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BNP Paribas' pullout results in a shutdown of the Showdown

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The BNP Paribas Showdown returned big-time tennis to Madison Square Garden.
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in Indian Wells, Calif. The bank did not immediately reply for comment.

The decade-long run of the BNP Paribas Showdown at Madison Square Garden is over after the French bank pulled out as title sponsor. The one-night March exhibition, televised on ESPN or streamed on ESPN3, often filled most of the arena and featured top stars such as **Roger Federer** and **Serena Williams**.

"After ten successful years hosting the BNP Paribas Showdown, we will be focusing on a new tennis event in 2018, details of which will be announced at a later date," MSG said in a statement.

Jerry Solomon, founder of StarGames, the promoter of the event, did not reply for comment. But a source said that when BNP decided not to continue with the sponsorship, it became too difficult to find a replacement. The bank entertained more than 500 clients the night of the match and paid in the low seven figures for the sponsorship.

BNP, a big sponsor in tennis, is in negotiations to renew its title sponsorship of the BNP Paribas Open

Sources said MSG is in talks with Tie Break Tens, a new initiative to play only tennis tie breaks. The format has been tried in Europe. A spokeswoman for the company promoting the format did not reply for comment.

MSG once hosted the ATP and WTA Championships, and was at that time seen as a premier spot to host tennis. The BNP Showdown revived the sense that tennis in midtown Manhattan still could be a hot property, if only for a one-night exhibition.



IBM's Watson looks for fist pumps and listens for crowd noise to create match highlights
GETTY IMAGES

> **THE AI CONNECTION:** The U.S. Open's renewal of its IBM sponsorship, announced last week, may be the first in sports where artificial intelligence is one of if not the primary driving forces. IBM is using AI to run the question-and-answer section of the U.S. Open app, and using it to curate highlights. As many as 1,000 highlights posted across social media by the Open this fortnight will be generated by IBM's AI technology, which learns from crowd noise, points graphics and other elements when there is a highlight.

"Who could ever think a system could learn a sport, learn what a fist pump looks like, can listen for the sounds, can read the scoring graphics and actually make sense of those," said **Noah Syken**, vice president of global sponsorships and client programs.

IBM is also at the beginning stage of integrating AI into the USTA's player performance unit at the group's Lake Nona center in Orlando.

play, not only the characteristic of your play on the court but what are your personality characteristics off the court?" Syken said. "Are you an aggressive person, all those kinds of things. We think there is an opportunity to develop groupings of people, understand those characteristics and help folks train, develop training regimens that are suited to their personality types."

IBM also integrated AI into a "cognitive" photo booth on site at the Open, which takes responses from fans and tells them what kind of personality they are.

American Express also infused one of its activations with what could be described as AI-light. Its "air tennis" on site allowed fans with their hands to compete against a virtual machine opponent.

At first AmEx described the technology as AI, but then said the technology is programmed and cannot learn like IBM's technology, later changing the description to "virtual." Either way, hundreds of thousands of fans are expected to play air tennis at the event. AmEx's activation is handled by Momentum, and is annually one of the highest regarded in sports. Even if it didn't have real AI, the 20,000-square-foot space had courts for kids to play on and a two-story card member lounge, which Venus Williams' V Starr Interiors designed.

> **LOBS:** StarWing Sports signed **Kyle Edmund**, one of Britain's top players. He had been with WME-IMG. ... He may have been knocked out in qualifying, but Noah Rubin, who trains at the nearby John McEnroe Tennis Academy, signed an endorsement deal with apparel startup Uomo Sport, which was represented by Gerard Fox Law. Rubin is repped by Lagardère. ... This week the U.S. Tennis Association is hosting a news conference to promote the coming "Battle of the Sexes" movie. Emma Stone, who plays **Billie Jean King**, is scheduled to attend the news conference and the women's final later that day. ... Tennis agents usually sit in prime seats near the court. For **Maria Sharapova**'s second match, in cavernous Arthur Ashe Stadium, her agent, **Max Eisenbud**, was spotted in the upper row of the upper deck. Emailed about his distant perch he responded, presumably tongue in cheek, he liked to be alone and passed along his well wishes. ... A court hearing is set this week in Brooklyn in **Eugenie Bouchard**'s now 2-year-old lawsuit against the USTA for her locker-room fall at the 2015 Open.

"The notion of machine learning for athletes — Who do you play like? What are the characteristics of your



Emma Stone, as Billie Jean King in "Battle of the Sexes," is set to attend the women's final.

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