

From a Prodigy to a Protector : Tennis: Andrea Jaeger, now 28, channels her enthusiasm into easing the suffering of children.

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INDIAN WELLS — Etched in the memory of tennis fans everywhere is the picture of a child named Andrea Jaeger, pigtails flapping as she bounced around the courts at the shrines of the game, Roland Garros and Wimbledon.

While others her age were experiencing pimples and puberty, she was experiencing the clay of Paris and the grass of Centre Court, in front of sellout crowds in the thousands and television audiences in the millions. She was not merely an early-rounder. She was a finalist in both events.

The child prodigy from Lincolnshire, Ill., as fiery as she was bouncy, won her first tour tournament at 14 years 8 months. She was No. 2 in the world before her 18th birthday.

And then she went away, not slowly or particularly quietly, but away, nevertheless.

After tearing up her serving arm and shoulder in 1984 in the middle of a French Open match, she had played only a dozen or so tour matches from that point until a day in Houston in 1987, at a nondescript women's tour event. She won both her first-round singles and doubles, then defaulted, never to play on the tour again. At 20, she finally put a stop to her endless cycle of surgery, rehab, cortisone, ice and aspirin.

She is 28 now, and except for occasional mentions in the press about the problems of similar young stars such as Jennifer Capriati, the name Andrea Jaeger doesn't come up much. Nor does the story of where she has been and what she has been doing since that day in Houston in 1987, when she walked away from it all.

But it is a story that should come up--and will more and more as it becomes better known--because it is a warm and wonderful story of a now-grown-up child, helping those who aren't and probably won't. Jaeger is here at the Hyatt Grand Champions Resort for the Evert Cup tournament. It will end today with the finals, and with a celebrity match in which Jaeger will play and also receive a televised commendation on the ESPN broadcast for her work with children.

Saturday, she sat in the bleachers on a side court, tight perm now replacing pigtails, and talked about the love of her life, her "kids," who now number well into the hundreds. She hadn't called a news conference, she had been sought out. News conferences aren't her style.

"Kids know if you are doing things for a response, or if you really care," she said.

And what kids know and think is all she really cares about these days. She runs something called Little Star Foundation, which is a program for children, age 7-20, with life-threatening diseases or life-altering conditions. Briefly put, Jaeger spends 14 hours a day, seven days a week, raising funds and attending to the details of providing a special place and time for these children. She goes the extra mile for them when other programs can't: "One of the kids has a brain tumor and the only way she could come is if we had oxygen on the plane and oxygen in her room. So we did," she said.

She has an 800 number so that kids who visit can stay in touch, at no cost. Everywhere she travels, she sends her kids postcards, hundreds and hundreds of them.

As she talks, she bubbles enthusiasm. This is her life work, something she will do forever, she says. The day her first group of 100 children arrived was like winning 10 Wimbledons, she says. This is so important to her that her personal life, perhaps children of her own, must take a back seat for the moment, adding with a laugh that when she does marry, it will probably be to a cancer specialist or a child psychologist.

Indeed, the pigtails are gone, but not the bounce. She describes herself currently as "childlike, but not childish--there's a big difference, you know." But there is nothing childlike or childish about the description of what this is all about: "The kids say that, when they come, they forget they are sick." That was from Andrea Jaeger. Adult.