

National tennis event drops in to San Diego at the Barnes Tennis Center

USTA Girls' 16s bring out country's elite young players

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Julie Chao of Rancho Peñasquitos considers it perhaps the most important tennis tournament of the year – maybe of her life.

"I've been looking forward to this tournament for a while," Chao said of the United States Tennis Association's Girls' 16 National Championships, which start tomorrow and run through Aug. 15 at the Barnes Tennis Center in Point Loma.

Chao, 16, is the only seeded San Diegan in the draw at No. 23.

"This is the one (at which) I really want to do well," said Chao, who carries a 4.0 grade-point average as she enters her junior year at Westview High. "I want to win it."

The same goal is shared by 191 other singles entrants born on or after Sept. 1, 1987.

"It's the U.S. Open for the girls' 16s," said former USTA referee Jim Hillman. "The best girls in the 16s in the United States are there and a lot of them do have aspirations of being pro tennis players."

Those dreams aren't far-fetched.

Past champions include Chris Evert (1970), Tracy Austin ('78), Zina Garrison ('80) and Mary Joe Fernandez ('84). The first year San Diego held the event, in 1990 at Morley Field's Balboa Tennis Club, San Diego native Ditta Huber upset top-seeded Lindsay Davenport in the final.

The singles draw has a mandatory feed-in championship through the quarterfinals. That means everyone will place, including main-draw semifinal losers playing for third and fourth. The Barnes Tennis Center will also be abuzz with a doubles draw of 64 teams.

The elite of the USTA's 17 official sections, from New England to Hawaii and everywhere in between, will be represented. Southern California and the Southern Section, which is comprised of eight Southern states, claim the most draw sheet ink, with each area placing 27 girls in the draw.

Catherine Newman of Greensboro, N.C., is the top seed. Brintney Larson (Orchard Park, N.Y.), Reka Zsilinszka (Fayetteville, N.C.) and Kristen McVitty (Woodland Hills) round out the top four.

Chao is one of seven girls from San Diego County competing. Nadia Abdala (Chula Vista), Kristin Strimple (Carlsbad), Carling Donovan (San Diego), Jie Zeng (Chula Vista), Natasha Makarova (San Diego) and Lisel Lewis (San Diego) are also entered.

Chao enters the tournament in her second and final year of competing in the 16s. She is currently ranked No. 1 in San Diego County, No. 6 in Southern California and No. 36 among USTA national juniors.

After an injury at the 2003 Super National Claycourts in Virginia, she managed a win in the main draw and three victories in last year's 16 Nationals back draw. This year, Chao skipped the trip to Virginia Beach to stay home – and healthy – on hardcourts.