

TENNIS

A Racket Maestro Makes His Yearly Migration

By KENNETH ROSEN AUG. 22, 2015

Many people who love tennis and play regularly within New York's five boroughs know Woody Schneider. At one time or another, they need him. And so do their rackets.

Each year — just before the estimated 700,000 attendees through the U.S.T.A. Billie Jean King National Tennis Center in Flushing, Queens, for the [United States Open](#) — the pro shop he operates there is emptied, closed and repurposed.

Schneider and his business partner, Joan Dziena, run NYC Racquet Sports and two branches of Grand Central Racquet in Manhattan, but they also have managed the National Tennis Center Pro Shop since 2005 on a year-to-year contract.

Before this year's [United States Open](#) begins on Aug. 31, they will have moved the merchandise in the pro shop, which covers some 2,000 square feet, to their Manhattan locations. The business closes (this year from Aug. 8 to Sept. 13), and a big-name libation lounge sometimes takes its place. After the tournament, the pro shop can reopen.

Synonymous with tennis and racket stringing for more than three decades, Schneider had a humble beginning, and his career is dotted with diversions like the annual uprooting from Queens. Much like the history of his stores, he is forever at war with renovations, disruptions and construction.



Woody Schneider started Grand Central Racquet in 1992; he also runs the National Tennis Center Pro Shop. Hilary Swift/The New York Times



Mark Teague, left, a longtime employee of Grand Central Racquet, inspected a racket in Grand Central Terminal. Hilary Swift/The New York Times

"I should have gone into the scaffolding business," Schneider said recently while he and Dziena plotted the annual migration of the pro shop from Queens. "No matter where I've been, I've been affected by construction."

In 1975, working at Commuter Sports Center for Marvin Weiss — at the time the owner of three stores inside [Grand Central Terminal](#) — Schneider weathered changes brought on by the construction of the Grand Hyatt New York hotel and a face-lift to the terminal's Beaux-Arts facade.

But by 1991, Weiss, who for 30 years leased the sporting goods store, a bookstore and a card boutique from Metro-North, [owed about \\$182,000 in back rent](#). Though most of the unpaid rent came from the bookstore, he closed all three stores on New Year's Eve, leaving Schneider on his own.

After the closure, Schneider rented a small space in 1992 below the private tennis court of Donald Trump inside the terminal. He dedicated the shop, the beginning of Grand Central Racquet, to racket stringing.

The foot traffic past his shop in those days was about the same as the yearly attendance at the Open. What no one told him was that an enormous renovation would soon disturb his setup.

At the start of 1994, an overhaul began, Schneider said, and about 10 businesses were allowed to stay in Vanderbilt Hall and operate out of free-standing, hand-built shanties. He strung rackets for hours at a time, using a machine that looks like a kitchen mixer with horse shoes where a bowl should be.

"It was a big disappointment because, the original space, we literally had tens of thousands of people walk past us every single day," Schneider said.

Construction continued to hamper his business, lasting into 2000. Schneider eventually moved to a kiosk next to a watch repair service in the terminal between Tracks 38 and 39. He had also gone into business with Gene Scott, then the publisher of *Tennis Week* magazine, who had rented a store on East 44th Street near Madison Avenue and needed help running it.

Schneider operated the Grand Central kiosk and store simultaneously. He used Post-it notes for price tags, and by 1998 Schneider ran the business outright, turning it into the second branch of Grand Central Racquet.

Dziena was dating Schneider around the time the business expanded, and they caught the eye of Bill Mountford, the former director of tennis at the United States Tennis Association, who approached them about running the [organization's pro shop](#).



Teague stringing a racket at the shop, which is between Tracks 38 and 39 in the terminal. Hilary Swift/The New York Times

However, there was the catch that required closing up and moving the pro shop during the annual tournament on the U.S.T.A. grounds. Around October 2010, after Schneider and Dziena signed another annual contract with the U.S.T.A., [Grand Central Terminal](#) underwent more renovations, including opening the Trump tennis court to the public as the Vanderbilt Tennis Club, and Schneider again found his business surrounded by scaffolding in the northwest corner of the terminal.

"That just completely devastated business," he said. "People believed we were out of business."

However, Schneider and Dziena survived with support from loyal customers and the U.S.T.A., which did not respond to requests for comment.

At NYC Racquet Sports, which they opened in 2009 on West 35th Street, Dziena sat behind a desk in an upstairs loft while Schneider sat nearby and showed a picture on his cellphone of the vacant pro shop.

Dziena talked about the [retractable roof](#) at Arthur Ashe Stadium, scheduled for completion in 2016, and she prompted Schneider to plug their newest endeavor, a racket courier service for at-home pickup and delivery. Schneider joked that he might take one of the racket-stringing machines home with him in case of a late-night job. "I'm thinking of it," he deadpanned.

As they plotted the logistics of this year's migration from Queens, a sidewalk shed and concrete barriers obscured their storefront on Madison Avenue. Nevertheless, they were again ready for the move, as they have been now for 10 years, no matter the challenge.

"Listen, a Jewish boy from Queens was not meant to drive a U-Haul truck, I'm telling you," Schneider said. "It's not pretty."