admits if it came down to having to choose between tennis and her back yard, she'd pick the flowers and vegetables. No contest.

Brother Bernardus and Arend were big influences in Balics' life: The stability they provided during the trying times of World War II. The diversion of sports they fostered. The comfort of being near family once in the new world of California.

But they're gone now. Bernardus, who lived in Oregon, was killed two years ago when hit by a car near his rural home.

"I miss my family," Balics says, but she dotes on her daughter and her accomplishments. She says it's wonderful that they're living in the same town and get to see each other all the time. The Balics home, adorned with pictures of Bernadette, again tells a story.

Looking back on the journey that is **Anneke Balics'** life, one could dwell on some many stops. Her education and degree from Sarbonne-Leidon University. The fact that her English, German, Italian and Hungarian are all self-taught. She studied French and Dutch is native.

As one of the original 200 employees of the European Atomic Energy Commission – there are currently 10,000 – Balics remembers interesting moments from the 1950s.

She still works one day a week doing books for UCD's physics department.

There's her doubles partner Ann Munro of Michigan ("I think I'm done playing doubles") and her Walnut Park morning-game gang – Lydia Bourne, Anita Wyland and Marianne Armstrong, among others. She talks fondly of each, recalling fun, endearing moments.

Her sponsorship from French tennis gear giant Babolat has an interesting side and then there's the recently discovered badminton league in which Balics is involved. But those are stories for another time.

Right now, Balics is focused on Monterey and that elusive national trophy.

And with her 76th birthday coming up Nov. 3, Balics has some words of advice for those who are getting older...

"To stay in good shape, you have to do something.

"Use your muscles. Walk, play a sport. Stay active however you can. Just do something."

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