

## Chapter 13

# Cleveland/New Orleans Nets



**Renée Richards, New Orleans Nets, 1978**  
**WTT welcomed pro sports' first transgender star**

## **FAST FACTS**

**Years of Operation:** 1974-1976 (Cleveland)  
1977 (Cleveland-Pittsburgh)  
1978 (New Orleans)

**Team Colors:** Red, white, and blue

**Team Record:** 1974: 21-23 (4th place, Central Section)  
1975: 16-28 (5th place, Eastern Division)  
1976: 20-24 (3rd place, Eastern Division)  
1977: 16-28 (3rd place, Eastern Division)  
1978: 20-24 (4th place, Eastern Division)

**Female MVP:** Martina Navratilova 1976 (453-388, .539)

**Male MVP:** Marty Riessen 1975 (398-350, .532)

**Highlight:** Signing Björn Borg and fiancée  
Mariana Simeonescu (2/1/77)

**Lowlight:** Nancy Gunter mugged in Cleveland Public  
Hall parking lot (7/25/74)

**Home Arenas:** Cleveland Public Hall (capacity 5,000)  
Richfield Coliseum (20,000)  
New Orleans Superdome (80,000)

**Quote:** “The Nets have as much chance of signing Björn  
Borg as he has swimming the nearest fjord.”  
—Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (1/31/77)

**“Either this town isn’t ready for us, or we’re  
not ready for this town. Where were all  
the people?”**

**—RAYNI FOX, Cleveland Nets, 1975**

Cleveland tennis dates back to the 1880s. The city’s first tournament was in 1881, run by George Worthington at the East End Tennis Club. Elizabeth Dean Sprague won the Women’s City Championship three straight years 1899-1901; local Mary K. Brown, the U.S. women’s champion 1912-14, won the women’s doubles title in 1921 and 1925 (with Helen Wills). Cleveland tournaments varied from junior, public-park, and amateur to pro, to semi-pro city tourneys called “The Munis.” In 1960, Davis Cup games came to the city.

Joe Zingale, a ’50s-’60s Cleveland rock & roll disc jockey known as “Mr. Rhythm,” bought Cleveland’s WTT franchise. The 41-year-old 1260 WIXY-AM executive dressed with ’70s style: balding, bearded, and lots of denim. The brash cousin of

Cleveland sports czar Nick Mileti owned shares of baseball's Indians and basketball's Cavaliers, and in late 1973, Zingale paid Mileti \$60,000 for his \$50,000 Nets stake. (In 1979, Joe bought out his cousin's Cavaliers stake, and in 1983 sold out to controversial Ted Stepien, acknowledged as the worst owner in NBA history.)

For November 1973's draft, fourth-round selection Cleveland native Clark Graebner, chosen as the team's player-coach, insisted that his wife, the former Carole Caldwell—once one of the top U.S. women players, now raising two children—be drafted by the team, too. So by special dispensation, WTT declared pick #4A a “family selection.” But love quickly soured when coach Graebner filed for divorce. He pled his case to owner Joe, and in a “play me or trade my wife” scenario, the Nets sent 31-year-old Carole to the Triangles for 21-year-old Laura DuPont. Carole insisted the feeling was mutual, so she returned to her native Pittsburgh. Zingale zinged, “Clark's a helluva lot more important to me than Carole.” Clark joked that he'd love DuPont madly if she didn't choke on the court with him in mixed doubles. His numerous inappropriate remarks included blaming a road loss to Denver on menstrual issues.

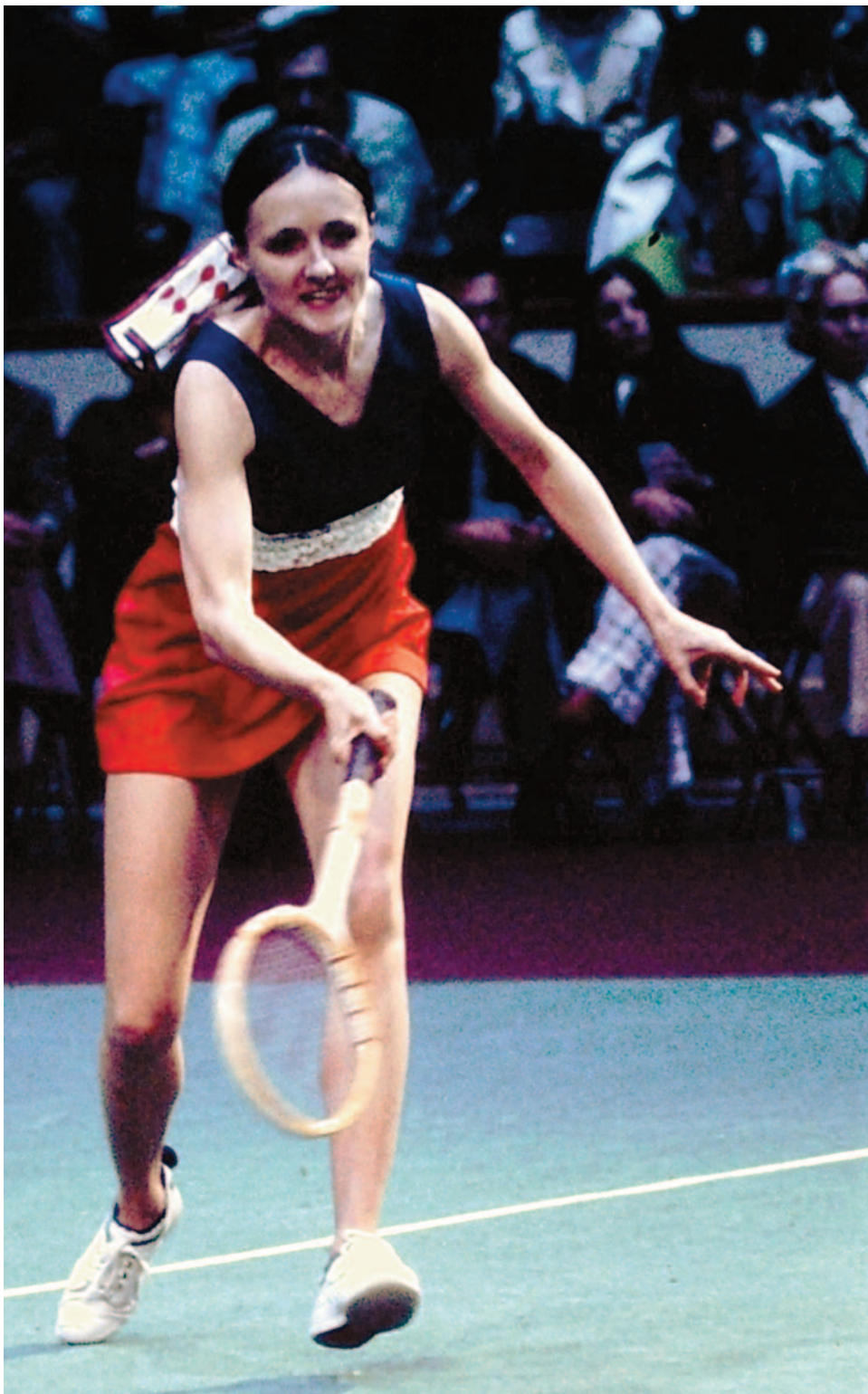
The Nets, in red, white, and blue, played in 1974 at the old 5,000-seat Public Hall. Their opening roster featured Graebner, DuPont, Texas siblings Cliff Richey and Nancy Richey Gunter, Australia's Bill Lloyd, aging South African Ray Moore, and Jane “Peaches” Bartkowicz, one of the Virginia Slims “Original 9.” Player-coach Graebner embraced WTT team spirit: “I get nervous worrying about my game and that of six others, and I love it.”

***“The team can't be in a position where a player can, at his or her whim, decide they can breach a contract in the middle of the season. I like her personally, but Peaches Bartkowicz has some serious personal issues.”***

**—JOE ZINGALE, Cleveland Nets owner, 1974**

Cleveland got off to a fast start in 1974. May 30, the Nets went to Boston and won their fifth game in a row 29-25 at Walter Brown Arena, led by Gunter-Bartkowicz in women's doubles, and Graebner-Bartkowicz in mixed doubles. June 5, the Nets jetted to L.A. and rained on the parade of just 855 fans at the Sports Arena, tweaking the Strings 29-25. But after a 10-5 start, things quickly went south, beginning July 15, when the Nets asked Peaches to turn in her uniform after her sixth contract renegotiation. The two sides parted ways when Bartkowicz told Zingale that she still wanted more money.

“I hear from her agent every day, but it's all over,” Zingale uttered, referring to lawyer Pete Huthwait, trying to trade Peaches to another squad. The owner went on: “I signed her when she was seven months pregnant and hadn't played in three years. I renegotiated her deal five times, and then she gave me this ultimatum that she wouldn't play if she didn't get more money.” Zingale upped her money with the proviso she'd play the whole season. Then, one week later, she failed to show up for a press conference to announce she'd remain with the Nets. So the team signed Winnie Shaw Woolridge, ranked #3 in the UK.



**Peaches Bartkowicz, Cleveland Nets, 1974**  
**Fired after her sixth contract renegotiation**



On July 25, the Nets lost to the Triangles in Pittsburgh, 26-22, after forfeiting 6-0 in women's doubles. Nancy Gunter got sidelined before the match after aggravating an injury to her right foot in the afternoon practice. Her absence left the Nets with one female in DuPont, who lost in singles to Evonne Goolagong, 6-3.

Gunter was not having a great week. Days earlier, after her 6-0 obliteration of Florida Flamingos star Laurie Fleming, she and her 73-year-old great uncle got mugged on the exit ramp into Public Hall's parking lot by two thugs wielding tire irons, who assaulted the old man and made off with cash, traveler's checks, and paychecks.

With the season in the home stretch, Cliff Richey was furious over his benching in an August 4 loss to Detroit, 25-17. Richey blamed Zingale, but Clark Graebner said he decided to play aging Ray Moore, who upset Loves' star Phil Dent in singles 6-1, as the Nets got swept in every other event.

Cleveland finished the season 21-23 (.477), fourth place in the Eastern Division's Central Section, and qualified for the final playoff seed. Billie Jean King's heavily favored Freedoms swept the Nets in the best-of-three. For Game One on August 19 at Public Hall, Cleveland lost 26-22 before 2,148. The next night 2,173 in Philly saw the Nets fall again 23-22. The Nets led before Gunter-Graebner lost to Fred Stolle-Julie Anthony, 6-3, to end Cleveland's first year on a downswing. Zingale hailed his heroic "street fighters."

***"WTT taught me that I play much better when I'm mad. I really need to get fired up."***

**—WENDY OVERTON, Cleveland Nets, 1975**

A month before the 1975 season, the Nets partook in a three-way trade, shipping Nancy Gunter to the Houston E-Z Riders and Kim Warwick to Pittsburgh, and welcoming former Toronto-Buffalo Royal Wendy Overton. Gunter wanted out after she and her brother feuded with Graebner and Zingale over their lack of playing time.

Gunter griped about the Nets, "I don't care for the owner. He's difficult and has double standards. Peaches was the reason we were winning, and she was earning nothing. Cliff and I urged her to demand more money and not to budge. But he took a stand that no one player is too important. Here's a guy who knows nothing about the game, yet refuses the advice of people with 20 years in the business. Anyhow, she left at the halfway point, and we'd won 12 or 14 with her and lost 15 of the last 20 without her. For a bit more money, we could've been good. If you confronted him, he pled ignorance. Yet he set the policy."

Cleveland then signed 33-year-old Marty Riessen, the nation's #3 ranked men's player, to a three-year deal, \$250,000 contract—to serve as player-coach, and to team with Clark Graebner, reuniting the three-time National Clay Courts men's doubles titlists. Riessen, who nixed the 1974 Chicago Aces, would play a vital role with the Nets moving forward.

Before opening night, the Nets signed WTT's first African-American woman, Margot Tiff, 22, of Shaker Heights, OH. The Cal State L.A. graduate was also the first AA woman on the Virginia Slims circuit. Zingale said he "followed Margot and watched her improve

for the past year,” stressing he signed the local pro “not as a black tennis player but as a good tennis player.” Tiff said of WTT: “I like the people yelling and screaming. It makes you feel like the fans care, and it makes the game exciting.” With Riessen, Graebner, and Tiff, the Nets’ 1975 roster included assistant coach/radio analyst Bob Giltinan, Ann Haydon Jones (ex-Buckskins), Sue Stap (Aces), and Valerie Ziegenfuss (Lobsters).

Cleveland opened its 1975 season 0-3 after a May 9 defeat to fewer than 1,000 fans in Pittsburgh, 27-26. The other 12,000 needed to fill the arena missed an action-packed night, as Graebner-Stap lost to Rayni Fox-Kim Warwick in a super-tiebreaker. On June 7, player-coach Riessen fined himself \$100 for smacking a ball at a heckler in a home loss to the Triangles, 26-23. Then he imposed the same fine on Graebner for foul language. Riessen reasoned: “I fined myself for smacking a ball too close to a fan, and did the same to Clark for his talk. I could’ve hurt an innocent person.”

The Nets finished the year 16-28, fifth place in the Eastern Division, and missed the playoffs. After moving home games from downtown Public Hall to suburban Richfield Coliseum, they drew just 1,000-plus per match at the 20,000-capacity arena. Zingale caustically praised his audiences as “the politest in the league.” Riessen ranked #1 in men’s singles (.570), and got voted 1975 WTT Rookie of the Year. Riessen-Graebner was top-ranked in men’s doubles. Tiff struggled to find playing time behind DuPont, Stap, and Jones, losing 6-1 in just one set of mixed doubles.

***“They put us in an arena for 25,000 people, and only an average of 1,500 showed up. By the time the applause got to you on the court, you’d already played the next point.”***

**—MARTINA NAVRATILOVA, Cleveland Nets, 1977**

In the offseason, the Nets shocked the tennis world when Zingale signed the 20-year-old Czech defector Martina Navratilova to a multi-year deal worth \$150,000 per season. The owner sealed the deal by giving Navratilova a “#1” diamond necklace. Three weeks before the opener, they cornered the market on famous Pakistani netters by signing doubles star Haroon Rahim. So Cleveland’s 1976 roster would consist of Riessen, Rahim, Overton, Giltinan, Navratilova, and 19-year-old college star Rayni Fox, acquired from Pittsburgh. Hot Chilean netter Hans Gildemeister filled in admirably during the season’s second half.

On August 15, Cleveland ended 1976 on the tennis court and prepared to take it to the legal courts. Zingale fumed after his Nets wrecked the Racquets, 31-14, because Phoenix’s top four—Chris Evert, Tony Roche, Andy Pattison, and Kris Kemmer Shaw—did not play, killing hopes of drawing 10,000 for the season’s finale. Instead, Richfield Coliseum announced a crowd of 4,615 but a WTT insider estimated 1,800 fans. Zingale said that if the four had played that week in the playoff’s opening round, he’d file a suit. Dr. Lowell Lubic found each to have different injuries and prescribed rest. After the fiasco, Lubic said: “I did not certify them as disabled. I said the injuries were bona fide.”

Cleveland finished 1976 at 20-24 (.455), third place in the East. They finished the first half of the season strong, but lost four of their five final matches, and got edged out of

the playoffs by their rival Triangles. The Nets' improved attendance, from 1974's 48,887 to 1975's 55,924 to 1976's 73,108 (2,323 per match)—but Zingale kept all options open.

Pittsburgh owner Frank Fuhrer announced on December 14 the demise of his Triangles, after admitting that he'd lost boatloads on WTT. Zingale joined Fuhrer on the podium to announce his Nets would play 1977 as the Cleveland-Pittsburgh Nets, with 11 matches in Richfield, and 11 at Pittsburgh Civic Arena.

January 31, at league meetings at the New York Hilton, Zingale introduced GM Dan McGibbeny, the 26-year-old, coach, GM and PR director of the 1976 fallen Triangles. Zingale also presented former Triangles director of operations John Felman to run the rebranded "Tri Nets" Cleveland-Pittsburgh "regional franchise." He also said in a move to improve the revenue that they'd play "home" matches from Nashville to New Orleans. Soon after, McGibbeny left to work for Fuhrer's insurance firm, before succumbing to cancer.

Zingale liked his 1977 roster: player-coach Riessen, Navratilova, Rahim, Overton, Fox, Gildemeister, and Giltinan. Laughs broke out when Joe said of Swedish star Björn Borg, "I've chased him for three years now and I may catch him." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* wrote, "He has as much chance of signing Björn as he has swimming the nearest fjord."

***"I've been thinking about playing Team Tennis. I like to try new things. Another reason I signed was to see my fiancée Mariana very often."***

**—BJÖRN BORG, Cleveland-Pittsburgh Nets, 1977**

On February 1, the Nets introduced Borg and his 19-year-old Romanian fiancée, Mariana Simionescu, in a "love conquers all" deal. The highest-ranked men's netter got \$40,000 weekly, in a pact financed by the Nets and WTT. The "sweetheart deal" also included \$20,000 annually for Simionescu, the 1973 Wimbledon Juniors titlist. Mariana denied seeking political asylum: "I have many rights from my country that I didn't think I'd get. My government lets me do what I want and go where I wish." Joe rejoiced: "It's a fantastic breakthrough for WTT to sign tennis' most famous player, a dominant force in tennis."

The fiery owner leased a jet to pick up Borg in Little Rock, where he played the previous night, and fly him to New York. Borg then departed for more press in Cleveland and Pittsburgh, then back to Little Rock for more tournament play. From the dais, Borg lobbed: "Europe holds no challenge for me. I've done everything there. I thought, why not try team tennis? I think we can win the league. I know I'll try my best." Zingale operated "Cleveland's Entry In World Team Tennis" without a Xerox Telecopier for intraleague messages or a full-time publicist. But his team was the only franchise with Borg. Posters hung around Cleveland and Pittsburgh proclaimed: "A Nets Star Is Björn."

After the Borg-Simionescu signing, Cleveland cut Wendy Overton and Haroon Rahim. Then they brought in Peggy Michel—Evonne Goolagong's Triangles doubles partner, out most of 1976 with shoulder injuries—to pair with Navratilova. But between Riessen, Borg, and Navratilova, the Nets took on a glut of pricy stars, so something had to give. As the 1977 season began, the Nets traded Navratilova to Boston for Virginia



**Björn Borg, Cleveland-Pittsburgh Nets press photo, 1977**



Slims Rookie of the Year Wendy Turnbull plus cash. Navratilova said she'd quit WTT if she had to play another game for Zingale. She told reporters she hated Cleveland's "too much pollution." Joe said, "She didn't like Cleveland, but there wasn't much I could do... Three years ago, I had trouble with Cliff Richey and his sister, and I vowed never to have an unhappy team again."

***"I wanted to be traded. I didn't care where I was going to play unless it wasn't Cleveland or Indiana."***

**—MARTINA NAVRATILOVA, 1977**

Navratilova, no longer the star after the Borg signing, forced the trade. But the heart of the issue was that the owner and the Soviet Bloc defector "couldn't stand each other's catgut" (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 4/30/77). Player-coach Riessen called Martina a royal pain: "She did what she wanted, and it was hard to control her. But the contracts are too weak to control anyone. It puts you in a begging position."

Slumped in his dressing room cubicle after April 26's season-opening 28-21 defeat to the defending champion New York Apples, Riessen raged, "We don't have the talent to compete." He noted Martina's trade to the Lobsters left the Nets a shell of what they required. In the loss, Borg bested 1976 WTT MVP Sandy Mayer 6-4.

May 4 at the Civic Arena, a crowd of 908—the press table tally was 731—saw Borg's second game in Pittsburgh. Zingale raged, "I'm sure there aren't even that many. That must have included no-shows." May 13, the winless Nets (0-4), greeted by empty seats and gaping yawns, lost four of five sets, and the match, to Indiana, 27-21. The only Nets win was Borg crushing Vitas Gerulaitis 6-1. Cleveland-Pittsburgh ranked last in the ten-team league, a failure conceptually, competitively and financially. Zingale saw that even a star like Borg couldn't overcome the fact Pittsburghers did not relate to World Team Tennis.

Pittsburgh hosted Boston on May 23, and before a headcount of three hundred crushed the Nets, 27-11. In a reversal of roles, Borg lost 6-1 to Tony Roche while his fiancée Mariana Simionescu figured in the only Nets win, with Riessen over Greer Stevens-Mike Estep 6-3. Autograph seekers by the locker room chased Mariana and ignored Borg. Riessen said the empty orange seats made him see red: "It was like a morgue. I have no idea how they promote. Pittsburgh thinks they're a major-league sports town. It's an insult to the players and an affront to pro sports that 200 or 300 people came." Riessen should've registered his complaints with the owner, who treated Pittsburgh like a spy agency, with little public information and no listed phone number.

Just 1,100 Pittsburgh fans came June 2 to see Chris Evert and her Racquets prevail over the Nets, 30-22. Zingale was coy when asked if this would be his franchise's final visit to Western PA, saying, "I'm gonna look at what's happening. I'm no idiot." When pressed if the city deserved another shot, he snapped, "Listen, I gave Pittsburgh two Wimbledon champions tonight with Borg and Evert. What else can I do?" The game would be the last of six home games in Pittsburgh. Joe said he'd provide refunds to the three hundred season ticket holders, and that any Pittsburgh ticket holder who'd drive to Cleveland would receive up to six free tickets. June 4's game with the Gaters,

moved at the last moment to Cleveland, had no issue with refunds since Ticketron punched only one ticket sold. Vince Leonard in the *Post-Gazette* wrote "Requiem for a Lightweight" about the end of Cleveland-Pittsburgh tennis, "The services smack of Siamese twins: stab one, and the other one feels it in Cleveland." Zingale said, "I'm pulling out of Pittsburgh, and I don't intend to return."

Then the Nets stunned the sports world by signing 42-year-old Renée Richards to a two-year deal. The former Dr. Richard Raskind, an ophthalmological surgeon famous for treating cross-eyed children, played semi-pro baseball with Yankees great Whitey Ford at age 16, then married, had a son, and was a ranked American netter. Raskind then gave it all up to become Renée, the towering maverick that underwent three years of painful gender reassignment surgeries, and got signed by the Nets as a female.

Zingale claimed that he made the move, not due to curiosity value, but because "she's popular and a helluva good player," and "a tremendous drawing card." He conceded the Nets were in dire need of female talent, after failing to replace Martina adequately. Joe pointed out that he and Richards came to a quick agreement, and that while he hadn't "polled" other owners, he admitted to a mixed reaction. Richards told the press, "All I want to do is prove myself as a woman. This is a great opportunity. I can help the team."

The owner said that Richards would play for the Nets Saturday night in Cleveland against the Golden Gaters. But new commissioner Butch Buchholz, in his first political hot potato, cited "league policy" in subjecting Richards to the karyotype chromosome test created by the International Olympic Committee, to determine if her chromosomes were male (XY) or female (XX). Butch later revealed, "I was afraid whatever action I took would be misinterpreted. If we refused to accept her, we could be accused of bias. If we took her in, people might say we're promoting WTT through burlesque. So I told Joe that if Renée passed the IOC test, I'd okay it. If she can play Wimbledon, she should be able to play WTT."

Buchholz feared a rumored walkout of women in the league. For example, the L.A. Strings' Diane Fromholtz called Richards "a freak," and when asked what she would've done had she lost to the transgender star, replied, "drowned myself." Days later, Richards failed the test and got barred from WTT. A distraught Richards, who planned to quit tennis and resume her medical practice, was unavailable for comment.

A July 6 Nets game against Boston planned for Pittsburgh got moved to Columbus, and then to Hartford. During the midseason break, Borg basked in his Wimbledon title but said that he had no trouble, mentally or physically, getting up for his WTT re-entry with his fourth-place Nets. A Lobsters record crowd of 6,118 saw the re-rebranded Cleveland Nets triumphant 26-23, as Borg blasted Boston in singles and doubles competition.

Zingale offered to lease Borg a Corvette if he won Wimbledon. So when he did win, the owner presented him the keys to the white sports car in front of a July 9 announced crowd of 8,312, the largest to see the Cleveland team. But a press table regular heard the attendance report and exclaimed, "If you believe that number, you believe in the Easter Bunny." Borg also got feted for his #2 rank in men's singles play (.667). The Nets set another home attendance mark July 18, this time in New Orleans, as 9,952 saw Borg spark his Nets, 25-23 over the Sea-Port Cascades. Zingale raved about fan support.

The Nets ended the 1977 season a mediocre 16-28 (.364) yet backed into the playoffs to face the first-place Lobsters (36-9). August 16, the Nets got trimmed at B.U. 30-26, as Borg fell to Tony Roche 7-6. August 18 in Cleveland, the Nets tied the series, 21-20; the Nets competed short-handed, between Turnbull's shoulder tendinitis, and Borg's ear infection. August 19 in Boston, the Nets' season ended by a score of 28-21. At WTT post-season awards in L.A., Borg—the top men's singles star and #3 with Riessen in doubles—got named Rookie of the Year. Renée Richards, finally cleared to play after being declared a female by the New York State Superior Court, never got on the court.

December 29, Borg announced that he would not return to the Nets in 1978. The svelte Swede spoke of the mental and physical fatigue he suffered, and of his inability to focus on the big tournaments. Borg complained that his season-long shoulder discomfort, for which the Swede retired from the 1977 U.S. Open, was due to his WTT overuse. Zingale said Borg's deal had a clause letting him leave at year's end, and that Borg felt pressured to play for Sweden's Davis Cup, and in Italy, where he had lucrative endorsements.

February 14, Zingale announced the Nets' relocation to New Orleans. He said the team would play nine home games in the 80,000-seat Superdome, plus 13 in other Southern cities like Baton Rouge, Shreveport, and Thibodaux, Louisiana; Huntsville, Birmingham, and Mobile, Alabama; Biloxi and Jackson, Mississippi; and Lakeland, Florida. The squad would also return three times to Cleveland's Richfield Coliseum: a May 28 exhibition with the Gaters, plus August 2 versus Indiana, and August 12 against Anaheim.

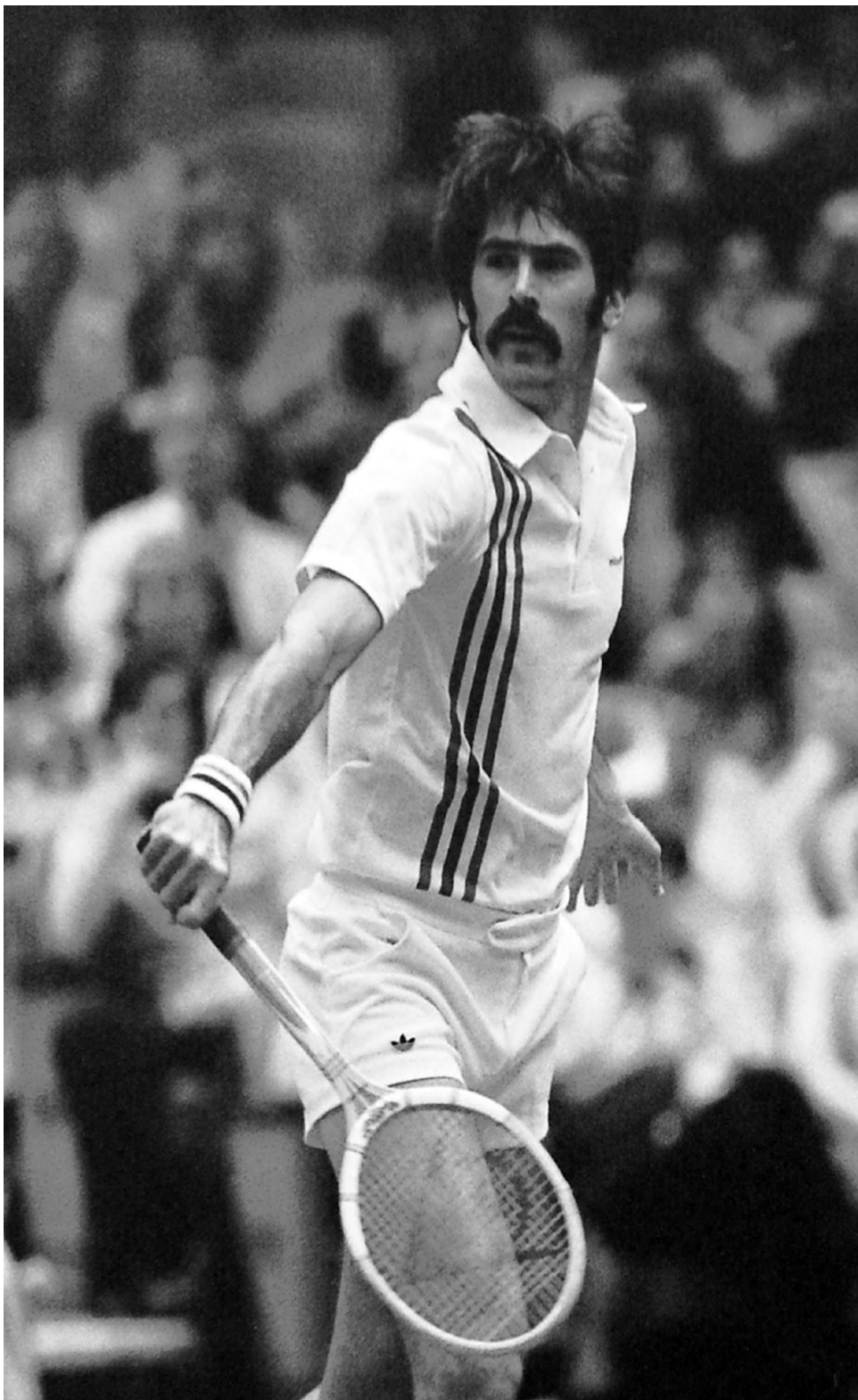
***“I am pleased that the press is beginning to refer to me as ‘Renée Richards the tennis player’ instead of ‘Renée Richards, the transsexual.’”***

**—RENÉE RICHARDS, New Orleans Nets, 1978**

Zingale, seeking local funding, said that with neither Borg nor Simionescu returning, all he'd signed for 1978 were Richards, Wendy Turnbull, and Peggy Michel. No men had come to terms, but he hoped to import Argentina's Guillermo Vilas, Romania's Ion Țiriac, or Florida's Brian Gottfried. The Nets players loved the move; N.O. was paradise compared to Cleveland. A week later, the owner said the team would be called the Sun Belt Nets: “Sun Belt got chosen because it's a term for the growing South.” When not playing in secondary markets, they were the New Orleans Nets.

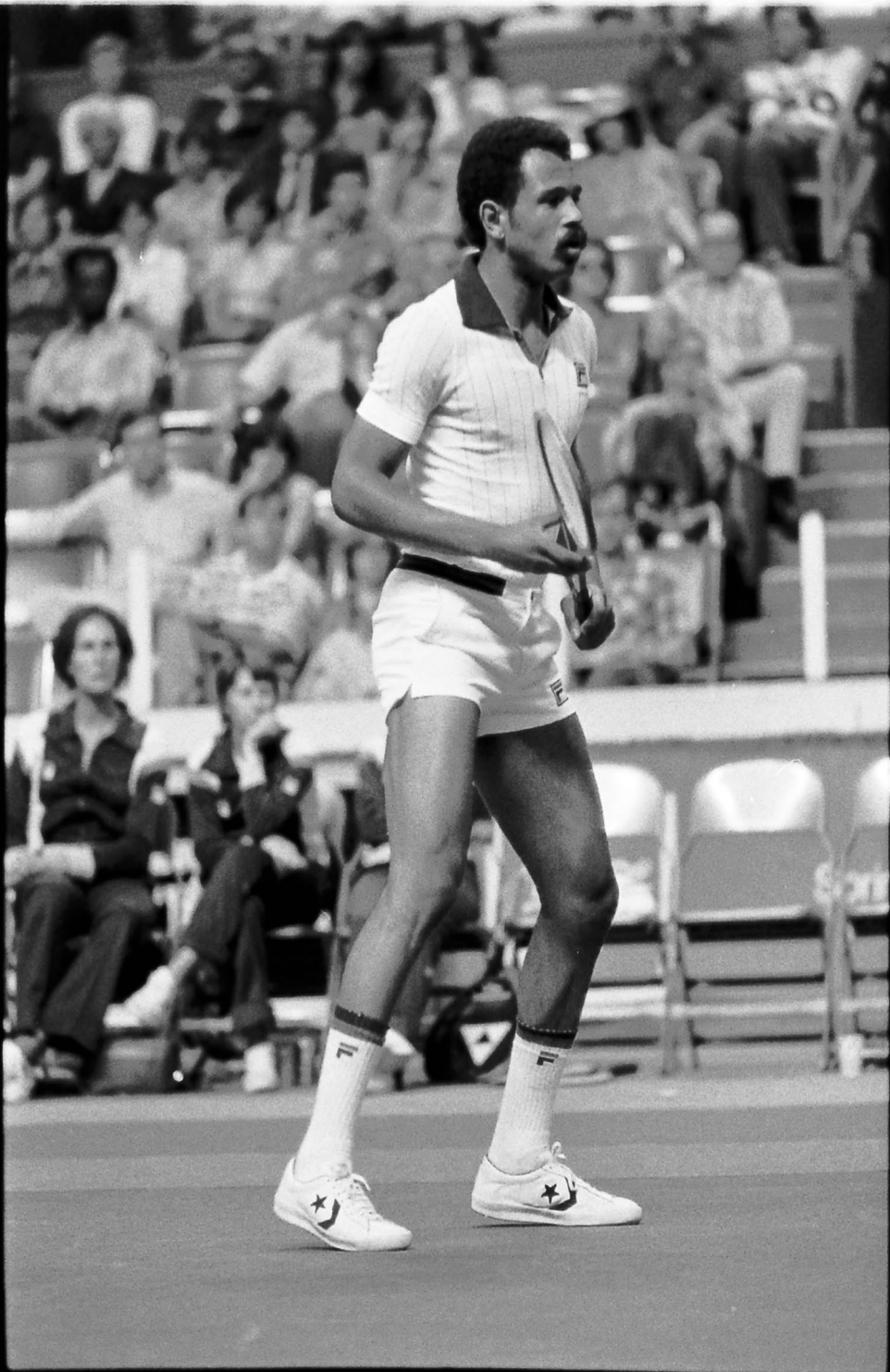
After re-signing player-coach Marty Riessen on March 8, the oldest team in WTT, with an average age over 30, now featured Richards, Turnbull, Trish Bostrom, Helen Gourlay, Andy Pattison, and NBA star John Lucas. The hoops icon obtained in a trade with Phoenix to play behind Riessen and Pattison came to terms with a paltry \$15,000 salary.

What does an owner do when his team draws just 704 fans to an event? He fires the promotion director. That's what Zingale did after his franchise brought 704 to see the Nets beat the Cascades 27-22 at the Superdome—looking like a postage stamp in the middle of the arena. Zingale said that Barry Mendelson, former EVP of the NBA New Orleans Jazz, was told he'd no longer work for the Nets. Zingale said, “I think we've done



**Marty Riessen, Cleveland Nets player-coach, 1976**





**John Lucas, New Orleans Nets, 1978**

**#1 overall NBA Draft pick, #2 African-American netter after Arthur Ashe**