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For Grant Roberts, the chance to help propel inclusive tennis into the international spotlight at the Australian Open is just ace.

Grant, who is deaf, will officiate at the very first Deaf and Hard of Hearing tournament in the second week of the Open.

He's Tennis Australia's first ever deaf chair umpire.

A NDIS participant, Grant has been training and learning to umpire during the past year through Tennis Australia, with support from the NDIS.

Now, he'll be overseeing the action at the first Grand Slam of the year.

"We'll be out on court for three days, and I'll be in a supervisor role, working to support the tournament referee and chair umpires," Grant said.

"It's brilliant and the outcome will be to ensure Deaf Tennis Australia has enough young people coming through the system.

"We can say, 'here's the pathway now', and before, we didn't have that."

Grant is a former tennis player with three decades of experience, playing tournaments around the world. He was also president of Deaf Tennis Australia.

Born deaf, Grant learned Auslan as a teenager. Now 52, he's made giant strides in helping to make tennis more inclusive.

"I achieved my dream of playing during last year's Australian Open, and to just be there was a combination of 20 years of lobbying for deaf and hard of hearing players," Grant said.

"The issue though was the communication between umpires and players. There were time delays during play as the umpire wasn't able to follow the players and had to get interpreters."

Post-retirement, Grant saw an opportunity to help bring change, using his lived experiences and skills.

"I was thinking about what to do after retirement. I was already a soccer referee in the Ballarat region, so I thought, 'here's an opportunity' to combine the two with one being winter and the other summer," he said.

"So, I reached out to Tennis Australia and asked about what the pathway to becoming an umpire would be."

In the 12 months since, Grant has umpired local competitions and pennants, before progressing to umpiring state and national championships for the deaf.

Experienced umpires have mentored Grant while he continues to learn and adapt to the craft.

Grant juggles tennis with his professional life as a program manager with NDIS partner, Intereach.

He says his NDIS funding makes it all possible.

“I wouldn’t be an umpire or referee without NDIS funding, and without the NDIS, I wouldn’t be where I am,” Grant said.

NDIS participants, families and carers are experiencing improved independence, life satisfaction and community engagement thanks to their disability support packages, new outcomes data shows.

“The NDIS funds my hearing aids, and technology like my watch, which is important for my independence,” Grant said.

“I use my funding for audiology and to access Auslan interpreters. Using Auslan interpreters has enabled me to participate in the local community and understand what’s happening when I’m umpiring and being mentored.”

Grant’s positive outlook on life is reflected in the number of NDIS participants over 15 years old feeling satisfied with their life now and when looking to the future, this reported an increase of almost 42 per cent over five years.

The Australian Open’s first-ever All Abilities Day will be Tuesday 24 January, followed by the inaugural Deaf and Hard of Hearing tournament, from January 27-29.

Abilities Day will focus on inclusive formats of tennis, and invite people who have vision, hearing, mobility, sensory and intellectual disabilities to enjoy the Open.

Grant knows the importance of such days and tournaments. He plans to continue to help provide pathways for the next generation.

As Tennis Australia’s first ever deaf chair umpire, Grant said the sky is the limit, with national and international competitions well within his sights.

“I’ve got a long way to go, but we have Nationals in Newcastle in 2024, and I hope to be picked to umpire there and at State Championships,” he said.

“The Deaflympics would be the pinnacle for me in terms of umpiring, and I ultimately hope to be there in Japan in 2025.

“But hopefully, with the Australian Open, we can gain publicity for Deaf and Hard of Hearing tennis. So, for the young ones wanting to play at international level, we can show a pathway.”

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