



Child's Play

Competing in tournaments in France can mean facing opponents of any age. Here's how one adult survived a return to the juniors. BY MARC HOWARD

As the child of an American father and a French mother, I grew up spending the school years with my parents in New York and summers with my French grandparents in Normandy. I played junior tournaments on Long Island, but it was during my summers in France that my game really developed.

Until I was 15, I competed mainly in age-group tournaments, but thereafter I started playing open events and taking on players of all ages, which is how it's done in the French system. I went on to play at Yale University in the early 1990s, but afterward injury intervened and I focused on my career.

Recently, after nearly a decade away from the game, I picked up my racquets and gradually increased my commitment to tennis. Soon I was playing in a

few tournaments, though just for fun. In 2006, with the reluctant blessing of my wife, I decided to get into serious tennis shape again. I lifted weights, ran sprints, and practiced with the team at Georgetown University, where I'm an associate professor in the government department.

My goal for the summer of 2007, when I would return to vacation in Normandy with my family, was to compete in six or seven tournaments on the regional club circuit. It was a rare and welcome opportunity to revisit the red-clay courts that were such a large part of my childhood summers. But I quickly found out that this time the shoe would be on the other foot—I was the tennis veteran, and the majority of the opponents I faced were under 18. One was all of 12.

Although I was familiar with the

French ranking and entry system, I was surprised by how increased emphasis on early training ensured that most of my opponents were less than half of my age. They were tough competitors who travel in a pack, with high hopes, and, probably, unattainable goals.

This experience turned out to be both a nightmare and a dream.

First, it triggered flashbacks. I once was one of these kids, and that competitive fire never gets extinguished. But I'm also a parent now, sensitive to how intimidated a youngster can be when playing against an adult. So when I learned that I was going to face a 12-year-old ("I'll be 13 next month," he told me) just six years older than my oldest child, it was clearly a lose-lose situation. How could I get any satisfaction in beating a 12-year-old? How could I live with myself if I lost to one?

The kid, while ranked No. 3 in his age group in France, snapped after I won the first few games, threw a tantrum, and gave away the match. I felt terrible. But what guilt I felt was alleviated soon enough. In subsequent tournaments, I had a few decent wins, but I lost matches

to two kids born in 1991 (both of whom are ranked in the French Top 20 for their age). The matches were winnable, but in the end my opponents had tenacity I lacked, as well as an edge in conditioning. After all, each of them had played more than 50 competitive matches in the first half of 2007. I had booked less than a handful.

I wasn't despondent after those losses. I have a wonderful family and career, and no ambitions for stardom. But at night I found myself reliving the close points and blaming myself for losing them. My consolation was that in my next event I took out a 16-year-old, one who had beaten the two I had lost to earlier.

Competing against this trio flung me into the cauldron of French junior tennis. Never mind that, while they're dreaming of Roland Garros, I'm chasing after my kids or preparing my next lecture. In the heat of battle, and during the post-match conversations (French tradition calls for the winner to buy the loser a drink; given the age of my typical opponent, it was usually a soft drink), I had a window into their lives.

I learned, mainly, that the game has changed a great deal since I was a junior. To most of these kids, the net is a foreign object, from which one should keep a healthy distance, even when an opponent hits the ball short—which I started to do intentionally. They seemed stunned to see their "old school" (or was it just "old"?) opponent charge the net and close out points.

I also got a better appreciation of the differences in styles between European and U.S. players. The college kids I play with at Georgetown try to win points by going for big shots, and willingly pay the price of unforced errors. French players start with the presumption that one shouldn't make an error, and therefore should only go for more aggressive shots if the risk is low. Obviously, this latter style works better on red clay with heavy balls.

These kids, and the clay courts, brought back memories from my past. At one event, I looked over at a court and recalled playing a match on it as a 15-year-old. It was the time I asked my grandfather, the person who had inspired me to take up the

game, if he would stop watching my match because his sighs and gasps were making me nervous. I still wish I had handled that situation better.

At another event, I played on the same court where I had won a match that launched me to the next level just before I turned 16. In that match, I was at 6-all in the first set against a fired-up opponent who had beaten me before. The scene was electric, with a big crowd in the stands.

Early in the breaker, I flubbed a backhand and yelled, "Bend your f----- knees!"

When my opponent heard that, he got in my face and started playing to the crowd: "You think we are stupid and don't understand what you're saying? I know what you said, you say f----- to me!"

I explained that the word wasn't directed at him. He turned sheepish and said, "Ah bon . . ." He went back to his baseline, head down, and didn't win another point in the tiebreaker. The incident took the air out of him and I went on to win the second set 6-0.

That memory didn't help my cause, partly because it dawned on me that the opponent I was currently facing was born a full four years after that match. This time the air went out of me.

My magic ran out completely at the next tournament, which turned out to be my last. Although I won three matches against players ranked higher than me, the two-a-day format was grueling. In my fourth match in fewer than 36 hours, against a nationally ranked 23-year-old pro, my already-strained right hamstring gave out. I went down early in the second set and had to retire.

The injury might have kept me out for a week back when I was 16, but this time the doctor warned that unless I took a month off, I risked completely rupturing my hamstring. So I guess you really can't recapture your youth. But I had come close enough to leave me satisfied and determined to return to battle the kids again the following year.

And when, hopefully, one of them becomes a Roland Garros champion, I look forward to saying, "I beat that guy once . . . when he was 12." ♣

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