

We tried it: Playing on the US Open's center court -- virtually

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The Pro Walk gives you the experience of walking from the locker room to center court, and serving an ace as fans cheer.

I love tennis. I'm not really sure when that love began -- maybe it was back in high school when I started playing -- because I didn't grow up like most tennis people, taking lessons since the day they're able to hold a racket. The sport came into my life later, but my love for it has only gotten stronger over the years.

So to me, the US Open is the most wonderful time of the year -- and probably my favorite sporting event. Getting to see the best players, explore the gorgeous grounds, eat top-tier food and watch some incredible tennis makes for the most enjoyable days and high-energy nights.

When I found out that there was going to be a virtual reality simulation at the tournament this year that let fans feel the excitement players experience when walking onto center court, you know I was checking it out. It's called the American Express Pro Walk ... and it's awesome.

The details

When someone tells you about a virtual reality experience, most of us think: That sounds great and all, but can't imagine it being all too believable.

Well the Pro Walk is quite the opposite. The company used immersion technology, so instead of wearing a headset, they've got holograms and 360-degree high definition projections to put you into the experience.

Jason Kempin/Getty Images

Pete Sampras and Monica Seles give a virtual pep talk before you go out on center court.

As you walk through the double doors, you arrive at player check-in, where the system captures a photo of you and takes the pronunciation of your name. A pathway created by lights and a moderator's voice then led me through the next door, into the "locker room." The wooden walls have the names of past champions on them, and just as I rounded the corner, I almost jumped as I was greeted by real-life-looking holograms of Pete Sampras and Monica Seles standing mid-locker room.



And they knew I had walked in! The pair greeted me and immediately started giving me tips for the match I was about to walk into, as well as some words of motivation. They wished me luck, and I turned and followed the lighted pathway down the infamous tunnel leading to the court.

My journey down the tunnel was accompanied by flashing lights from the paparazzi and sound guys in videos on both sides of the walls, imitating the media capturing photos and sound bytes. Videos of past players during crucial points from epic matches were also immersed in there, moving down the wall, leading me toward the dome. When I reached the end, the moderator asked if I was ready -- it was time to step onto the court.

I walked through the next door and into Arthur Ashe stadium (the biggest tennis stadium in the world), accompanied by the chants and cheers of the crowd as my name was announced and my photo came across the Jumbotron. I kid you not -- it felt like I was on center court. The seats were filled with what looked like real fans, 360 degrees around me, cheering and going wild. I couldn't help but say, "This is so cool" out loud. I felt like I was Serena -- and the crowd loved me.

I was handed a racket and the dome projection directed me to prepare to serve. On the screen in front of me, I could see my opponent across the net. I also caught a glimpse of Monica in the stands cheering. I was directed to serve, so I wound up with the real racket I was holding, and ... ace! The crowd went wild as I won the point.

Worth it?

Definitely! Walking out of it, I couldn't stop thinking how unbelievably realistic it all was. Computers operate all the behind-the-scenes technology (such as each room's ability to know when you enter, your face's projection on the Jumbotron and your serve as you wind up with the connected tennis racket) so nothing gets in the way of your experience once you're inside the walk.

Plus, it's all free. Afterward, you get a takeaway video that shows clips of Monica and Pete talking about what a great player you are ([here's mine](#)), as well as quick shots of you from the experience. Would I do it again? Absolutely.