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# Agassi

07.

## SECOND SERVICE

Image isn't everything to Andre Agassi in his life-after-tennis career in real estate development. But his new resort in Idaho sure looks good.

By Charles Bethea

Photographs by Andy Anderson

### DIFFERENT STROKES

Agassi, formerly the top-ranked male tennis player in the world, has turned to big-time real estate investment just a year into retirement.

## "I ALWAYS GET TWO QUESTIONS,"

Andre Agassi tells me as he reclines, sighing, on the living-room couch of a penthouse in Tamarack Resort's Lodge at Osprey Meadows. "Why Idaho?" And "Are you just attaching your name to this place?" The sigh is one of satisfied fatigue—from a day on the slopes, a busy first year of retirement, and, apparently, this endless line of questioning. It's no coincidence that Agassi has been snowboarding for about a year now—it was forbidden, along with motorcycle racing and skydiving, during his playing days. He's a quick but conservative study, betraying none of the reckless flamboyance that defined the early years of his tennis career. Case in point: Agassi's favorite run on Tamarack's 2,800 feet of vertical is a pleasant blue cruiser called Serenity.

What happened earlier this December afternoon, however—between the slopes and the penthouse—was anything but serene. While walking along a slick embankment to the edge of vast Lake Cascade, just a short stroll from where the hotel he's building will stand, the tennis icon with legendary footwork slid again and again toward the frigid waters. We weren't on asphalt, grass, or clay, after all. On snow, Andre Agassi falls down just like a normal person.

Now, back at the penthouse, it's time to forget the whole thing and consider those two persistent questions, which, predictably, I was about

**PLAYING A NEW SURFACE**  
Agassi standing in front of 30,000-acre  
Lake Cascade at the base of  
Tamarack Resort

to ask. Gunlek Ruder, the president of Agassi Graf Development—a real estate and hospitality company created in 2006 to bring Agassi's lifestyle to the world—enters and sets a couple of Coors Lights on the coffee table in front of Agassi and me. "No Diet Coke in the refrigerator," says Agassi, smiling. With more time on his hands to lift weights (and toss back a few more cold ones than would have been advisable in his tennis days), Agassi has bulked up since quitting the tour, adding 15 to 20 pounds of mostly muscle mass, by the looks of him. Given his penchant for tight, stylish shirts, he could be mistaken for a bouncer on the Strip in his hometown of Las Vegas.

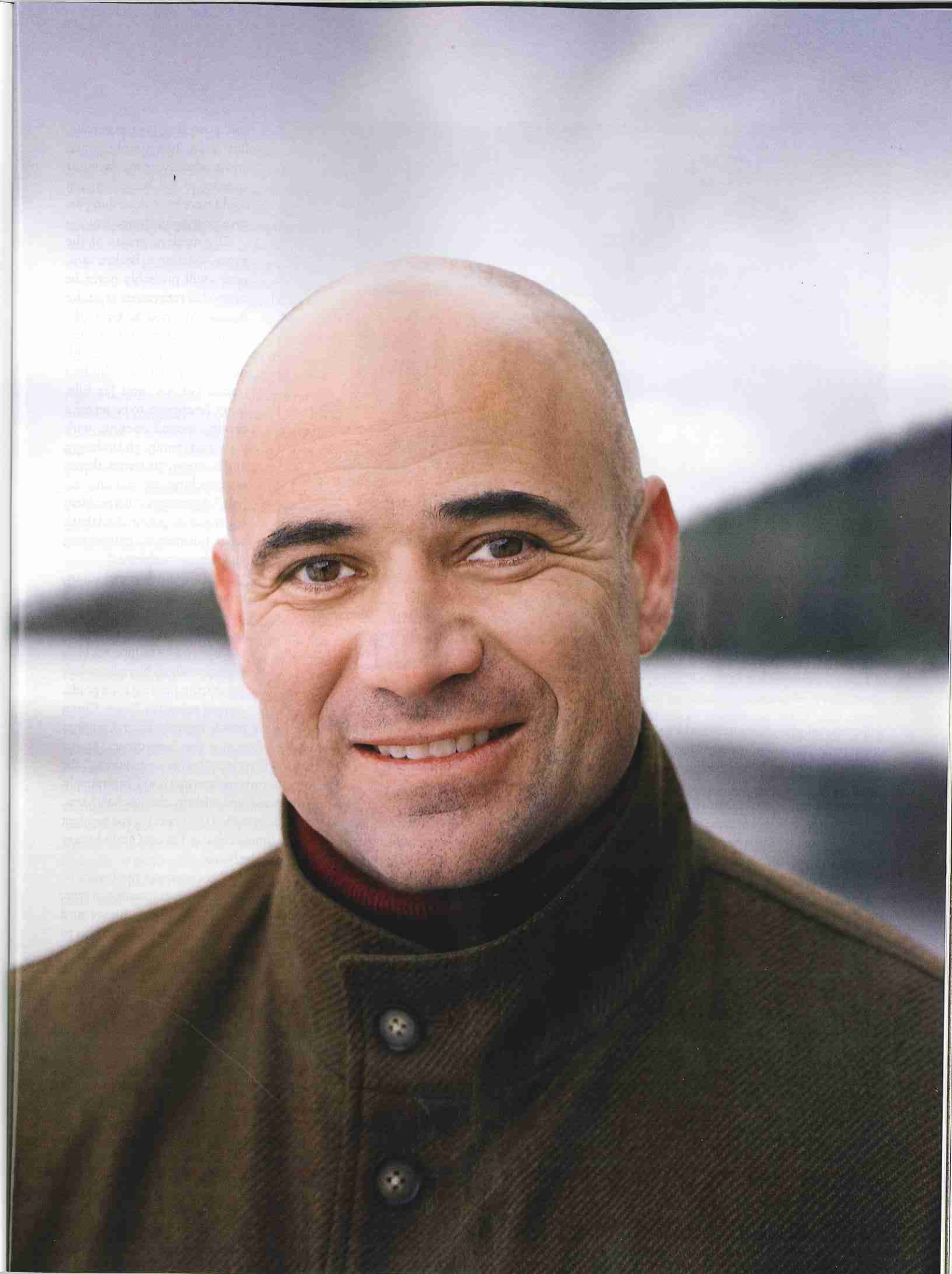
After a slug of light beer and another sigh, Agassi explains how he ended up in Idaho. "My wife [Steffi Graf] was pregnant with our second child, and we were thinking, How are we going to set up traditions in our lives, places to go and things to do that we had to give up for tennis? A friend told us about Tamarack." Agassi stops and raises his arms to the bluebird sky in disbelief, much as he did after most of his eight Grand Slam victories. The beauty that brought him here, he seems to suggest, is all around us. "Within 48 hours of arriving," Agassi continues, "we'd bought a chalet in town."

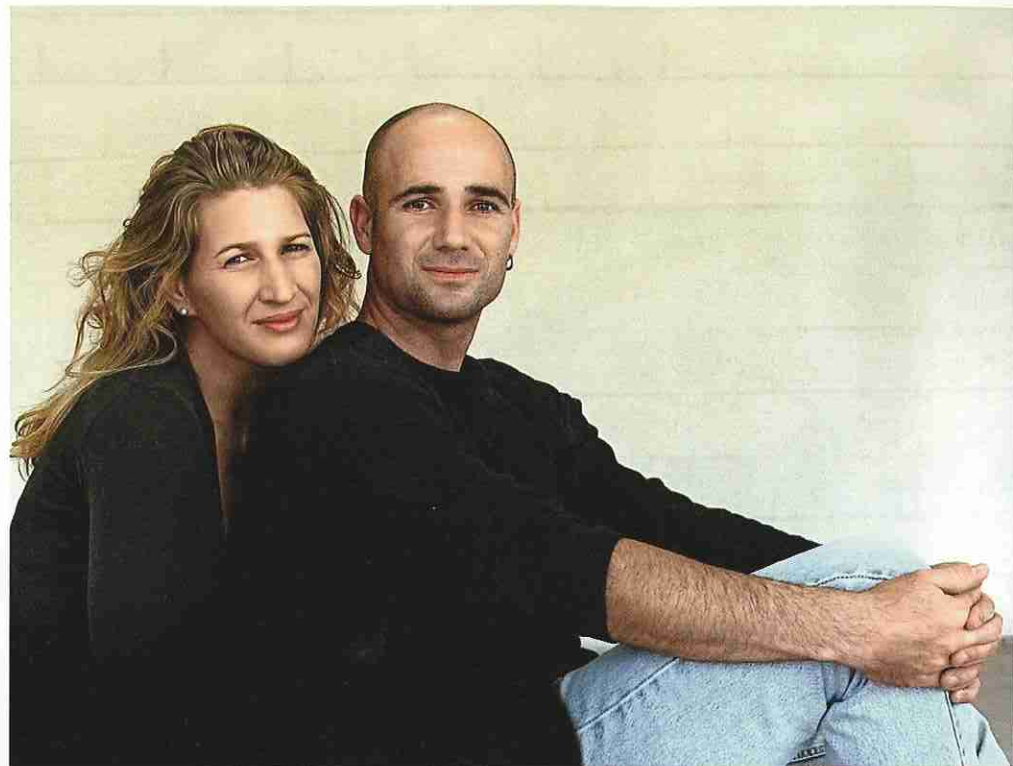
The once bratty boy prodigy—whose father hung a tennis ball over his crib, who became number one in the world at 18 and the first true rock star in tennis, who married and divorced a Hollywood actress and then fell in love with and wed a tennis legend—hasn't picked up a racket in weeks. And he doesn't plan to anytime soon. With the game behind him, Agassi, 37, is redirecting his famous work ethic into a new career in real estate development. He's starting with two properties: a tennis-themed villa resort in Costa Rica and a lavish hotel at Idaho's Tamarack, the first all-season resort built in the U.S. in 23 years, which has drawn increasing acclaim since opening its slopes in 2004. The Idaho project is Agassi's most daunting ambition since setting out to win all four Grand Slam events in tennis. When it opens in late 2010, the palatial Fairmont at Tamarack aims to be the Gem State's first five-star hotel.

The decision to become a hotelier evolved from casual conversations Agassi had with his business partners before settling into his chalet. His lifestyle could be branded and marketed—as could Idaho's remote paradise in the Payette River Mountains. The hotel would be the center of his Shangri-La.

Agassi speaks religiously of "the process" that this—like all worthy goals—entails. His living room, covered in cloth swatches, paint samples, and design books, conveys the depths of this devotion, as well as what he calls his "sort of autistic attention to detail." Daily betterment, he insists, is the real goal. It's not only an appropriate fixation for the son of an Iranian immigrant Olympic boxer hell-bent on raising a tennis star; it also makes having a serious talk with Andre Agassi feel a bit like taking a self-help seminar.

After finishing our beers, we stand and stare out the wall-size window of the penthouse. I follow Agassi's gaze toward the soon-to-be broken ground below, where the Fairmont Tamarack will stand two years hence. I see a conifer-covered knoll, cordoned and laden with snow, framed by Lake Cascade to the southeast and the Payettes beyond. Agassi sees something bigger, something through which he





McEnroe, Becker, and Sampras will never beat Agassi at retirement. "This," he says, gesturing toward Tamarack, "is more important than what I did with the game. We're creating a platform for life here."

will create another, more personal legacy. "This," he says, gesturing out at the green and white and blue, "is more important than what I did with the game. We're creating a platform for life here."

**During his playing days, Andre Agassi was famous for his return of serve, a reactive weapon that was equal parts reflex and read. He was the best at telling where Boris Becker, for example, was going to place the ball—the German stuck his tongue out in the direction it would go, just slightly. Becker, not realizing this, once told reporters it was as if Agassi could read his mind. "I actually shared [how I did it] with Boris over a night out in the Oktoberfest, in Germany," says Agassi. "He said he'd sleep better." Agassi's anticipation is uncanny.**

There he was, buttoned up and waxing nostalgic, at the U.S. Open quarterfinal last September. Agassi and the ever-boisterous John McEnroe were volleying insights and memories in the Flushing Meadows broadcast booth; it was a scholar-athlete spectacle often more engaging than the contest between Roger Federer and Andy Roddick below. Agassi's analytical angles were as sharp and poetic as Mac's ever were, at the net or the umpire chair: "Federer is like a hundred-meter-sprint champion who, at 60 meters, seems to be hitting stride

**LOVE-LOVE**  
Graf and Agassi, who never partnered on the tennis court, have since teamed up in business and marriage.

and powering past everyone. But really, he's simply easing into it, while everyone else is just starting to fall back." Agassi could have been describing his own post-tennis trajectory.

The modern greats of the game—McEnroe, Becker, Sampras—will probably never be as good at retirement as Andre Agassi. Married to Graf (the winner of 22 Grand Slam titles, who now goes by Stefanie), with whom he's had two children (Jaden Gil, six, and Jaz Elle, four), he appears to be set for a prolific second coming, with equal parts family, philanthropy, and business. "In tennis, there's no coaching, no passing the ball," Agassi says. "It's problem solving at its purest. And that's what business is: galvanizing and solving problems."

Agassi the businessman, unlike Agassi the tennis player, likes to multitask. His foundation, created in 1994, has raised more than \$70 million for children in southern Nevada, including startup funding for a public charter school in Vegas. Citing

his philanthropy and style, Swiss watch manufacturer Longines named him its Ambassador of Elegance last September. (Agassi hopes "Elegance is an attitude" will replace "Image is everything," the Canon advertising slogan from the early nineties that is still, frustratingly, affixed to him.) He has also partnered with celebrity chef Michael Mina, who is developing restaurants across the U.S. There's a spa product he's creating in Asia, a 24-hour fitness chain in Europe, and a luxury furniture line he's backing here in the States.

Most important to him right now, however, are the boutique hotels and villas he's designing with his equally entrepreneurial wife, through Agassi Graf Development. ("She's very linear and focused," Agassi says of Graf. "When we both get logged on to something, it's scary how well we work together.") There's the Revolution Places development in Cacique, Costa Rica, which will have tennis courts and clubhouses modeled precisely after Wimbledon's and Roland Garros's, in addition to 25 luxurious villas. And then there's his home away from Vegas, the Fairmont Tamarack, in Idaho. Both properties will facilitate "the physical, mental, and holistic enhancement" of their denizens, says Agassi—once again using the language of uplift. Rest assured that if they bomb, the motivational-speaking circuit—full of former sports stars enamored of their own voices—won't see the rise of tennis's Tony Robbins. Lecturing doesn't interest Agassi.

Sitting there in Idaho, feeling uplifted, I realize we're both older, balder, and more prudent than the last time I saw Agassi in person—pestering him for an autograph at Atlanta's AT&T Challenge

in 1994. But his fixed gaze and purposeful, pigeon-toed gait are the same. And, perhaps most tellingly, he holds a rolled-up blueprint with a cocked wrist, like it's a tennis racket.

**Since opening in 2004 next to the tiny town of Donnelly, 100 miles north of Boise, Tamarack Resort has grown steadily, accruing a reported \$515.8 million in property sales. Agassi's Fairmont Tamarack hotel—scheduled to break ground this spring on the resort's cherry-picked lot—should ramp up cash flow considerably. Some \$350 million is being invested in the hotel, split between Agassi Graf Development and the real estate investment company Echo Partners LLC. It's a clear risk: The only town in Idaho currently known to most of Tamarack's target demographic is Sun Valley, yet Agassi is sinking much of his career tennis winnings into a relatively obscure ski village some 250 miles, as the jet flies, to the northwest.**

Judging by the mere seven hours it took to sell out the first batch of units last March, for a total of \$140 million, it's a cleverly calculated gamble. Matt Leinart, quarterback of the Arizona Cardinals, and Eric Dane from ABC's "Grey's Anatomy," were among the first 125 buyers, and a handful of other celebrities seeking to avoid the paparazzi who subsist on big-name resorts are rumored to be close behind. If all 376 planned units (306 hotel, condo, and penthouse units in the main hotel at Belvedere Ridge and 70 more private homes on a ski-in, ski-out mid-mountain site called Whitewater) sell as planned, at just under \$2 million for a middle-of-the-pack, 1,600-square-foot home, Agassi and his associates will generate upwards of \$600 million.

And Idaho will have its first palace. "We conceived it as a grand country estate," says Boulder, Colorado, architect Eduardo Illanes, "a sort of shimmering castle, similar to the great resorts in Chamonix and Switzerland." Illanes was chosen by Agassi Graf and Echo Partners for both the sophisticated work he's done at small-scale western resorts like Copper, Keystone, and Winter Park and his commitment to sustainability as well as luxury.

Seemingly unfazed by this big picture, Agassi intends to enjoy himself every day. After picking up snowboarding in January 2007, he chartered NetJets into nearby McCall, Idaho, to hit the slopes some two dozen times. Initially, he just wanted to keep up with his kids, both of whom jumped on skis shortly after learning to walk. Now, of course, Daddy intends to master the sport—which has resulted in more than a few blooper-worthy wipeouts. But he



**NO SMALL POTATOES**  
Tamarack Resort, which hopes to boast Idaho's first five-star hotel (not pictured), offers all manner of starch-free indulgence.



doesn't mind. Once again, it's all about the process. "Tomorrow is going to be an even better day," he reminds me back at the penthouse as I peer out the window.

I'm inclined to believe him—especially if 2006 Olympic gold medalist and resident ski pro Julia Mancuso, 23, is carving beautiful turns down the mountain, as she was last week. Mancuso has been stalking Tamarack's steeps lately, having found her new favorite stateside retreat. "It's not like Vail or one of those resorts," Mancuso told me over the phone before a race in St. Moritz, "where you're right on the freeway, and it's been there forever, and there are tons of hotels. It's a small, luxurious escape, with excellent skiing and so much else to do. I'm having a family reunion there this summer—it's that sort of place."

**The next day, before following in Mancuso's tracks, I walk the cordoned grounds with a wide-eyed group of prospective buyers who have come from as far as Japan to see the place. Amid all the expected hype, I'm struck by what appears to be a legitimate singularity: There's no other year-round resort in North America where just a few hundred yards from the central village lies an imposing ski mountain, a premier golf course, and the shores of a pristine lake. Hotel brands are in the business of serving lifestyles, and Andre and Stefanie are creating a brand that's an extension of a lifestyle they already truly embody.**

Watching Agassi, it's clear: His imposing physique recedes into a ski jacket, a wool hat swallows his shiny pate, those Iranian eyebrows disappear behind goggles, and he's in boots, with his board in hand, heading for the hill. If not for that unmistakable, tiptoed fast-walk—a vestigial quirk from his playing days, when he'd give his opponents as little time as possible to rest between points, part of his strategy to "take their legs out"—he could be anyone racing to the lifts for fresh snow and blue skies.

The last inevitable question is whether the Fairmont Tamarack will offer tennis courts in addition to its indoor kayaking simulator, bowling alley, movie theater, 20,000-square-foot spa, and access to the award-winning 18-hole Robert Trent Jones Jr. golf course. "Yeah, we're going to add a tennis component to all this at some point," Agassi says, shuffling toward the mountain as he speaks. "We've got to pay our respects." ☺