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For Agassi, Cheers for Work Off the Court

By LYNN ZINSER

When Andre Agassi steps out onto the all-too-familiar court at Arthur Ashe Stadium on Monday night, he will share another few moments with a crowd he adores and that adores him back. It is a testament to the length and passion of his United States Open career, which ended so memorably three years ago, that Agassi will be able to have an intimate exchange with a crowd of 23,000.

"I wish I could just reach out and hug the whole stadium," he said Thursday in a telephone interview.

The fans in New York, Agassi said, watched him grow up for 21 years, from his first appearance as a 16-year-old in 1986. Now 39, Agassi is returning because of his post-tennis life; he will be honored by the United States Tennis Association along with David Robinson, Mia Hamm and Doug Flutie on opening night of the Open for the charitable works of their retirement years.

A star will return to the U.S. Open to face a crowd that helped him grow up.

More than just watching him grow up, though, Agassi said the people here helped him grow up. He said they became a part of his journey from a rebellious teenager to the sport's revered elder statesman, to someone who has dedicated himself to public education by running a charter school in a rough area of his hometown, Las Vegas.

"To share with them what my life's work is now just feels right," Agassi said of the fans. "They didn't let me get away with less than I should strive for. Through all my rebellious years, they held me accountable with their

lack of condoning certain behavior. They pushed me to take a harder look at myself."

Agassi said he wanted to return a year ago, for the champions' celebration at Arthur Ashe Stadium, but the demands of his life prevented it. It was the first day of school for his children: Jaden, 7, and Jaz, 5.

Over 21 years, the Open crowd became a sort of extended family for Agassi. He celebrated two Open titles with them, in 1994 and '99, in a career that eventually included victories at every Grand Slam event. He shared this stage with his fellow American Pete Sampras for many of those years, but unlike Sampras, who had an under-the-radar retirement, Agassi has a persistent spotlight following him and his wife, Steffi Graf. And he embraces it.

That is because they decided to tackle the issue of improving public education, a venture helped by their athletic success. The

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Andre Agassi during a gym dedication at the Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy in Las Vegas.

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school he opened carries his famous name — the Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy — and this week drew a visit from Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Agassi will talk education policy with anyone who asks. His school, which teaches grades K-12, opened 10 years ago and had its first high school graduation two months ago. He said all 34 graduates were headed to college.

It spawned a mixture of emotions in Agassi.

"You're happy; you're sad," he said. "You feel like you've come a long way but you've got a long way to go. But over all it was a celebration. It was unlike any accomplishment that I ever had on a tennis court. Nothing I ever did inside those lines has ever compared to that feeling."

Agassi says he considers the school a laboratory of sorts, to see if his ideas for streamlining and improving education can have an effect on the "children society is quickest to write off." It operates in the fifth-largest school district in the country — Las Vegas's Clark County — and in a state ranked near the bottom nationally in sending students to college. Agassi hopes to boost graduating classes to more than 50 students each year, and if his academy succeeds, he hopes its example will become part of a national effort to improve public schools.

He acknowledged he was not the most likely candidate to turn his talent into a lifelong pursuit of helping others. But even as he was competing as tennis's young rebel, with long hair and a devil-may-care attitude that rankled traditionalists, he said he devel-

oped a desire to help children. He founded the Andre Agassi Foundation in 1994. His early efforts focused on smaller programs for abused children and after-school activities. He eventually decided

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that was not enough.

But while tennis gave him the money and fame to make his plans possible, it kept him from dedicating all his time to them. So, while other athletes miss the cheers and the competition that end when they retire, Agassi said he had found more than enough

to replace them.

"Tennis gave me a lot but it also came with a big price tag," he said. "To live without the dramas now has been an asset in my life. I miss the relationships. I miss my peers. I miss the fans being up close and personal and being able to impact their day for a couple hours.

"But I've also chosen to look at my life as a canvas to impact people for a lot longer than that. You don't get the immediate feedback, but your life's work truly has a bigger relevance than just a break from their day when they come out to watch you. This is about real change and real impact."

For a short time anyway, he will get another dose of the up close and personal, which perhaps only he can pull off in a stadium so cavernous. But now, he is all grown up.