



Since 2004, **Alex Grabowsky** has adeptly managed transportation during the Rolex Shanghai Masters, facilitating the movement of players, officials, and media from airports, hotels, and the Qizhong Tennis Center, thereby ensuring a smooth experience for all participants throughout the competition.

Photo by Mike Frey

CHAUFFEURING CHAMPIONS

Moving players at elite tournaments like a pro

Bivash Mukherjee

Beyond the fierce rallies and electrifying serves on the court, there is a complex and carefully coordinated logistical operation in place. Player logistics entail arranging and executing travel and lodging as they race between tournaments, often across continents and different time zones.

The logistical challenge begins with arranging flights, transfers, and visa requirements, especially for top players who often travel with an entourage that includes coaches, physiotherapists, and family members.

Organizers must ensure that players arrive in good physical and mental

shape, minimize travel weariness and delays, and manage last-minute changes due to qualifying results or player injuries.

A crucial element of logistics is the transportation of players and Alex Grabowsky executes this task with remarkable ease. The German has been part of the Rolex Shanghai Masters since 2004, managing the transportation needs of officials, players, and media.

"Alex," as he is known on the tennis circuit, started off as a driver in 1990 at an ATP event in Frankfurt, eventually setting up his own business as a transport organizer.

In Shanghai, Alex oversees shuttle

services to and from the airports, train stations, hotels, practice courts, and the Qizhong Tennis Center, ensuring that players move seamlessly throughout the tournament.

Personalized transportation options, such as dedicated cars for top-seeded players, help minimize waiting times and provide an additional layer of comfort. His team must coordinate these movements with precision, accommodating changes in match schedules and ensuring that players are on time for their commitments, whether it's a match, practice session, or press conference.

The Hamburg native has had such a long presence on the tennis circuit

that players often refer to him as a "dinosaur!"

"It means Alex has been around for a long time!"

Ahead of the 2024 Rolex Shanghai Masters, Alex talks to Shanghai Daily about his typical day at work and his admiration for the city he has been visiting for nearly two decades.

When did you first come to Shanghai for the Rolex Tennis Masters?

In 2004. I was in Houston at the invitation of the then CEO and President of the ATP Brad Drewett as part of the ATP World Championships. I was already organizing driving services in Frankfurt and Hanover from 1990



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Alex Grabowsky
Transport Concierge

to 1999. They wanted to improve the most important tournament on the ATP Tour, and I was able to make that happen.

That year, a Shanghai delegation was in Houston, and I became their transportation manager for the ATP event in Shanghai. Since then, I have worked with local specialists every year.

Please tell us about the kind of work you do at the Rolex Shanghai Masters?

The task is multifaceted. We first communicate with the organizer, reflect on the previous year, and plan for future improvements in this area of player support.

Then, collect and verify travel information, create transfer lists, and coordinate with the local transportation company.

Ensure timely planning of requirements, scheduling of sufficient vehicles, and transportation of players and their entourage from the airport to the official tournament hotel on site.

Furthermore, we organize the daily transfers from the hotel to the venue and back during the tournament. This includes special events, medical trips, or photo appointments requested by the tournament organizer.

How do you deal with the language barrier?

From the very beginning, I had very nice young people at my side who helped me as colleagues with the translation from English into Chinese.

These young people have changed over the years. Many of these young people have since moved on to other positions, but the great thing for me is that I get to see them again every year, and friendships have developed. These young people have helped me

learn about and comprehend Chinese culture.

Today, I regret that I never took the time to learn the Chinese language, but at the age of 56, it is too late.

Do the drivers work in shifts, or are they always on call when you need them?

The drivers assigned by the transport company are professional chauffeurs, and they are responsible for scheduling. You never get the feeling that there is a shortage of staff. The driver managers are highly professional experts who take care of everyone's safety.

How do you deal with emergencies like change in schedule, etc.?

After so many years of competing in the best tournaments in the world, you know the procedures well. These are discussed in advance with the driver management, and the deployment is planned. Good pre-planning also leaves room to react to surprising moments.

A player once forgot his travel documents in the hotel safe. We were able to react quickly and take the documents to PVG (Pudong International Airport) in a second vehicle, and the player was able to make the trip. I always advise our guests to leave for the airport early and arrive relaxed.

Your finest recollections about Shanghai?

For me, the tournament in Shanghai was and has become a part of me. The long journey from Germany to China is always one that I look forward to. It's the friends, the fascinating metropolis, the players and entourage, the exciting task, and, of course, the cooperation with the organizers, Charles Smith and Michael Luevano.



Are you assigned a particular number of vehicles, or do you give a specific number to the organizers?

Experience values are used here, and the organizer is responsible for the coordination!

Your relationship with players? How easy — or difficult — is it to deal with them, especially star players? Who has been your favorite player while working in Shanghai?

I think in the many years I have worked in this field, I have had the opportunity to get to know almost all tennis players. Many of them are now "retired" and travel with the active players as coaches, agents, and managers. Of course, you look forward to seeing these great players and people again.

I played tennis successfully in a club for many years and am still a tennis fan. I am always loyal to my assignments, and I wish every player a lot of fun on the court or "a good day at the office."

The players know that they are all treated equally and that the cars are lined up in a row and driven up one by one for them. It can happen that a young talent gets into a great limo and a former Shanghai winner gets into a comfortable minivan.

Of course, there is no favorite player in Shanghai. I am a tennis fan and a local service provider. When I'm at the big Qizhong stadium, I like to watch the matches. The selection is then totally uncertain, and I enjoy an exciting match and great shots.

It's great to see how enthusiastic the Chinese tennis fans are.

Are you involved only in tennis or any other sporting events as well? How different is your job compared to, let's say, Formula One?

My role in other areas of sport is comparable.

What is your best memory of the event in Shanghai?

I like it when the tournament starts and everyone arrives at the hotel with great expectations. There is often friendly small talk before check-in. The players know the reason I am here and trust me and my work. That is one reason why I was allowed to travel to China for many years and become a part of the tournament.

When a player leaves, it is sometimes very spontaneous after a defeat. They want to go home after the long

Asian swing. That's understandable, as these players travel for most of the year.

Everything has to fit together. The often-promised "Alex, I'll be 15 minutes late, and then I have to get to the airport really quickly" almost never works. Who can manage to pack their suitcase in 15 minutes, including checkout? You usually wait a little longer, and then the player leaves for the airport after a quick hug.

Of course, many people plan for the following day, when everything is more relaxed. I always look forward to the friendly hug and a final chat (where are we going, what's next, etc). We have become familiar with each other during these Shanghai days — or after all these years.

How do you ensure players reach the venue on time? Has there ever been a case when a player failed to reach the venue on time?

Traffic in Shanghai is not easy to predict. The streets are never empty; you have rough planning figures, and we keep track of them. The players and we plan generously, and I can't remember a player ever missing a deadline.

What is your best memory of the event in Shanghai?

As I said, many players leave before the tournament ends, and only one winner and one winning double remain. These players then arrive late at the hotel, and the reception is always special. I love it when all the hotel staff form a trellis and greet the big winner with applause. It's a wonderful moment with goosebumps and emotion. You also know that the tournament has come to an end and you can soon return to your family — with lots of great memories to talk about.

Do you only deal with foreign players, or do you also deal with Chinese players?

Of course, there are also Chinese players on the site. They are also familiar from other tournaments. The Chinese staff have more direct access because of the language. But everyone is on the transfer list and is served the same way.

How stressful is it while dealing with logistics at an event?

There is no such thing as an event without stress. But it's the experience and working with a great team that make everything run smoothly.