

# HELPING PLAYERS FIND A PERFECT MATCH

Sabre Springs resident brings together athletes of similar tennis skills

BY GLAE THIEN

Along with a surfboard for trips to the beach, Steve de la Torre also began packing a tennis racket to hit the ball on days when the waves weren't cooperating.

The one-time competitive surfer eventually developed a zest for tennis that transferred from the sand to the courts during his college days at San Diego State.

Four decades later, while he still surfs, the Sabre Springs resident is in a tennis league of his own. His own ownership, that is, since he operates Tennis League San Diego as a conduit for singles players to arrange matches and possibly qualify for playoffs in quarterly seasons.

## NORTH COUNTY

Sports

De la Torre first joined the league looking for matches some seven years ago. Following his retirement, he assumed control in early 2014 with a zeal for tennis and the acumen of a former regional sales manager in the corporate world.

"It was a passion, and I had the time to do it," said de la Torre, 67, a Crawford High alum. "Because I love the league, when I talk to people about it, I'm pretty enthusiastic."

Since de la Torre took control, the number of active players has doubled to 170 during the current summer season split about evenly across four divisions from intermediate to advanced as determined by the National Tennis Rating Program.

Players set up matches online at mutually acceptable times and places. Also, they can vary how frequently they play depending on their personal schedule.

"The league's ideal for so many reasons," said longtime member Neil Berkowitz, a family physician who has his home and office in Scripps Ranch. "There's not only the flexibility, but the vast majority of players are just such nice people and very enthusiastic. Also, you get to play against such a tremendous va-

### Setting things up

**What:** Tennis League San Diego, an organization for arranging matches.

**Who:** Recreational and competitive singles players, intermediate to advanced, mostly adults with older juniors.

**Owner/director:** Steve de la Torre

**Schedule:** Four seasons per year. Fall season starts Oct. 7.

**Membership:** \$30 per season or \$100 per year.

**Online:** [tennisleague.com](http://tennisleague.com)

riety of styles."

Berkowitz, 67, began playing tennis during his childhood in South Africa and has kept at it recreationally ever since.

"The (division) winner gets to go up to the next one, but I would not want to do that," said Berkowitz, who competes at the 4.5 level. "This is just the right place for me."

A two-time winner of the league's top 5.0 division is Chula Vista's Augustin Ochoa, a native of Colombia, who came to this country for college and competed at Division II Davis & Elkins College in Elkins, W.Va.

Ochoa moved to Atlanta following graduation in 2013 and then recently to San Diego County.

"After college, I've been playing really for fun and exercise just because I love the game," said Ochoa, 26, a financial analyst. "Also, it's a good way of meeting people and making friends. I like exploring the city at the same time (for matches)."

Ochoa, who has also considered playing USTA tournaments, likes how the league keeps his game sharp.

"I'm a competitive guy, so when I go out to hit or play a match, I want to be at the highest level possible," Ochoa said. "That's when I have the most fun."

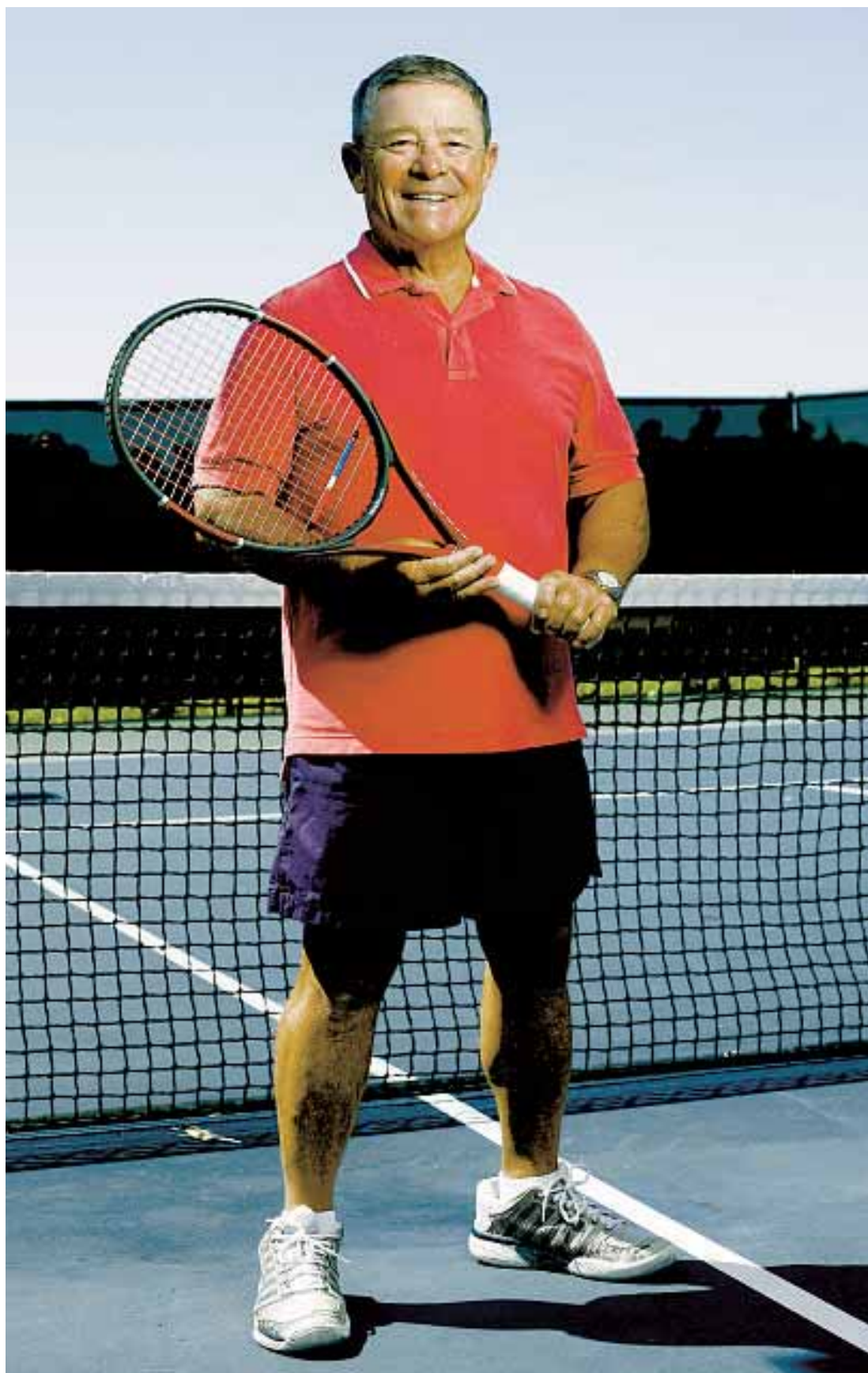
The league, founded by Craig Novak in 1990, serves both recreational and competitive players, mainly adults but also older juniors. It fills a niche in singles since popular USTA leagues provide doubles play.

Through sponsorships, items such as gift cards and tennis shoes are awarded as prizes.

"More members beget more members," de la Torre said. "If they're happy and like the format, they start marketing the league."

As a league of their own.

Thien is a freelance writer.



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Longtime player Steve de la Torre is the owner and director for Tennis League San Diego.