

# A Handful of Promise

*A Hidden Tennis Journey*

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# INTRODUCTION

My eyes sting with sweat, I can't breathe, no matter how hard I try to keep moving to create a breeze, it doesn't help! I don't know what the temperature is, but it feels like every breath I take, my nose burns all the way down into my lungs with each shallow breath. I'm on the verge of passing out in what feels like the inside of an oven on high temperature with the door locked. I'm fenced in; there is nowhere to go. I look up, and I see my coach and my parents sitting there in the stands in the sweltering heat while I'm trying to put in 100% of effort and show no weaknesses. My Spanish coach keeps nervously nodding, repeating 'VAMOS...VAMOS', and my parents are sitting next to him, staring at me emotionlessly. Across the net is my opponent, ready to serve, so I stop pacing around and get into returning position, where the full effect of being standing still on burning concrete takes its toll, my feet feel like they're on fire inside my melting shoes, sweat starts to pour from my face again, dripping onto the court evaporating instantly even though I towed off 20 seconds ago. I try to refocus on returning another 125Mph+ serve from a guy who looks like he is not even bothered. My nerves and nausea have almost gone due to losing the 1<sup>st</sup> set, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> set is looking bad. I just want to get off this court and have a cool shower and get comfortable, but I can't; my parents have just spent \$10,000 on this Mexican ITF Men's Circuit, and I can't just walk off the

court. BOOM...CLUNK, another massive serve from my opponent, and another jolty frame from me lands me 1-4 down in this 2<sup>nd</sup> set. I feel like screaming, self-harming, and smashing everything around me, but this would be too much effort. 'COME ON, TOMMY!' I hear my dad say, followed by another annoying 'VAMOS...VAMOS'.

As I lost another 1<sup>st</sup> round match and said well done to my opponent, I feel embarrassed, angry, and afraid, but I also feel relieved because the pain is now over. This cocktail of emotions is met off court with a disappointed greeting from my parents and trainer, all of us knowing that I should be getting better results and performances. As I warm down and hit the showers, I want to cry, my hands against the shower wall. I ask myself, 'Why am I here? What am I doing? I'm 19 years old.'

# CHAPTER 1 – HOW IT ALL BEGAN

It's cold, dark, and rainy outside, my dad said he could hear the rain pounding on Guildford's hospital roof while he waited for my mum to go into labour. It's March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1984, my Nana's birthday. As the night then pushes past into the early hours of the next morning, my father is called in to see the birth of his child, a boy, that, as he says to my mother, is "a handful of promise" as I sat on the palm of his meaty left hand. This is where I chose to name this book.

Before the family could settle down to a 'normal' life, we were on a plane to Pennsylvania for my dad's job. My dad was an executive for a British chemical company called ICI. He travelled a lot, and I always remember him in a suit, smoking a pipe, and holding his heavy leather briefcase bursting with what I assume were important papers, which, in the mind of a three-year-old, just lacked colour, of which my crayons would sometimes help. A big, burly man with a bushy red beard, standing at 6'3, always smelling strong of quality aftershave, a smell I longed for while he was away, and his big hugs that a 3-year-old disappears into. A gentle Welsh giant, always loving and caring, spending quality time with the family every time he was home. His family is originally from North Wales, and he was a post 2<sup>nd</sup> World War child. He had two older sisters who were born before the war, and

when my grandfather came back 5 years later, they had two more children: another girl, and finally my father, the youngest of the four.

My father comes from a well-off family that, at least after the war, never went hungry for food, and due to the house he lived in having a large garden, there was an orchard, and there was plenty of space to grow fruits and vegetables. Once in a while, my grandmother instructed him to soak some raisins in alcohol and leave them out for the pigeons! This was an ingenious way to get them drunk so he could then run after them and catch them by hand. Roasted pigeon with no shotgun pellets was a weekly delicacy, not to mention a lot less dangerous than hunting, and probably highly entertaining to the rest of the family watching.

As he grew up into his teens, he worked at local dairies and breweries around Oswestry where he was always the biggest and strongest around, so the owners would get him lifting and loading 50kg beer kegs into the back of the delivery trucks two barrels at a time, then unload them and walk with the two kegs uphill to the pubs countless times as the trucks could not climb the steep Welsh hills with such heavy loads, he was a human ox. This beast of a young man saved up his hard-earned shillings to buy whatever climbing equipment he could and headed off into the mountains to climb every nook and cranny of Snowdonia and mountains alike across the UK. He ended up being part of the Snowdonia Mountain rescue teams, who would often go into the mountains to retrieve dead hikers who made wrong turns at the wrong

times as the weather turned against the hikers. With no helicopters back then, it was all based on assumptions on the last sightings, and off he went to search for them in the grimdest of conditions. As he was the strongest in his team, they would strap the dead bodies (sometimes alive) to his back, then he would climb down and return the bodies. It must have been very rewarding but very tough at the same time, physically and mentally.

My mum, on the other hand, was the enforcer of the household, very strict and kept my brother and me in line, a tightrope line that you didn't want to fall off from. She was also very loving and brought us up well, and lots of my attributes and good manners I have today are from her refined parenting. She was from a wealthy family; the wealth had started to dwindle on the death of her father, but nonetheless, her upbringing in Brazil, São Paulo, was of extreme wealth and luxury. In size, she is, let's say 'petit', standing at a strong 5'2, always with heels on that I'm sure she slept in to make her taller in her dreams. Immaculately dressed all the time with make-up on, and even though small in size, she definitely made it up with a dominant and confident character that filled any room she stepped into. Brought up in Moema, a sought-after area in São Paulo, my Brazilian mother was the daughter of a German Jewish girl who fled the holocaust with my great-grandmother. My grandmother at the time was only 17 years old when she arrived in a very humble 1939 Brazil. This cultural shock must have hit hard, as her family in Berlin had an elevator in their

house and Berlin was the center of the world, a place of extreme wealth and sophistication. The war uprooted what was left of her family, and many who could not leave or were caught, perished in the Nazi concentration camps. In this case, she was very lucky; nonetheless, arriving in strange lands by boat to start a new life would have been demoralising, especially after losing all the family's wealth and having to actually work for a living. My grandmother ended up working in a lab for a pharmaceutical company, which was owned by one of the wealthiest men of South America. This man was a widower with four sons, but my grandmother, in all her refined essence, being fair-skinned with blue eyes and red hair, caught his eye, and this man was my grandfather.

After having to change to Catholicism to get married, they had two children, a daughter (my mother) and my uncle. My uncle still remains in Brazil, in the same place, Moema, as the rest of my current Brazilian family does. After my grandfather's premature death, over 90% of the wealth was left to the previous marriages' four sons, of whom three have now had children and still live in extreme generational wealth, whereas my grandmother, mum, and uncle still lived in exceptional conditions, as explained earlier, even with less than 10% of the inheritance. My grandfather is in the Brazilian history books due to introducing and administering antivenom vaccines for free around Brazil, especially for farmers who often encountered some very poisonous snakes while working out in the fields. He was also the Director of the famous 'Instituto Butantan', which is considered one of

the major scientific centers in the world. He is also known for being the only man to take the Brazilian government to court and win, costing him his health and millions of dollars. He lives on for Brazilians as some major roads in São Paulo were built and named in his memory.

So now you have a better idea of my mum's background, you can imagine back in 1984, as an executive's wife living in a posh suburb in America, she did not have to work, which left her with huge amounts of free time. So, she did what all the other executive wives did, go down to the clubhouse every day and find a hobby to fill in time between cocktails, lunches, and house parties. As you can imagine, tennis became her hobby, and without fail, that's where you would find her, on the courts at Radleigh Run Tennis Club, all day, every day.

Addicted to tennis, supplemented with her dominant character, the family was now rotating around this new indulgence. My poor father, tired and stressed, just off a plane from yet another business trip, was literally pushed onto a tennis court, almost in his suit, with no time to rest. I, on the other hand, was given my 1<sup>st</sup> tennis racket made from metal with thick intertwined white and grey strings. It fit me well as it was for my size and was accompanied by three scruffy tennis balls. I was shuffled into a small, closed fenced practice wall near the main tennis courts. It was mono colour green with faded lines and a few weeds growing here and there. 'Hold the racket like this,' she said to me, 'turn your shoulders and hit the ball.' I tried the best I could, like any three-year-old would, and probably missed the first 10 times. 'There you

go!' 'Now, mummy is just over there playing tennis, so you stay here and DON'T LEAVE!' So, I didn't, as I always did what I was told, and my mother nicknamed me 'angel boy.'

I would keep hitting balls against the wall for hours, nonstop. I remember my mum telling me how the other mothers were amazed at how I didn't wander off or get bored and start nagging them, and they continuously asked my mother 'What is the secret?' to keeping me entertained for hours alone on the practice wall? I still don't know the answer she gave them, although I was told by my mother that there were poisonous snakes in the stream just behind the wall, which I'm sure was enough to scare any child from leaving their comfort zone.

## CHAPTER 2 – 1<sup>ST</sup> RECOGNITION

We're back in the UK now, in Haslemere, I'm 4 years old, not far from where I was born, in Surrey. We lived in a beautiful Tudor-style house that stood out with its iconic half-timbering – black wooden beams running across the exterior of a white facade. It had four bedrooms and a great-sized garden with a pond and lots to explore.

The Preschool across the street is now my new four-year-old social hub. My two main memories here are one being stabbed in my arm with a pencil by another student from Kuwait, as I didn't save his place in the cue for him, and the other memory is in a typical indoor wooden floored multi-sport court playing short tennis with yucky sponge balls that stank over a tiny overworn net. I don't think I missed a shot, or at least that's what I would like to think, but what did happen is that the P.E teacher called my mum in one day for a chat. She asked if I've had experience playing tennis before, as it came very naturally to me, as I stood out in my class. I can just imagine my mother's unsurprised and smug response as she tried to explain to a teacher how she taught me for the last three years in America.

Haslemere Tennis Club was the local club, which was located near the cricket grounds. I would find myself here frequently as my mother was now a full-blown member, and the

playground was a lot more interesting than an enclosed, isolated practice wall surrounded by poisonous snakes. This is also where I first learned to ride a bike with no stabilizers. Again, my father was dragged into playing tennis, and to everybody's surprise, they kept winning the annual mixed doubles tournaments even against the head coach. I had a few group lessons here, but mainly just playing with dad on some weekends got me playing over the net and having basic rallies for the first time.

I am 8 years old now, and we have been living in Haslemere for 4 years. My mother has opened a small business selling vitamin slimming pills and Brazilian stones and necklaces, in the Old Stable markets. I have outgrown my current school and now need to find another. My father steadily climbed the corporate ladder (then called Zeneca), and we moved to Hindhead, Beacon Hill Park, which was not far from Haslemere, into a beautiful, detached house with a garden so big that hide-and-seek was just boring and scary. The garden bordered the National Trust and made this a never-ending world of adventure for a young boy and the best birthday parties ever! I used to sometimes disappear for hours with our dog into the deep woods and just explore around or play with bows and arrows. My mother would have to come out to the edge of the garden and crazily shake a massive cowbell against a wall of trees, and I would hear the faint chimes over half a mile away, meaning it was time to go home. Unheard of now for any kid aged 8-10 to be out in the woods playing for hours on end; nowadays, you would be in full panic mode

after two hours and send a search party. I guess parenting is easier now, give them a screen, and at least you know they are 10 meters away, how boring!

The house is big, with a long drive from the main road, turning into another very long private drive until you reach the house. Big bay windows and large rooms. Four oversized bedrooms upstairs and a big kitchen, dining room, and separate living room with a conservatory. I remember being scared of the downstairs toilet and garage as I didn't like spiders or the dark.

The other thing about the house is that it was haunted! I personally don't recall much of anything, but everyone else did, and even our guests and family who came over to visit heard and saw very weird things. My brother's room was in the original part of the old house, and countless times he would burst into my room at ungodly hours, as white as a ghost he had just seen or heard, and would sleep on the floor. The instant strong smell of cigarettes as if someone lit one up next to you, random whistling, and once my mother thought that my brother and I were running around playing upstairs and this especially shocked her as my father, brother and I all walk in through the front door after picking up a take away, her face dropped, she said, "Who is upstairs then?!"

This didn't put my parents off the house, as there was no malevolence, just a weird experience. My father was always travelling anyway, and the minute my brother was offered to

go to boarding school, he snapped up the offer, even though he hated that as well.

My mother is now in full search mode for the best tennis club in the area, as we are now fully installed in our new home, school, and lifestyle. The Bourne Tennis Club in Farnham became the family's second home. For the next few years, all I remember from here are Chinese, Indian, and Italian restaurants, which were our weekly spots apart from obviously the tennis club; in my opinion, all were frequented too often!

My school was fantastic! As a young boy, putting on my first uniform and how my dad taught me how to knot a tie, this made me feel really important, looking like my dad in the mornings. He taught me how to polish my shoes and told me to keep them clean, as he said, "You can tell the quality of a man not by his suit, but by how he keeps his shoes!" I also got to go on a 45-minute bus ride every morning and back, and made lots of new friends.

The school was an Irish Catholic school run by nuns who actually lived there. The teachers were the nuns themselves, and they were very strict. It was called St. Margaret's Convent School in Midhurst. The education was excellent, a lot of which is still embedded in me today, not just neat, elegant handwriting, organisation, and always having to be immaculate, but the way you were taught to be thankful, caring, and empathetic to others.

My tennis was also going well, and soon I started my 1<sup>st</sup> private lessons with the head coach Andy Warry, which became a staple part of my time at the club. The family's relationship grew with Andy up to the point of him babysitting my brother and I when my parents would go on executive dinners, probably unwillingly as my brother would have immense pleasure in pranking him and his wife during their stays, such as placing big lifelike tarantulas in their bed after watching the film 'Arachnophobia' the screams still make me smile 30 years later.

I am between 8 and 10 years old now, and weekends are now starting to feel like nonstop travelling for me as my tennis is starting to take shape, as my 1<sup>st</sup> real taste of competition is introduced. We were travelling around the South of the UK playing tournaments that Andy would find and sign me up for. We got to visit many tennis clubs all over the area, most of them on indoor hard courts, which I liked. I still love the sound of popping tennis balls echoing throughout indoor clubs. I would say my results were above average and fueled the process to keep trying harder and keep up the training. This era of my life seems to be all a bit of a blur, as all I remember is feeling nervous and nauseous while playing my matches.

Searching for more advanced training now took us further away on Sundays to Bisham Abbey, where some of the best UK players were being studied to see who had real future potential. It was a long drive for a tired young boy after a long week, but it was worth it as we would stop to have a Burger

King on the way back home from training, which was heaven, as my mother is anti-junk food.

As I keep training and progressing, my results are showing more and more positive signs, and when I turned 11, Andy recommended a suggestion that would reshape my whole life and my family's in a way no one could imagine.

# CHAPTER 3 – ACROSS THE POND

BEEP...BEEP...BEEP..... BEEP...BEEP...BEEP...

The family alarm goes off. My parents and I yawn and get up. We get ready and head down to the inexpensive motel reception, where breakfast is served with no service, no tables, no chairs, just a stand with coffee, hot chocolate, and donuts. All new experiences for me, but as I munch on fresh donuts, I just remember thinking, 'This is amazing,' I'm in heaven, especially after a long flight. As I roll my eyes back on the last bite of this luxurious breakfast, I look out beyond the reception glass windows to a very common sight found in the UK, fog with low visibility, thinking, I'm underdressed, as my freezing school run experiences have never let me down. But as we are ready to leave our Econolodge motel, my father opens the door for my mother, and I'm hit with a thick, warm, 26°C blanket of Floridian air that I can still taste when I close my eyes today, it's 9 am, a memory I will never forget.

My brother was left back in the UK in a summer camp with his mates, as a young teenager, for him family trips are now gay.

Why are we in Florida? Well, my coach in Farnham (Andy) had a meeting with my parents and said that due to my natural talents in tennis, my parents could kill two birds with one stone and take me to Disney World, and whilst in Florida,

check out the best tennis academy in the world, NICK BOLLETTIERI'S TENNIS ACADEMY (NBTC)!

The weird thing is, I don't remember anything about Disney World, but boy, DO I REMEMBER NBTC! In 1995, they ONLY had 75 tennis courts! A DJ blasting music throughout the drilling courts, creating an atmosphere nowhere else on the planet! The motivation, intensity, infrastructure, and setup were awe-inspiring, not just for me but also a huge eye-opener for my parents.

Halfway through my 2-week stay, at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> week, there was a competition in which all 400+ students took part for 1<sup>st</sup> prize, which was any choice of racket free of charge from the Pro shop.

This consisted of 2 coaches feeding balls to an infinite queue of kids sprawling out of the prized center court, where the waiting time between shots seemed to be forever in unbearable humid heat with disorientating noise all around. If you missed the shot, you are out and sit in the bleachers. My parents nestled themselves 1<sup>st</sup> row against the side fence alongside Steve, an eccentric African American coach who had been training me that week. As the hordes of players started to thin and the bleachers started to fill, in my head, time started to become irrelevant, the heat dissipated, and the noise started to fade. Without knowing it, I was entering 'the zone', a state of mind that, if you enter, anything is possible!

We are now down to 10 players, 9 of them tall, strong, and well-trained, and then there was me. A small, shy, thin 11-

year-old English boy, smothered in sunscreen, hiding in the shadows. From this point, I'm following visual orders, as any sound barked at me by the coaches is completely drowned out by hundreds of people shouting and screaming. From 10 players, we are now down to 2, and I didn't even register it as my sole focus was to hit the ball into the continuously reducing target areas. From 400+ players, I'm left facing a 16-year-old who is a forged competitive player. I'm standing behind him as he is fed his 4<sup>th</sup> go as we drew the previous 3 tries each, the tension is palpable, electric, and on the verge of explosion. He misses his shot by a hair. He pulls aside slowly, frustrated, and lets me take my place on the baseline. As I walk up to position myself, the crowd is going absolutely berserk. Steve and my parents are jumping up and down, screaming at the top of their lungs, cheering me on, along with countless strangers. Time has now stopped, any feeling positive or negative is not present, and I cannot hear a sound or focus on anything else. The ball is fed, I cannot remember if it is a backhand or a forehand, all I can remember is that it was the size of a watermelon and travelling in slow motion. For the first time during this competition, there was absolute silence. As the ball bounced, my backswing was already prepared. I smoothly swung at the ball and hit a perfect sweet spot. The ball travelled seamlessly through the hot air and landed in the target area. The stadium erupted into pandemonium. Coaches and friends, along with my parents, flooded the court and surrounded me and hugged me, and all I remember was not showing much emotion due to disbelief, as I was still in the zone. Various athletes around the world

recall similar accounts of entering the zone and producing unworldly results as the active mind is switched off and the body takes over and does what it does best. It can do this by activating a different part of the focused mind, and there are even techniques to try to achieve this consciously. I think I achieved it by being just a generally spaced-out kid, along with 0 expectations for the outcome, but still with a deep desire to get the prized racket from the pro shop.

# CHAPTER 4 – OUT OF THE BLUE!

As the 2<sup>nd</sup> week carried on and our holiday was coming to an end, I remember feeling a mix of emotions, such as not wanting to go back to school, but also a bit of relief as the relentless sun and nonstop arduous training were taking their toll on this puny body. Then it happened, out of the blue, my coach for the week Steve approached my parents and said, “There is a head coach that would like to talk to you,” unknowing what this was about, my parents accepted and without my acknowledgment had a chat with Mr. Bollettieri’s right hand man, a guy called Red! (Later known to be Tommy Hass’s coach, Tommy Hass achieved a career high at #2 in the world) A tall, broad-shouldered man with fire-red hair with the famous Floridian look with dark sports glasses on at all times whilst sporting a hunting hat to protect his fair skin in this extreme climate. Chewing gum as he talked in his Southern accent, my parents probably pretended that they understood everything that was being told to them. The gist of the conversation was that a lot of coaches and headhunters were very impressed with my performance in the competition and wanted to know more about me and the family, i.e., where we are from, what our intentions are moving forward, and most importantly, whether would we be interested in me training full-time at the academy.

This obviously took my parents by surprise, and a huge thinking process began.

I remember being asked countless times by my parents if I liked the academy and if I wanted to become a more serious tennis player; the answer was always yes.

When we returned to the UK and broke the news about the competition win to coach Andy, he was ecstatic and very happy for me. He told my parents that this was a big opportunity for me, as I had been recognised, and that my parents had been approached by a senior coach. I assume my parents had lots of conversations in private on how this could be achieved. I was also about to move from primary school to secondary school, so first, exams needed to be sat and passed.

# CHAPTER 5 – MY ACADEMIC COMPETITION (EXAMS)

I remember that sunny Saturday morning when we drove to the local secondary school in Farnham called Frensham Heights. I still find it hard to differentiate the feelings of nervousness and excitement, what I do feel is nauseous and numb to what's going on around me, and the feeling of lead weights hanging all over my body while I try my best to avoid everybody around me.

As we arrive at the majestic entrance, my eyes light up as I catch the first glimpse of the main building that exudes an air of importance, of past successes, and the future successes to come. This seemed like the place I should be going to school, and it really made me feel like I needed to concentrate on the acceptance exams ahead of me this morning, as this was an important milestone for me. Getting out of the car, the feelings increase.

After all the introductions and pleasantries were out of the way and my parents exited the car park, all the aspiring future lawyers, doctors, and engineers, etc., were sent to the examining rooms where we all sat down at our individual desks, which were well spaced out. The examiner walks to each table, placing our 1<sup>st</sup> exam in front of us, explaining stuff I can't remember. What I do remember is looking around at all the other 50-odd students and recognising a couple of them

from my school, both of whom I knew were at the top of the class. As the examiner finishes placing the last exam on the last student's table, I remember him saying, "Your time starts now, good luck!"

I just remember knowing the majority of the answers to the questions, and after a long day of various exams on all subjects, we finished the last exam of the day. I had a sense that it must have gone alright, and no real feel of dread crept in.

We were all sent to the main hall, where there were snacks and drinks, and parents were invited to come in and see the school for themselves. We were given a tour of the grounds and installations, which were impressive to say the least. I remember my mother saying what the tennis program was like and her concern for me playing rugby, as her angel boy might get hurt. At the end of the day, I was exhausted and was happy to go home and answer all the questions my parents had about my day and generally about my feelings and experience there. I remember that I said I liked it, but then again, I say that about everything; it's one of my character flaws even to this day.

# CHAPTER 6 – T-JUNCTION DECISIONS

Most people in their lives are born in the area where their parents are living, they generally go to the nursery and preschool down the road, before starting in one of the few options of primary schools allocated near their postcode. If options are limited, they may venture off to a secondary school, which may be a 45-minute bus ride away. Whatever their parents choose, they will be in the vicinity, establishing their roots, where friends, family, and their community are close.

After a few years, these young lives get ready to fly from their comfortable nest called home and at 18 they are dealt with a family decision, where the biggest choice so far is of 2-5 Universities which might make them venture further afield for a few years to a neighboring city, always returning home to their nest on holidays before finding a job, often close to home back near their community, family and contacts. They'll probably find a partner either at their workplace or local bar, and before you know it, the process starts all over again. As mentioned at the start, this is not the case with everybody, just the majority.

That could have been me, and even now I still think about how different my life could have been if I just said to my parents, JUST ONCE, "I want to stay and study in the UK." It

would have been the most sensible idea and definitely the easiest and cheapest. But I didn't, I chose left instead of right, black instead of white, and chose an option that led my family and me in a completely opposite direction, and the repercussions of that decision are and always will be in effect.

My results came through from my exams to enter Frensham Heights, and I was accepted. Everyone was happy, and I remember feeling relieved knowing that a big change was on the horizon. Little did I know it would be halfway across the world, I would soon be on the other side of that horizon, sometimes looking back in wonder and doubt, for the rest of my life.

Communications from NBTA (Nick Bollettieri's Tennis Academy) also came through, asking if we had decided on starting the next term with them and, if so, plans needed to be made, such as financial commitments to them, schooling, residence, and, of course, visas. As you can imagine, a lot was being talked about and planned between my parents, with the constant questions directed towards me, "Do you REALLY want to go to Florida and play tennis?" I still wonder if the question was asked differently, if I would have chosen Frensham Heights, such as, "Are you sure you would like to stay here and go to this fantastic school?" Who knows! In hindsight, I probably think my mother secretly wanted to go to Florida, as the UK weather breaks even the hardiest posh Brazilians.

Now, put yourself in my 11-year-old's shoes, do you want to 'play' tennis all day long or go to school? What would you choose? I assume most kids would choose to play the sport they love rather than go to school.

As an adult and a father of a beautiful 9-year-old daughter, I don't think that in a few years I will give such an important choice to a child who does not understand logic fully or has the capacity to foresee circumstances or responsibilities. Most adults with normal logic would analyse in depth the situation and realise this is a fantasy option. But my parents are very special (or naïve) and let me make a decision that would mold the family's outcome forever, up to this current day and beyond.

# CHAPTER 7 – GOODBYE DAD, GOODBYE BRO...

As the plane touches down for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time this year in Orlando, Florida, the hot, humid air is not a surprise, but still brings an ear-to-ear smile on my face. I'm with my mother and father, and we are here to find an apartment, school, and setup for my mother and me.

The final decision is that my mum and I will live in Florida, and my mum will oversee my schoolwork, tennis training, diet, and well-being. My dad, on the other hand, will need to stay in the UK and continue to work and finance this project, and my brother, while he finds the best way to retire early and reunite with us again. I can only imagine my father's feelings, as it must have been a bittersweet time we had together during his short stay, as this time he knew that he was going back alone.

My brother has also now left home at the tender age of 17 and has been given a similar opportunity compared to mine, but in the dramatic arts. He was always the lead actor in his school plays, and his personality is the opposite of mine; he is naturally extroverted and always makes people laugh, even at their own expense. My brother is the kindest of people or the most menacing threat, depending on how you cross him. He has a very yin-yang personality, which he has refined over the years to suit his lifestyle and job. As adults now, I love him

deeply, but as kids, we probably wanted each other to die. Even today, I still need to be on high alert to his reactions, as time is precious and I would rather sail in calm waters.

Proving to be a difficult teenager in the last few years at home (not solely his fault), I think it was not only a relief for my parents to let him fly early, but also for him, who needed time and space to truly find himself. The Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute was my brother's 1<sup>st</sup> stop in Santa Monica, California. A million miles away from us, he was left to find his own path with the financial help from my father and whatever emotional support he could get on an ad hoc basis from my parents. Little did I know that from here on, I would barely see my brother for the next three decades. I can't talk about what he does (as I don't even know the details), but all I know is that he works at the highest level of privatised Black Ops security around the globe.

The acting didn't work out for him, but with his personality and incredibly strong work ethic, he applied himself to other realms and became very popular and successful in his domain, where he not only opened doors for himself but also his job now makes him burst through some doors where few dare to enter.

As we found a 3-bedroom apartment in Bradenton near the tennis academy, there were 2 schools recommended by the academy to choose from, both private and not cheap. We chose Bradenton Academy High School because my mother thought that it was a better choice than the other option. A

second-hand white Mazda was not as nice as the brand-new Volvos my dad got every three years from the company, but it would get us to and from school, tennis training, and tournaments.

The apartment was in a closed condominium, which back then was called 'Hampton Court' and was a really nice place to live, and well situated. We lived on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, which was the top floor. It had a small open-plan American kitchen, a dining/living room, 3 bedrooms with a family/guest bathroom, and a spacious master bedroom ensuite. It also had a small balcony which overlooked the main lake and beyond that the reception, swimming pool, and two tennis courts. The gardens were well-maintained, with thick Bermuda grass encompassing all the palm trees up to the edge of the 2 lakes.

The school was a typical American high school that you see in the movies, with steel lockers, carpet floors, bells ringing every hour, and fast-food lunches. Generally, everyone was very nice, and I made some good friends there, some of whom I am still in contact with today. The great thing about being a student of NBTA was that 3 iconic yellow school buses would turn up at 12 mid-day (3 hours early) to pick up the tennis students and take them to the academy to get lunch and get changed for the afternoon tennis training. I would get the bus if my mum could not pick me up for any reason.

I was settling into the routine quite nicely, meeting new people and friends, and I was generally happy. It hadn't dawned on me fully that very soon my dad would have to

leave us and go back to the UK, and we would be separated, and I would only see him during holidays. This must have been REALLY hard for my parents, as this choice has now literally split the family into pieces for an unknown amount of time. But we all knew now that there was no turning back!

# CHAPTER 8 – THE ROUTINE

My dad has now been back in the UK for weeks, and my mum and I now have a well-established routine: wake up and get dressed in a very informal uniform that consists of a navy-blue polo with the school logo on it and some Khaki trousers. A far cry from the suit and tie with polished shoes and immaculately tucked-in shirts from my previous school. My mum would make me a cooked breakfast frequently pancakes or waffles with some side bacon and with 1 liter of freshly squeezed orange juice which is then blended with 5 fresh fruits, creating a healthy smoothie which she exclaimed was the ‘actual’ breakfast, accompanied by a handful of Vitamin pills that I learned to swallow in one massive gulp assisted by the thick juice.

Fashionably late as always, I was taxied to school by my mum, where red lights were hardly respected, especially if you’re in a massive rush, as we were always late. Screeching to a halt, I pleaded to be dropped off as far away as possible from the entrance, as a smoking Mazda 323 wasn’t the coolest of parent taxis around. A wet motherly kiss and then a “I love you” was shouted at me as I slammed the creaky door. As I approached the front door of the school entrance, my mum drove past, beeping and waving, and embarrassed me as everyone looked and heard 3 gears grinding away as she departed the school car park exit.

I kept telling myself how cool this school was and how laid back the American system is. It was just more fun to move from class to class rather than be stuck in the same old classroom for the whole day. Everyone was nice, there was no bullying or anything like that, plus there were lots of pretty girls, something I never noticed before.

Pick up time is at midday, where the morning antics are replayed in reverse, as we arrive home, lunch is already prepared. Normally grilled chicken breast with white rice topped with black beans, this is the national dish of Brazil. Easy and made in bulk on the weekends, so cooking during the week was minimal. My issue was that I ate more chicken rice and beans than a Brazilian peasant farmer did! This was washed down with a litre of homemade, freshly juiced vegetable liquid that looked absolutely vile and tasted worse than it looked. The trick was to not breathe and swallow this mix of torture in one go, so that you only tasted the mix of broccoli, beetroot, cabbage, garlic, ginger, carrots etc. at the end, normally followed with a massive shiver that felt more like a spasm throughout the body, the aftertaste that usually burned my mouth and lips was quickly washed out with mouthwash. This period of my life is probably the healthiest I've ever been.

A quick rest and back into mum's taxi we go, full speed towards the security checkpoint entrance of NBTA, again, screeching to a halt and clunking over the humps as the sounds of walkie-talkies blare out, as the barrier lifts and the security guard nods us through.

After parking, the place to go is 'The Board' outside the cafeteria. This tells you where your group's 1<sup>st</sup> rotation will be. You need to find your name in your group and see if you are starting with drills, match play, or fitness. It generally felt that we did drills 1<sup>st</sup>, followed by match play, and finished with fitness. Each rotation was about 1.5 hours long. Quite often, there was a motivational speech by a charismatic mid-50s guy who was overweight with grey hair and a beard called Coach DePalmer. Tightly squeezing into his tennis uniform with his socks pulled high, all the students would sit down in the bleachers in the blazing sun (the same bleachers where my parents watched me win the competition) as this intense coach would pace up and down, delivering these amazing speeches that would fire up emotions, which would inspire you to work your hardest. I wish I had paid more attention to them.

After the speech, everyone got up and went to their allocated areas, and the training started. The drilling stations were great fun but hard work, as mentioned on my 1<sup>st</sup> visit, they had music playing, pumping up the energy, and the sound of hundreds of tennis balls being hit simultaneously with high-intensity instructions being given out nonstop. Once in a while, all students had to put their rackets down and dance the Macarena! Great stuff.

Match play was normally the next stop just outside the indoor courts, where you gathered round the coach in charge of this section. His job was to organise the pairs, where you got randomly paired up and sent off to your court with some

balls, and there you were left to defend for yourself. Once your match was over, you would find the nearest assisting coach and give in your scores, which would then be noted down and recorded for future reference. Here is where you got to hear and see more frustration, with the lack of coaches to control every match; sometimes the frustration wasn't even the players, but the parents' themselves.

Parents could be seen milling around outside the courts following their kids to each rotation, sometimes with immense bollocking sessions, as it was the parents' opportunity to quickly intercept their kids in between rotations to make sure their investments progressed quicker week after week, month after month. Some parents would shout or threaten their kids through the fence the minute the coach was distracted in another direction, to make sure there was no time wasting or joking around.

I remember playing a match against Maria Sharapova, as we often got paired together because our level was similar. We said something to each other and laughed, only for her father to rush over and scream at her, "MARIA, YOU ARE HERE TO WIN, NOT SOCIALIZE!" She never spoke to me again. She was 10, I was almost 12.

Other parents turned to more extreme and darker ways of making sure their investments would come to fruition. There were accounts of parents verbally abusing their children nonstop, and physical abuse could be seen on some children. I recall a major situation that happened where a 10-year-old

Indian girl kept turning up with bruises all over her body, until someone confronted the father, and all hell broke loose. Emails started going out to all the parents to start looking for signs of abuse and to mention it to the nearest coach or safeguarding officer. But all this did was make the abusive parents more wary, but they still carried on. There were stories of parents forcing their children's heads into the toilet when they did not perform, etc. For a lot of the kids, it was probably a nightmare being a tennis player. So, in this rotation, tensions flared high, as it was a competitive part of the training program, and some parents took the losses personally.

The last rotation for my group was the fitness rotation. Here, we did everything, from learning to warm up, cool down, stretch in pairs, and solo stretches to running, sprints, physical fitness routines, intense footwork drills, followed by competitive games and more. This was my least favourite rotation as I found it boring, unless we played dodgeball. I now realise that the whole foundation of great tennis is great footwork and fitness to accompany this.

After training had finished, it was time to go home. We all headed back towards the cafeteria area, where this was the easiest place to find your parents and socialise a little with some friends. I started to get into fishing for America's trophy inland fish, the famous Largemouth Bass. There were so many small ponds and lakes dotted around, and the majority of them were stocked with fish. It was very easy to grab a rod and some plastic baits and walk around different

urbanisations and cast a line. Once we arrived home, I would grab my rod and hurry down to the lake and try to find a little time to myself and indulge in silence. I would be called up in a more subtle way, as my mum this time didn't have a cowbell. It was time to shower and have some dinner, a bit of downtime, and sleep. Tomorrow will be exactly the same!

# CHAPTER 9 – GETTING SERIOUS

Now well established in school and the academy after my 1<sup>st</sup> year, the routine was set, and everything was running smoothly. But maybe it was too smooth in my mother's eyes. Continuous update reports were sent back to my dad on a weekly basis, as he was keen to hear how I was doing. The special feeling I had of me being a good tennis player and always getting attention was starting to dwindle as the only motivation and attention I now get is from my mother, being told how good I am, how talented I am and one day I'm going to be #1 tennis player in the world and create history (this is how the entitled generation was formed the 'Millennials').

There were so many students at NBTA, and so many of them were unbelievably good that it was very hard to stand out in any way. After observing other parents and other players' routines, it became apparent that training 4+ hours in the afternoon was not enough if you were to be a serious combatant on court.

I trained with another girl who was in my group, called Tatiana Golovin. After her training finished, her mother would take her to a small, secluded pool away from view, where she would skip rope for an hour and then swim countless laps until her 11-year-old girl was on the verge of drowning, and only then would her mother be satisfied. My

mother found out that Tatiana was not the only one putting in extra hours; in fact, many students were having private sessions and extra training in the background, and it paid off. (Tatiana Golovin, a few years later, would go on to get a career-high WTA ranking of 12 with two singles titles.)

This is when my mum realized what I was doing was not enough, and we needed to step up my game. It started to get serious!

BOK.... BOK.... BOK.... BOK.... reverberated through our condominium as the sound bellowed from the two tennis courts next to the swimming pool. My mother slides open the veranda doors and sees a trainer coaching what seems to be a decent player. A sight and sound that has gone unnoticed in the past, but now, on the hunt for extra training for me, everything is an opportunity for my mother.

She gets dressed and confidently walks over to the tennis courts, observes more closely the quality of tennis being played, and tries to suss out if this is a decent coach or just another charismatic ball feeder.

After analyzing the coach's intensity, instructions, and professionalism, my mother is now more interested, but what caught her attention was his genuine character. After watching until the end of the session, my mother approaches him and introduces herself, and explains she has a son who is training at NBTC and would like to do some extra hours. He said "no," he is too busy, and shrugs my mum off to his best

ability, little did he know that my mum ALWAYS gets her way, he was not off the hook, not even close!

This 6'3 guy is now cornered by a 5'2 nuclear-powered mother who does not take 'NO' for an answer! As he frantically tries to escape the quicksand, he realizes there is no point struggling and caves in. I was now set up to do a trial lesson with him later that week. I'm sure my mum walked away with a smile after that one.

My mum was waiting for me after my final rotation one day and she said, "Quickly, we need to get home as you have a lesson!" I was a little perplexed and remember wondering, "I just played for hours, I'm sweaty and tired and just want to go home, grab my fishing rod, and zone out by myself next to a lake in silence while having small adrenaline bursts fishing for largemouth bass, why am I playing more tennis?!" Anyway, I did what I always do and just went with the flow. As we entered our condominium, we parked near the reception, and as we walked towards the courts, I saw the lake, and it was perfect for fishing, with zero ripples, and the surface was active with fish. My mum growls at me, "Hurry up, we don't want to be late." I remember thinking, "She's not that bothered when we're late for school."

She chats to this guy, and he peers over at me, and then my mum introduces me, "Tom, this is Arturo," "Nice to meet you," and we shake hands. A firm grip grabs my hand as I look up, as he is well over 6 feet tall, a slender body around mid-forties, a sun-weathered face topped with sandy, wavy,

dry hair that started to bald at the top, a goatee beard, golden coloured skin with a lazy eye. “Ok, start with 3 laps around the court and then start your stretching routine,” in a weird accent. After what I assume is an analysis of my body language intensity and knowledge of warm-up routines, we commence rallying in the service boxes. My mother was watching from the side fence, looking on intensely. We now moved to the baseline and started rallying, faster and faster after every ten shots or so. “OK, cross-court forehand rally, deep!” Arturo expressively orders me. “Now backhand cross courts, again deep!” I nod and do what I’m told. After about five minutes on each side, he says, “Grab some water and pick up some balls,” as he turns to my mother, and they start talking. About 5 minutes later, he pulls away from the fence, and I put my water down. He comes over to me and explains to me that on these next forehand drills, he wants the ball higher over the net and for me to consistently find the deeper part of the court.

As the lesson goes on and we go through different drills, we finish up with some serves and points. At this point, he seems more emotionally devoted to the hour. I pick up the balls for the final time, and I’m told to grab my stuff, and the lesson is over. He says, “Well done, you play well but need work in certain areas. It was nice to meet you.” We say our goodbyes, and my mother and I walk towards the car, and she seems happy. She asked me if I liked the lesson, and I said yes. She told me that he seems like a good coach, and for three days a week, I am to finish my training at NBTC and have private

coaching on top of my regular program. That's how my relationship with Arturo started.

# CHAPTER 10 – STEADY PROGRESSION

It's hot, but I'm used to it. I'm nervous but dealing with it. Across the net is my friend who is better than me; we've just spun the racket, and I've won the toss. I'm serving to start the match, and after assessing my opponent in the warmup, I'm ready for a fight. It's the annual tournament at NBTC.

I won the 1<sup>st</sup> game, we switched sides, no eye contact, no words, we are not here to socialise, we are here to win, as Maria Sharapova's dad would eloquently put it! I'm focused and consistent, my unforced errors are low, he has to earn every point. I go 2-0 up, I look around to see if my mum is watching, but we are on a tough court to view, as it's sandwiched between other courts and far away from any bleachers. I know she is around somewhere, but this lack of concentration has cost me a game; it's 2-1. Jonathan has a bad service game, his mum can be heard in the distance cursing away in some Asian dialect, probably Creole, as they are from Mauritius. Now 3-1 up and back on my serve, he is starting to get rattled, bad body language followed by a few hasty racket swipes on the ground, I'm feeling good and surprised how few double faults I'm making and how well this is turning out. I snatched the game and went 4-1 up. After switching sides again, we are about to commence play, and his mum bursts onto the court screaming at him, and you can see he is

visibly distraught. She calls him over angrily in her famous quote, "JONNY-TAN, CAM OVA EER NOW!" Her accent was hilarious, continued by inaudible angry tones. She grabs him and tears him off the court, and I was left there a little confused. My mum turned up and said, "Well done, you're playing well, she obviously doesn't want you to beat Johnathan." I went over to the tournament desk to give in the score, and as you can imagine, the story of what happened bewildered the referee.

You see, Johnatan had always beaten me, and I was starting to get a lot harder to beat. In fact, his father once burst into the court not long before during a training match and chased him around the court trying to hit him. It was very amusing for me to watch at the time, but in hindsight, that kid must have gone through hell, especially when no eyes were present. Abuse was still all around, just in the shadows now.

I'm thirteen now and playing quite a decent game of tennis. I've always thought that I wasn't that amazing, and everyone was better than me; I felt that I lost more than I won. But one day, my term results from match play were handed to me by my mother, and as I ran my eyes over them, I was surprised to see how many wins I had. I remember feeling great about it. I was starting to get noticed again as trainers would come up to my mum and say, "Just to let you know, Tom is playing really well, and he's being recognised." I was putting in a lot of hours now and playing as many competitions as my mum could find. I would pre-prepare my tennis equipment on Friday evenings and chuck it in the back of the trusty Mazda

323 that now had a strong smell of fish from any free weekends, as we would go sea fishing whenever there was no tournament. This was now common practice before setting off to a new part of Florida to compete in tournaments, sometimes accompanied by Arturo.

I remember one year we went to Miami to try and compete in the famous International Junior tournament called the 'Orange Bowl.' For many foreign players, their 1<sup>st</sup> visit to the United States is to play this tournament, and for many Americans, it is their 1<sup>st</sup> time to experience an international tournament. It was my 1<sup>st</sup> time playing such an important tournament, and I formed part of such an amazing atmosphere. It gives you a sense of importance and, at the same time, dread about how you are going to perform. The two-hour drive there was memorable, as you have to drive through what is called 'Alligator Alley,' a long straight road that cuts through the swamps of the Everglades, which links the Southwest and Southeast of Florida. It is dead straight for more than an hour and fenced on both sides, keeping as much wildlife contained as possible, especially the gators. I just remember constantly looking out the back car window to catch a glimpse of an alligator, and once in a while, you actually did. My Brazilian uncle (Edgard) kindly lent us his apartment in Miami for the duration of our stay and gave us recommendations on where to eat and local information.

The tournament routine was similar to the rest, apart from the fact that we needed to go back to the club in the evening to check the order of play and draw. That 1<sup>st</sup> day was all about

signing up, familiarising ourselves with the club, and getting a training session in. This was also my 1<sup>st</sup> experience on how competitive it was just to get a training court and how the time was allotted into 30 minutes, and only 1 slot per half day was allowed, so 1 training session in the morning and one in the afternoon. You had to find the training court book and find any available slot and reserve it before anybody else did, and once you got to the court at your time, forcefully start warming up to kick the current player and coach off as quickly as possible, as the same would happen to you in half an hour. It all seemed uneducated and pushy, but Arturo handled it well with loads of experience behind him. In a few years, I would have to do the same, so it was a good first-hand learning experience.

The next day, after breakfast at the apartment, we headed out to the club and got in a warm-up training session, as we knew I was on about midday. We walked around the different courts and watched other players battle it out from different age groups. Then Arturo prompted me to run and stretch, as I was next. We then stayed near the tournament desk, and after what seemed to be an eternity waiting, my name was called, and this was it. My mum gave me a few words of encouragement, and Arturo gave me his last words of wisdom before I went into the court, where I was then alone and left to fight for myself.

The match started as normal, and I just went through the motions. The other opponent was very good, and after losing the first set, I felt very vulnerable as the nerves died down,

but churned into dread as losing started to seep into my constant thoughts. Still being cheered on by my mother and Arturo, I kept trying to play my best, and it showed. After losing the second set and shaking my opponent's hand, I met off-court with some bittersweet words of sad comfort. You can see in people's faces those half-ass smiles with a semi shoulder shrug with a tilted head, trying not to make you feel too bad. I got a lot of those in my life. I'm just glad I didn't mess up too badly, which is very easy to do; all it takes is a filthy attitude, and those were the times I was met off court with a harsher encounter and lecture. Not this time, my attitude was correct, and with a good fighting spirit, just not my day.

I was told to warm down and stretch, and then we headed off back to the apartment for a shower and to grab some dinner in a local favourite of my uncle, who had recommended the best baby back ribs in Miami, a restaurant called 'Flanigans'. For me, it was the highlight of the trip. I never went back to playing in the Orange Bowl, so my memories are always of the 1<sup>st</sup> round defeat in my 1<sup>st</sup> ever international tournament, albeit a junior tournament. At least I remember Flanigans with their legendary baby back ribs!

Another year goes by, and same old same old, loads of training and as much fishing as I can do. My mum came with me on weekends, and we found new fishing spots and frequented our favourite ones.

I'll never forget 'Anna Maria Island Pier,' at the end of the pier was a tackle shop and a restaurant which served 'onion straws' which were super thin strips of onions, battered and fried along with my Floridian favourite dish 'Broiled grouper with butter with a side of King crab legs', kill me and chuck me over the side, that was heaven for me in-between a 6-hour fishing marathon. Fishing was just my way to escape and relax, and still is today.

I had to teach my mum different fishing techniques, so she didn't get bored. So one evening we were in a private harbour which was recommended by another tennis player who trained with me. We were illegally fishing (as we were trespassing), but the fish were big, so it was worth the risk, plus, how much damage can a small lady and two teenage boys do?

We parked down a private road and just followed David, the boy who regularly trains with Arturo and me. He knew where he was going as he had been there with his dad many times. Weaving in and out of a couple of gardens and over a small bridge into a small, quaint harbour, we finally arrived. I love the sound of harbors, water gently slapping the side of boats, and the constant pinging sound of ropes and wires tapping the masts of the sailboats, with seagulls complaining up high. Tonight, though, it was very calm and silent. The harbor lights were on in the water, attracting small fish to the surface and the mighty Common Snook lurking underneath, which is one of Florida's trophy sport fish. They are unique in appearance with a long snout with small teeth, golden colour

on their back and a more silver underside separated by a distinct thick black lateral line. This is what we are after! After an hour or so casting our live shrimp under boats and near structures, David had one massive bite that snapped his line almost instantly. His facial expression was as if he had just been slapped by his mother while she poured freezing water over him. David was good at fishing, so I knew that it was probably a monster Snook as he came prepared with heavy tackle that night. We were now fishing with more enthusiasm as the prospect of landing a good-sized fish was promising.

After many false alarms over the years from my mother, "I'VE GOT ONE, I'VE GOT ONE, TOMMY HELP!" This was no different; what made the difference on this specific scream for help was that she did, in fact, hook a monster, a 20-foot, beautiful powerboat with a soft canvas top. Now, before any sense kicked in or thought process, such as 'should we maybe cut the line?' A horrible, thick ripping sound came from the poor beast, as my mother, determined not to lose yet another rig, pulled as hard as she could, only to quickly turn to me with her hand over her mouth in shock at what she had just done! We quickly vacated the area before we destroyed anymore million-dollar yachts.

Some innocent boat owner will soon discover, upon entering his prized possession, that at the end of his ripped canvas, there will be a smelly prawn still on the hook, followed by 10 meters of fishing line and probably a dent somewhere where the lead weight was so accurately cast into his yacht in the

middle of the night. At least my mother didn't have to reel that one in!

# CHAPTER 11 – NEW PLANS, NEW LANDS

My father had been working hard for 4 years now, and despite coming over to Florida on every holiday occasion, I am sure the separation was starting to take a toll on my parents' relationship. I'm now training almost full-time with Arturo, and the paradigm has shifted to where I go to NBTC three days a week, and the rest is all with Arturo, and I guess you can now call him my private coach. My father was also working hard these last few years to find a way to retire early from Zeneca and reunite the family.

Arturo suggested that if we had access to clay courts, I could develop a stronger game, as clay is slower, so you need more patience, thought process, and grit. My mother suggested we all go to Spain for one year, where we had a holiday villa in 'La Manga Club,' so I could train on some of the best clay courts in the world. We were to meet my dad out there and get a change of scenery in a different country. I think everyone could enjoy a small mental change once in a while. My father agreed, and Arturo needed to check with his wife, as he had a three-year-old daughter, and to uproot his family to a completely different country is a big change for many.

The answer from Arturo and his family came back a 'yes,' so planning began! I knew we were leaving, but my schedule didn't change. All I remember is that boxes started to appear

in the living room, and day by day, things started to thin out around the house.

As the term was coming to an end, there were lots of goodbyes to school friends and tennis friends. All the coaches who looked after me so well during my time there, along with security guards and receptionists, we made sure we said goodbye to them as well. My dad came over for the final weeks, as he wanted to help and probably needed to sign off on the apartment, and we couldn't take four years of accumulated belongings, so we needed to place quite a few things into storage. It was quite hard for me to separate things I wanted to take with me and things that had to stay behind. The trusty rusty Mazda was one of the final things to be sold, to a young lady who wanted an autographed tennis ball, just in case I made it. She must have been desperate for a car, because it was literally a giant empty tin of fish with seats.

Before I knew it had happened, we were on the plane to Spain. I was excited as I was going to live again with my dad and be with him like before, but also excited, as moving normally is, but also a feeling of the unknown. My brother decided to stay behind in Los Angeles, and even though I hadn't really seen him many times in the four years I've been in Florida, it felt like we were leaving someone behind. I guess he was starting to drift away and set his own life up, and the idea of living with mum and dad again in Spain did not attract him in the slightest. I guess being a young man in L.A. was a lot more entertaining than being in a small club in the sparse Spanish hills.

As we got off our flight into San Javier, Murcia, it felt like a holiday again, the dry air of Spain smells salty and smoky, everywhere is hot, no air conditioning anywhere, and the sound of cicadas is everywhere (a local cricket that is hard to spot but very loud). The people are louder than the crickets and abrupt in personality. Most of the population smoked back in the 90s, and smoking was permitted everywhere, so you would have to find your way through thick smog in every enclosed space with dry eyes. My mum would always tell me, "Don't breathe through here," as she would make a very visible effort to everyone around her that she was agitated by their smoking.

Most places are run down and are very simply set up. The cafes and bars looked like they had been ransacked by a group of wild monkeys that had just recently left, and no one had bothered to clean up the mess. You were expected to sit amongst the rubbish and crudely shout over the top of other individuals to get some sort of reluctant service from a sweaty, bothered individual who had no time to try and understand a foreigner in the surrounding chaos.

La Manga Club was an English haven, back then a private millionaires' club which was starting to expand into what is now a mega resort 30+ years later. It had more refined Spanish personnel to cater to the more upper-class needs of the British clients who visited or lived there, and the services were more 'British,' so apart from the sweltering heat and cicadas, you felt more at home. As we waited for Arturo to arrive from Florida, we had a really great time as a family,

enjoying the villa and going to the beaches, and just relaxing and sightseeing. It was good to have Dad back.

Arturo finally arrived, and within a couple of days, we began training as his family settled in. It was HOT! A different kind of heat that I wasn't used to, this was a burning, dry, dusty heat, but there is no stopping and no complaining, no matter what. Acclimatising is an essential part for a tennis player, as travelling to places all over the world results in many different playing environments.

As a couple of weeks went by, my parents tried to look for schooling for me, but there were not a lot of options in the area, and the only real candidate was one hour away in an international school which didn't make much sense paying for when you are also paying for a full-time coach to sit at home waiting for you to finish. So, the decision was made to fully commit to tennis full-time and leave the academic path. Plus, this was only for one year, so let's make the most of it.

# CHAPTER 12 – METAMORPHOSIS

Only one thing happens when you train seven hours a day, 6 days a week, every week. You get better, quick.

It was ongoing and relentless. Arturo would push me every day and beyond, from drills to rallies, points, and fitness. Lots of mental talks as well, and competitive psychology were introduced. Arturo and I really bonded well and had a great relationship. He would help in finding tournaments and taught me how to string my own rackets. He was in it for the long run. He was the ONLY coach that really believed in me 100% and was dedicated to me at that same level. I now realise just how important that is, and how crucial it is to find a person who sees the best in you and will dedicate themselves to you on a whole different level. No one has ever had that dedication Arturo had, which is why if you are a parent seeking a private coach, and you think you have the right person, make sure you keep them, because the hardest part is finding them in the first place.

From age fourteen to fifteen was definitely the biggest jump in performance in my career so far. Training 40+ hours a week, where all other players at that age are going to school, maybe putting in 6-10 hours a week, there was a big advantage.

In the tournaments, the local Spanish kids would always whisper and stare when I was around; they called me the ‘Inglesito’, which means ‘the little English one’. They would gather in groups and hang on the fence to come watch me play. Most of them would turn up with carrier bags on bicycles to play their matches, as we turned up in a Volvo estate, with my entourage comprising both my parents and private trainer, and I dressed head to toe in Adidas with all the gear, I stood out.

I got good results, but these Spanish players were tough, seasoned competitors on their surface, red clay obviously, high bounces often accompanied by bad bounces and dusty grit blowing into your eyes every so often when a rare gust sweeps in. Red clay sticks to everything: the bottom of your water bottle, your bag, all over your skin and clothes, and destroys never-ending socks and shoes.

I remember during tournaments walking around the different clubs and seeing fifteen-year-old kids that were well built, hairy, and rough who grunted loudly, followed either by an intimidating ‘VAMOS COÑO!’ which means ‘FUCK YEAH!’ if they had won the point or ‘JODER!’ which would burst out in disgust if they lost which practically means ‘Fuck.’ They were very in-your-face players and had no problem cheating in any way as long as they won. Loud and verbal disputes erupted in almost every match, and there was no quarter for the weak or quiet personalities.

The rallies went on forever, crushing shots, loopy shots, dinky slices, and insane topspin were part of everyone's game, sliding endlessly across the court multiple times in a point to reach impossible shots on the dry clay were the norm.

I had to learn how to be more like them, fiery and passionate and constantly aggressive, or be eaten alive. The mentality here was very similar to America, that you and your opponent are enemies on the court, and nobody chats to anybody.

So, a real metamorphosis had to begin, and the 1<sup>st</sup> step is to shed your personality of any shyness and build confidence. Arturo would make me speak Spanish to the receptionists to reserve the courts, make me skip rope in front of all the holiday makers at the reception door, run and do fitness around busy areas, etc. If I wanted something, I had to go get it or ask for it myself, let it be in a restaurant if I wanted salt, or purchase even a bottle of water to reduce the conservative in me. I still hate it today, even though I'm a lot more outgoing now due to maturity and training.

The result was a more hardened version of me, let it be a slow transformation. I was now contesting more with the players on court and trying my best to communicate with them when they were blatantly cheating and generally being more assertive on court, even though I couldn't speak the language, I was more 'on it,' and I also knew that Arturo spoke Spanish, so he could translate if things got nasty. Sometimes, there were disputes on the side between Arturo and other coaches

and parents when things heated up. It was nice to know that I wasn't the only one fighting, and I wasn't completely alone. Lots of points are played in rage if there have been disputes in a match, and either winning or losing the point would mean so much as each win was celebrated with a loud cheer from yourself and any supporters, and vice versa.

We were a team; me, Arturo, and my parents. Travelling around the country, playing tournaments, eating together, shopping together, and enjoying the moments together. It was a good time, even though I had zero interaction with kids my age. In my free time, I lost myself painting and playing simple video games, as this was my alternative to fishing. I used to watch painting programs during breakfast and try new techniques. I really enjoyed the creative aspect to it, but most of all, I enjoyed the silence of it, where my mind would just switch off, like a caveman watching his fire whilst sharpening his spear. This was the start of experiencing loneliness in the tennis world, even though I didn't realise it, there were countless hours of me just being by myself and not interacting with anyone. My personality being an introvert made this process probably easier to deal with, but this downtime, if you are a parent, needs to be monitored carefully, as before you know it, it could start to lead to depression in early life. I'll talk more about this later in the book.

# CHAPTER 13 – A TASTE OF THINGS TO COME

The year was coming to an end, lots had been done, progress had been made, and the main objective had been completed, which was to develop me into a more rounded competitive player. From more patience, more grit, more guile, more strength, and more determination.

It's 1999, and an ITF Men's tournament is hosted at La Manga Club. I'm 15 years old, and Arturo and my mother have somehow achieved that the Murcian Tennis Federation granted me a 'Wild card', which is a free pass to enter the qualifying draw of 128 players. This is my 1<sup>st</sup> experience playing a 'real' tournament where young men are trying their hardest to break through into the next levels of professional tennis.

I remember the 2-3 days leading up to it, players started to arrive and book out courts to train and get used to the surface. There was a big jump from well-built teenagers to seeing these guys. Everyone was serious and committed; you could see it in their demeanour with a confident, turn-your-nose-up attitude. Most of them were quite tall and athletic, some with beards and some with ponytails, and all of them were well presented, carrying a lot more equipment around with them than the U16's national tournament players.

Arturo and I went around watching them train, how they warm up, how they play, what common routines they have, and how they carry themselves on and off the court. I remember thinking, I have no chance against these guys. It was a completely different level.

Sign-up day is normally on a Friday, so you get in line when the referee's desk opens, again normally around 5-6 pm, and wait your turn to give in your passport and national tennis number and pay the entry fee. Nowadays, you need an 'IPIN' (International Personal Identification Number) and be registered with the ITF. The club was buzzing now, hundreds of people milling around, comprising of players, trainers, extras, and spectators. Lots of the residents would come down to watch the tennis as the quality is fantastic, and it was considered a great event for the club. Some recognised my parents and me and wished me the best of luck. All courts are taken, and the sound of tennis balls popping in 360° is great to hear and witness. Arturo and I would have to muscle our way onto a training court just like the Orange Bowl at Florida, which is normally our home turf, and fight for every dedicated minute you have to train, which was normally 30 minutes before the next guys would be kicking you off in the same manner. Once the order of play was out, which is around 9 pm, we went and checked to see at what time I would be playing. That was it, it's game on and no going back, tomorrow was the day.

I was playing a guy called Santiago Ventura, which at the time meant nothing to me, just another weird foreign name. He

was my 1<sup>st</sup> ever international match. We were scheduled to be the second match on. I remember hanging around the reception area, trying not to look nervous as I waited for my name to be announced over the loudspeakers. I'm fidgeting, re checking my equipment repeatedly, constantly trying to keep the 'warm' from the warmup going away by doing stretches and hopping up and down, all at the same time trying not to look nervous and blend in with the other players, even though here I stand out as well, like I always do, but this time in a different manner. This time, not as a menace but an underage skinny kid, that all the surrounding lions were wishing I was their next meal.

I'm trying to take in all the information Arturo is giving me, and my parents are saying, 'Just enjoy it, have fun,' which seems contradictory to everything I have been through so far. Finally, the loudspeakers came alive with an almost audible familiar name, Thomas Sampson, Santiago Ventura... please go to the referee's desk.' I make my way there and let the referee know I am present and ready to go. Soon after Santiago arrives at the desk, followed by a couple of his Spanish friends who seem to be very giggly with him as he looks over at me for a split second, still with a smirk on his face, he then quickly focuses his attention on what the referee is saying in Spanish to him as the smirk turns to a face ready for combat.

We make our way over to the court, which is a minute's walk away from the reception. Arturo is talking to me, but I don't remember anything he said to me. My parents followed

behind us. I enter the court behind Santiago, and there is no eye contact with him as we settle into our benches. We move to the baseline and start warming up. I see Arturo and my parents finding their seats, closely followed by the still giggling friends of my opponent. After the serves were completed, we used body language to signal to each other that we were ready, and we both approached the net. He spits machine gun Spanish at me, which I can only make out as ‘bajo,’ which means down, which also obviously meant he must have asked me if I want ‘Up or Down’ on the spin of the racket. So, I said ‘Arriba’ in a wonderful English accent, we are ready to battle!

Now you’re probably thinking, here comes another unbelievable achievement, like winning Bollettieri’s competition, but no, I’m 6-0 down, and the guy is literally walking all over me. I’ve never received serves like it or been so overwhelmed in every aspect. Yes, I had good shots, and we got into some OK rallies, but nothing that ever hurt him or got him worried. Santiago was running at about 50% capacity, with me going at 100%

We shake hands at 6-0, 6-0, and he seems more relaxed now and not so ‘professional’ as he knows this is my 1<sup>st</sup> time playing a match at this level. He smiled, and we parted ways. Little did we both know that we would meet again, quite soon.

For the rest of the duration of the tournament, my parents, Arturo, and I would go down and watch matches, and I

would jot down notes in my tennis diary. It was great to see the quality of tennis that was out there and observe the different styles and personalities on court. As the tournament progressed, the atmosphere also thinned as each day the number of players halved and moved on to the next tournament venue.

I was unaware at this point that Arturo and his family were having trouble getting Visas back into the U.S. and that his options were limited in moving forward with me. He suggested to my parents that I go with him and his family to Caracas, Venezuela, to train there for one year until his papers come through. My parents were not fond of this option, as my mother being Brazilian, and my father, living in South America for his work, understood that a foreign, rich white boy playing tennis in one of the most violent countries in the world was a short-fused time bomb until some organized crime gang got the gist and targeted me.

So, there was a collective effort to find the best temporary way forward until things sorted themselves out. The search conveniently came in the semifinals of the tournament, where a young 19-year-old player was there with his coach and a small team that looked solid and professional. He was ferocious but calm, his play was orderly and in control, along with a mature attitude. Supporting him from the side and sitting next to his coach was Santiago Ventura and the giggly boys, now with serious, determined faces, spurring their friend on, on every winning point. Their friend won the match in a dramatic finish and was now in the final. I saw them

celebrate the victory near the reception, and soon they left with the main finalist and his trainer, getting into a convertible Renault Spyder (a car I have never seen since), which rumbled off up the hill.

We all went down the next day to watch the final, which was on the same exhibition court in front of the reception. We saw the small team again talking to each other and helping the finalist warm up and stretch. Santiago looks over at me and nods. I nodded back. Even if you're not playing, you turn up in tennis kit as if you were in the final yourself or about to train, it's a way of identifying yourself to the rest, but also in the event of someone asking you to hit or train, you're always ready for the extra balls and opportunity to improve.

The match started, and it was fantastic tennis from start to finish. It gave my mother more of a chance to study the coach and the team, and she liked what she saw as her curiosity started to bubble. With the same focus as the day before, the players' team was concentrated on every point, making sure the cheers were heard on every winning point their comrade made.

As the match point ended, there was a nice round of applause for the winner and lots of great emotions and shouts coming from the team as they watched their comrade win the tournament. As he shook his opponent's hand, you could see he wasn't the biggest of competitors nor the tallest; he actually looked very normal, but his ranking had just jumped into the top 200 in the world. This guy had promise, a lot more than a

handful, his name would soon be screamed by millions of people all over the world and become one of the most famous Spanish tennis players in history, but that day, he was just a 19 year old boy from a tiny village called Ontinyent in the mountains of Valencia, his name is Juan Carlos Ferrero!

My mother, along with Arturo this time, goes in for the kill, straight to the jugular, the coach. His name is Antonio Cascales, late 40s, early fifties maybe, quietly spoken but very assertive, this guy knows his shit! Again, the nuclear mother delivers her payload and its bombs away, supported by infantry to mop up any doubt in the form of Arturo. After a short exchange of fire, it's agreed that I am allowed to do a trial, but only for three days, not to waste anyone's time, in their training ground, which is a two-hour drive away in the middle of some farmland near a village called Villena, in the province of Valencia.

# CHAPTER 14 – BLACK SHEEP GETS SHEARED

It's 05:30, and the household awakens with the numerous alarm clocks going off simultaneously in each room. For me, it's like waking up to go on holiday, but the happy feeling is not there; anxiousness is the predominant feeling with nausea thrown in, more like being shipped off to a warzone. It's dark outside, and I'm very sleepy, which is why I packed the night before, breakfast is forced down, and there's no time to spare as we get in the car to pick up Arturo, who is a minute's drive away, before we set off to this tennis academy no one has ever seen or heard of.

After an hour's drive, the sun starts to make its appearance for the day, spreading orange rays over the dry grey hills of Alicante. Arturo is conversing with my parents nonstop about future plans and general chit-chat. I joined in the conversation once in a while, but the journey is starting to get monotonous, and the nervousness is still churning away deep in my gut.

As my dad finally exits the motorway, I perk up a lot, because all I know is that we are close. We start to go down a long, straight, bumpy road between large flat farmlands on either side. After two minutes or so, we turn right onto an even bumpier road, which starts to wind a little bit but is now even more suffocated between the farms. We see an old white finca to our left with familiar tennis fences with wind barriers,

which must be the place, we all thought simultaneously. We turned in, and we were correct, a tennis court to our left, followed by some old garages to the right, and an opening which was the gravel car park.

We all got out, and I remember it being breezy, and the smell of manure from the farms was intoxicating. We walked up to what seemed to be the main entrance, and we were greeted by a lady who spoke zero English and looked at us as if we had just landed from another planet. Arturo explained why we were here, and soon we were greeted by Antonio, the main guy. After a short greeting, we find out that the lady was his sister, Lola, and his mother is seen walking by in a typical Spanish maid's dress, which is open-shouldered, which covers the knees, and normally has a small white and blue checkered pattern across it with a large kangaroo pocket in the front. Her name was Carmela, short, chubby, and friendly with shortish side-parted grey hair and glasses as she hobbled along carrying an oversized dirty clothes basket in her late sixties.

A couple of tennis students milled about in flip-flops and were polite enough to say hi to our party. Lola smiles and briskly takes me into the main courtyard, and then we enter a building with a dark hallway as I leave my parents and Arturo speaking with Antonio. I hear loud voices coming from every doorway as everybody seems to be getting ready for the day. After taking 3 right turns, we arrive at the far room, where, upon entry, the chatter coming from this room turns into silence as Lola walks in with me behind her. Two

guys are now fixated on me as Lola splurts out some angry Spanish as she points at some dirty clothes on the floor. The guy stretching stops and picks up his mess as if his life were on the line, and puts it away. She then turns to me, spitting out crazy fast Spanish, but this time in a calmer tone, saying “nombre?” I say “Tom,” and the two boys, without smiling, just say at once, “Hola.” She points to the top bunk, and I nod. I’ve been signaled to leave my things there and to follow her back out. The hallway is now silent on the way back out, with a few heads poking out like a meerkat community that has been warned of an incoming predator. Lola puts them back in their place with some more fiery Spanish.

As we reached the door that we came in through, we exited it, and the daylight seemed brighter and the temperature warmer, but the stench remained the same. There are a couple of boys who have been added to the group, speaking to my parents, Antonio and Arturo. One of them is Juan Carlos Ferrero, whom I am now to address as ‘Juanqi’, and the other is 17-year-old David Ferrer. Both smile as I approach and shake my hand as a welcoming gesture. Lola is obviously explaining that I have been introduced to my roommates, and I know where I am sleeping. She says goodbye to my party and walks off.

It seems that the conversation is now ending, and I see my tennis bag against the wall, ready for later. Antonio and the boys now walk away and leave us to say goodbye. I give my mum and dad a big hug as they reassured me that they are going to look after me well here and that they will pick me up

in three days' time. I hugged Arturo, and within a moment's notice, now all the boys are outside in a group of around 13, some without T-shirts on and a lot bigger and taller than I am; I seem to be the youngest one there. I'm told to approach them as they seem to be waiting for me, I see Santiago, the giggly boys, along with 10 new faces some of which said "Hola" while others just stared, it was very intimidating and daunting, knowing you were going to be left here alone not speaking the language at the tender age of 15, it really was like being left on another planet.

Without a moment to waste, we set off running as a large group. I see the Volvo exiting the road, followed by dust. This is it, I'm completely alone in an alien environment, and everyone knows I'm the black sheep here, and I've now been sheared of all my comforts. Two boys engage me, trying to make an English phrase, insinuating that we are going for a run, saying, "We go footing now". I smile, nod, and form in.

# CHAPTER 15 – THE LONGEST DAY OF MY LIFE

After 25 minutes of running at a good pace, listening to nonstop chatter between the boys, we all stopped and instantly headed back in the direction we came. I was straggling behind the group on the way there with a sharp stitch in my left lower chest. I'm starting to feel the heat, breathing heavily, and sweating tons, but I know I can't be left behind. I have to keep going. After 10 minutes on the return, I was in trouble as I started to break away further from the group. A couple of the boys turn round and meet me to spur me on as the rest of the group strides forwards, chatting as if they are still warming up.

As we arrive back at the parking lot, the main group is already there in front of the courtyard chugging down water from a dirty, banged-up 5-liter bottle, which they kept passing round to each other. When they shoved it in my direction, I have already noticed that no one has touched the bottle with their lips as they poured it into their mouths, I wasn't going to do that anyway as I'm personally disgusted that we must share water from the same bottle in the first place that looks like it came from a water aid commercial to save Africa. I don't know how many dribbles and drops of sweat have fallen into this last swig that has been offered to me in a Viking manner,

but all I know is that I'm very thirsty and I need it, but more importantly, I need to blend in Chug...Chug.

Everyone starts stretching around me as some guys hold onto each other's shoulders for support, stretching in pairs. The chatter and laughter are never-ending. I notice there seems to be movement on the courts nearby with coaches I have yet to meet as they move balls and equipment around. "YOU...ESPEAKI ESPANISH?" a boy grunts over in my direction. I just shyly mono answer "No, poco", he turns and blabbers something out to the guys next to him, and everyone laughs, making me feel as big as an ant.

After about 10-15 minutes of stretching, a slim, smallish build coach in his thirties approaches the group, and I assume he told them to grab their bags and make their way to the courts. He introduces himself to me as Samu, now known internationally as Samuel Lopez (In 2026, he is now the head coach for the world #1 Carlos Alcaraz). He has a nice, comforting smile, wearing a sports cap with large prescription glasses; his English is one level up from my Spanish, so not good. He mentioned something about "Footing good?", as he swings his arms in a running motion finishing with a thumbs up, I said "Si." "Your racket, now", he said, and I pointed to my bag, and he gave me another thumbs up. By this time, the boys are coming back out with two to three loose rackets, no bags in sight, and most of them with a towel over one shoulder. They looked like a bunch of ragged homeless people who stole some rackets and were on their way to get free food and not to play tennis. Some of them

had long hair, sweatbands, no shirts on, deeply tanned skin, a couple of them with tattoos on their legs or chest, unshaven stubble, accompanied by a confident swagger as they all walked onto the courts, chatting and in good spirits.

It was very gusty as we got paired up and started short rallies in the service boxes. My partner was one of the giggly boys, whom we had just been introduced, I remembered him from the match I played against Santiago Ventura in La manga not long ago, his name is Guillermo Garcia Lopez. After observing him for the last 30 minutes and now, meeting him officially, he was just, genuinely always happy and friendly. We were ordered to move to the baseline and started to rally, still at a very slow pace and gradually building up. As we got going, I was nearing my capacity in performance, trying to play the best tennis I could, but I could feel that Guillermo was not even at 50% as the heavy topspin balls were pushing me back. The quality of tennis all around me was extreme. I felt completely out of my depth, but I kept trying my best. At every change of angles or sides, which is around 10 minutes each rotation, we would all stop and gather around the dirty, refilled bottles and drink water. To my surprise, this was very often, as Arturo and I had very few water breaks. Samu would be talking in Spanish to the boys, and all of them would listen attentively. As we restarted, Samu would come over to me and speak to me personally, saying “lifta.... lifta!”, which I then came to understand with his colourful gestures that I needed to apply more topspin as I hit too flat. That was the main instruction directed at me for the next three days. After

about 1.5 hours of rallies, it was snack time, something I was not used to either.

We went inside to the main living room/dining area, which was very humble, two large tables with plastic tablecloths, two very dirty sofas, and one armchair; flies were everywhere. Lola had prepared the snacks and left them in a neat pile, individually wrapped in foil as she waited for the surge of sweaty, loud, hungry boys to come in and snatch them all up within seconds.

I watched as all of them ripped the foil off as if they hadn't eaten for days and devoured them with faces of satisfaction. As I opened mine, it was dry brown bread rolls with some Spanish delicacies that I detested or had never heard of, like 'pork pate'. I pretended to like it as the boys were ranting stuff at me like "muy bueno", with their mouths full, giving me thumbs up. At the 1<sup>st</sup> sign no one was watching, I wrapped it back up and squeezed the foil hard to hide the evidence and put it in my pocket. After about 5-10 minutes, we went back away to Lola to throw our 'empty' foils in the bin she had provided, as I peer through the doorway into the kitchen, Carmela is cooking away and I smell something familiar, tomato sauce, and what came to mind was a homemade Bolognese pasta, I can't wait for lunch!

As we went back outside, the wind was still blowing strongly. I was quite tired after putting so much concentration into the hitting and after my morning marathon, but it was time to get going again. This time, we gathered on the side of one of the

back courts, where a long-abandoned mud road led to nowhere. Another friendly coach, whom I hadn't seen before, called Carlos, was greeting the boys and then turned his attention to me, blurting something out at me. One of the boys said something to him, and he started to say, "Hello....my name is a Carlos!", in a very Spanish accent. I thought great, some actually speak a little English! Until he said, "We do now, fast footing!", then I realized that's all he could say. Carlos was the fitness coach, so I've gathered no more tennis for now, as no one had rackets. He was quite tall, with dark, parted hair, with prescription glasses, not a fitness body but not overweight either, just a normal guy in his late thirties. Always smiling and seemed to be a happy chap.

We started doing short sprints, about 5 meters, sets of ten, then medium sprints of 20 meters in sets of ten, finished by long sprints until the end of the road, sets of 5. We did these in rows of five students at a time, so about three rows. After each set, we chugged down some more sweaty water. My legs now feel shattered, and I was ready to go in for some lunch. Before my wishful thinking becomes a reality, we move on to another area at the back side of the club, where rusty construction poles have been dug into the ground in a grid fashion, about 1 sqm. apart from each other, wrapped with blue rope creating squares, four people in a line could jump forwards together into their box and do this for sixteen jumps forward. Carlos tells me, "Here...multi saltos", as he shows me the correct form to jump and land. As everyone sets off, I'm in line waiting for my turn. "VAMOS", shouts Carlos, and

I set off. It was quite demanding after doing all the exercise this morning, and the ropes were high and the ground uneven, which made the landing precarious as you tried not to impale yourself on these rusty spikes. After ten sets of these, you then did the hard ones, jump forwards, sideways, forwards, and back sideways again, which turns into 32 jumps. I was beyond exhaustion as we continued to the next footwork section, which was set up just around the corner.

Here, we did movements through cones, lines, and ladders for about another hour. There was a lot of emphasis on this, and Carlos was very engaged. Over the last few years, I learned that correct footwork is the basis of every good tennis player, and without it, tennis is near impossible, but this was a different level of intensity, and everybody was taking it seriously.

After the last drill, we head back over to what now seems to be the central hub, either in the courtyard or just through the arch in front of the courts, very close to where the reception and parking lot are. We start to stretch again, as I am relieved and assume we are finished for the morning, as two bites of dry bread and secondhand water have been the only things sustaining me up until now, so I'm feeling quite hungry. After stretching, we go inside to our rooms and take our shoes off, and everybody slips into their Adidas sliders and quickly gets washed up. Not long after there is a terrible high-pitched cry from Carmela that echoes all down the hallways and back again, "AAAACOMER!", Chutey, one of my roommates who is French but from African background looks at me and says

with a smile, “lunch....food....ready”, we go out and there is already a line of everybody grabbing there plate and cutlery which has been all laid out on a side table. As I got closer and saw that my prediction of homemade Bolognese pasta was completely wrong, I felt deflated. It was, in fact, overcooked rice with packet tomato sauce poured over it with a fried egg on top, which was cooked over an hour ago and left uncovered for the flies to feast on. I was told by Lola that this was called ‘Arroz a la Cubana’, which translates to ‘Cuban rice’. I instantly lost my appetite but tried to force down at least the parts where I thought the flies had missed. After that, Cuba has never been on my bucket list to visit!

Everyone had their shirts on, as Lola and Carmela did not allow the boys to eat shirtless at the table, even though various complaints came through, as some boys had to go back and put one on to be allowed back at the table. Juanqi was learning English, and we engaged in simple conversations. Sometimes, some of the other boys would summon up the courage to say something in English, everyone would laugh, and I had no clue what was being said. No one was mean to me, but I was the centerpiece of having a good laugh at. There was fruit for dessert, and after everyone had finished, they dispersed into their rooms to rest, or some hung around the living room watching Spanish soap operas. I went back to my room, and Chutey told me which wardrobe and drawers were mine so I could put my things away. My other roommate was called Jose Lido, who was a

great player and seemed to be the only other player apart from Juanqi who was sponsored.

15:15 came around very quickly, and even resting seemed hard as there was no air conditioning, so the body is still working hard trying to keep cool. No one needs to come in and tell us to get ready; everyone here is self-motivated and driven. I just follow suit as Jose and Chutey say, "get ready, time to train". After suncream is applied, sweatbands and shoes go on next. I can see them checking their strings, grips, and tightening their shoelaces, like a soldier gearing up for war. We make our way down the dark, hot hallways with only a couple of rackets and a small towel. It seems a lot quieter now as everyone seems to be more lethargic than this morning.

As I exit the door, I see why. The wind has completely stopped, and it is scorching, literally baking hot. Samuel is outside already and said something of which I recognize one word, "..... estirar....". We put our rackets down, and everyone starts to stretch in the shade. Santiago is next to me, and we become stretching partners. At this point, I know his name is Santi. Little did I know that after playing my first ever international tournament against him about a month ago, that I would be stretching with him now and here! He seemed respected in the group, quiet, friendly, but popular. Little did anyone know that in a few years, he was going to achieve being #65 in the world!

We finish stretching and head towards the courts, where the maintenance guy (who was Lola's husband) finishes watering down the clay for us. We paired up like the morning and started off with no rackets, 2v2 in the service boxes, playing football with a tennis ball. I've never been good at football, and it showed. We end up at the baseline with rackets and start to rally. I'm rallying with a long-haired blonde boy who hits the ball well and is very consistent. His name is David. I see Samu coming over to me and continues to say "lifta.... lifta", again insinuating that I need more height and topspin, making sure I don't forget it.

We move into the net and practice some volleys, and then move back to allow our partner to warm up their volleys, and then a quick water break. We then start to warm up serves, which, when I see and hear the pops and booms coming from 5 courts, I realise I have the weakest serve. It would be 3-4 years until I developed my 120+mph serve. We all herd together in the center, and I gather we are about to play some matches. We all spread out, and I stayed on the same court closest to Samu. I'm playing against David Ferrer, the player I have just warmed up with, and who was introduced to me while he was speaking to my parents. He does the spin, and we start.

He holds his serve with ease, and I'm struggling with mine, but whatever happens and whatever the score, I never stop trying and giving 100%. I know I'm out of my depth, so there is no point getting frustrated. I'm only disappointed that I can't be a more challenging opponent. David takes the set 6-

2, we shake hands, and the future world #3, and I go get some water while the other courts battle it out. As I look around, the tennis being played is of a very high standard on all courts, long grinding rallies with serious faces, no friends here, not now.

My next set is with Guillermo, my partner from this morning, who has just lost to Juanqi. We do the spin, and it all starts again. Within 25 minutes, he was 6-0 up, and Samu told us to get some water and continue playing as we waited for the others to finish. I'm struggling physically, and even in perfect fitness, I would still be wiped out. Guillermo goes 4-1 up before we are all called in as the matches finish up. Guillermo is a great player, and I didn't realise he was only a year older than me, but he was twice my size and a Spanish U16 champion. He would go on and achieve his peak at #23 in the ATP world rankings in the next few years. As we finished sweeping the courts, it was snack time again. Same routine as this morning, a rolled up unpleasant surprise in foil, as I unwrapped it, I was ecstatic that it was something familiar, cheese, so I gobbled it up.

I was sure the day was finished, and we could all have a shower and relax, as I was starting to hurt all over. I was very wrong.

We were told by Carlos to go grab a T-shirt and put it inside a bag that he was holding. I thought this was quite odd. Everyone was outside again, still with no shirts on. As Carlos received the last shirt, he addressed the group, "Ahora....

footing.... club...”, which obviously meant ‘now we go running somewhere in the club’, as he walked in a different direction towards a van.

The group starts moving towards the road, and the walk turns to a slow jog and rapidly increases to a medium-paced run up the road towards the exit. I couldn’t believe we were now going for a run; in my head, I was hoping this was a warm-down jog to loosen the muscles. Ten minutes in, we have left the club far behind us and are in the middle of farmland running down these arid tracks into another unknown destination, and there seems to be no stopping or slowing down.

I’m hurting, my bones ache, I feel my skin is burnt, my feet are really rubbing into my shoes and feel true exhaustion in my breathing, but I can’t just stop, for many reasons, one, I don’t know where I am, two, no one is going to stop because of you, and three, my pride won’t let me. We cross a train track as the sound of a distant train approaches, of which the occupants, I’m sure, were delighted to see 20 shirtless guys pulling down their pants and showing their bum to them as the train angrily honks past us. As much of this was shocking to me, it also amused me, but most importantly, it gave me 30 seconds to recover. As the guys pull up their shorts still laughing hard, we keep ‘footing’, soon I start to fall behind again around 30 meters, and the rest of the boys and Ferrero spurred me on, “VAMOS.... VAMOS...TOM”.

4 km later, we arrive at another club. Carlos and his never-ending smile greeted us in the parking lot. Everyone was chugging down water that was brought in the back of the banged-up white and green academy van, along with the bag of shirts. After hydration, everyone gets handed their shirt, the other giggly boy (of whom I've now found out his name is Isra, short for Israel Matos Gil) throws me my shirt, and we all put them on before we go up some steps into the reception of this club. Isra was a bit rougher around the edges and boisterous. He had wavy short blonde hair, green eyes, and was well built, standing around 6 feet tall. He seemed to be Juanqi's best friend, and they bunked together on the second floor above the kitchen, where the boss, Antonio, also slept. They were the only ones who slept upstairs.

As we enter this other club, we walk through a cold, grey granite stone reception that has seen better days, into a large outside area with a large swimming pool, surrounded by hedges and various paths. I see a large garden past the bushes and some tennis courts, but we head along the pool edge, which looks so inviting to jump in and cool off. We enter a building, and it's a large gym. We pair up, and I'm with a guy called Chema, short for Dionisio. He had a weird technique playing tennis, and was quite awkward to look at, with short brown hair stuck to his head, very brown skin, a scar down his face, and wasn't tall or strong, in fact, he was skinny with a chubby belly. His mouth was always slightly open, and he just looked out of place amongst the other highly tuned athletes around him. He was a good player, as I found out, he

was the U14s and U16s Spanish champion. He was funny and very popular. I just went round following him and did what he did with a lower weight. After an hour or so, we gathered around Carlos under a pull-up bar as the boys took turns in peacocking their strength. At this point, a feather could knock me over. I was so tired, and as I tried with all my might, I gathered the power to do one measly pull-up; to my satisfaction, Chema couldn't even do one.

As I limp out of the gym, it's around 18:45, we all pass the pool and tread through the reception again, out to the van. I could not believe it when I saw everyone taking their T-shirts off again as the word of the day kept being said by different guys, "footing, footing, footing", and to my absolute despair, we were off again in the direction we came.

The sun was starting to set, and it was a beautiful sight watching it perform its artistic slow fade whilst it painted the sky full of oranges, reds, and violets over the farmlands and distant mountains. To be honest, I couldn't give a shit about the sky. I was emotionally distraught, and it's funny how exhaustion draws out feelings of doubt, sadness, and helplessness, and they find their way so easily into the broken mind. I'm faced with the same conundrum as before; I can't just simply stop for the reasons listed on the way there. Another 4km run back, which was filled with non-stop self-pity talk and the urge to cry, with sporadic bursts of self-motivation to keep me going through the pain.

I'm the last one to arrive, some guys greet me with a smile, some say "que pasa, todo bien", which means "what's up, you good?". Carlos gives me the thumbs up, "very good, now stretching", he says to me, still smiling. We all stretch for about 15 minutes until around 19:30, and we start to make our way inside. No coach really controlled us or was on top of us; the boys just got on and did what they were told. They were all driven through self-discipline and motivation, along with group support and, obviously, testosterone-fueled bragging rights of those who worked harder or won their match that day.

We get showered, and at 20:15 dinner is served, same process as lunch, where Carmela shouts down the hallway acting as a human bell, the line forms, and we grab our salad to start, followed by pork loins with leftover rice from lunch, which right now I'm not complaining about due to uncontrollable hunger. There are lots of laughs and more attention thrown in my direction as the boys warm up to me and realise I'm not a threat, and my reputation has gone up a notch for putting in 100% effort.

After dinner, we are left to our own devices; some guys just evaporate into their rooms, where they have brought their own TV or radio. Most hang out around the living room and cram into the sticky, smelly sofas to watch random TV programs, mainly Spanish game shows. Some guys stretch in the background, whilst some hardcore guys do press-ups, lunges, or some type of fitness! After a while, the area starts to thin out as the guys retreat to their rooms and settle in for

the night. I remember just answering some of Chutey's and Jose's questions about where I come from and so on, the next thing I know is the alarm bell goes off, and it's 07:00 am.

My eyes slowly open, but my body remains still. As I try to figure out where I am, it's almost like switching on a computer, and it needs a little time to actually turn on. I try to get up, and my whole body hurts. I can't move, as I relax back into my comfortable position. The boys are up, yawning and starting to get ready. "Guud marning", Chutey says out loud. Jose grins as even he, who speaks no English, knew that didn't sound right. "Good morning", I say back as I try to make it look like I'm not in huge amounts of pain. I thought to myself, 'let's try this again,' I took a deep breath, and I forced myself up in bed with a grunt. My core and legs were gone, my back was sore, and my arms hurt getting down off the top bunk. I got dressed and followed everybody to the living room. Breakfast was very simple, and everybody was dragging themselves around looking wrecked. There was bread, plain muffins, and cheap, unbranded cereal with skimmed milk, which looked and tasted like talcum powder with water. After eating a few muffins and a glass of milk, I am feeling nostalgic for my cooked breakfasts and homemade juices. But now, it's time to get ready for the day. Everybody now seems to be more perked up as laughter and shouts start to echo out from the rooms, and a lot of movement in and out of the bathrooms as some of the older boys shave and get washed. Everyone tries to find a slot in the uncontrolled queue to go to the toilet, as there are only 2 toilets for 20 guys, you can

imagine the commotion as some would bang on the door and shout something through the thin door if someone was taking too long, with a shouted response to where some of the other boys would laugh. Once everyone was ready, we would walk outside into the windy patio, as Samu is already there and the day replays itself, as the phrase of the day starts with, “let’s go footing!”.

Today is very similar to yesterday’s training, starting with running, stretching, tennis, and so on. The only thing that changed was the type of fitness drills and the order in which some things happened. But generally, I knew what to expect. For anyone who has experienced muscle soreness after a strenuous workout can relate. From my wrist upwards, all the way down to the soles of my feet, I was in some sort of pain, which slightly dissipates once the body warms up. Tennis is a full-body sport, so not much is untouched. It was the next day, my third day, that the full effect of this took place, it’s scientifically called DOMS, which translates to Delayed-Onset Muscle Soreness, it results from temporary microtears and inflammation in the muscle tissue, and it was very tough to draw out any strength.

# CHAPTER 16 – RECOUP AND REGROUP

After three days of intense training, my body was wrecked and suffering, and even my eyebrows were sore. It's Saturday morning, and I knew my parents and Arturo were coming to pick me up, watch some of the training, and have talks with the coaches and Antonio. DOMS was now in full effect.

The same routine is how we started every day with running, then rallies and points, fitness, etc. The last two days, even though extremely hard for me, weren't a shock, as the initial shock was on day 1. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> day, it was just routine hardcore training, knowing what to expect.

I remember seeing the Volvo driving up the dusty road. As I was looking out for them all morning, it was comforting to see Arturo and my parents again. The training wasn't allowed to get interrupted for pleasantries, so back to work, and really time to show them my best tennis. The boys had also warmed up to me more, so more smiles and interactions were present; I wasn't just left aside like day one and two. I could now spit out two or three words in Spanish.

The day before, after training there was a social gathering outside where everyone gathered into a large circle and everyone, one by one had to show off their dance moves to

techno music as everyone else cheered and laughed while they filmed it, I was pushed into it with all my shyness and had to dance, along with being pranked the second night as this was what happened to every new student, which created lots of laughs and bonding.

As the strength and conditioning was ending, we all gathered for stretching on the patio, and I saw lots of smiles from Antonio and my parents talking in the distance, and I felt happy. Probably because I knew the pain was over and I could relax and go sleep in my own bed and eat proper food! After stretching, I was asked to go over to join the conversation. I was asked by Antonio if I had enjoyed my stay and what my thoughts were. I said that I enjoyed it very much and that the training was good. He said thank you, and I was then instructed to get my things packed. I went inside and showered, and then started to pack up all my belongings. Arturo helped me pack the car, and we were now ready to leave. The boys were just about to have their lunch, so we walked in, and I said goodbye, and everyone was very polite and said goodbye. Juanqi got up and gave me a high five, along with some of the other boys who talked to me more. We also said goodbye to Lola and Carmela, who were very nice to me the whole time as they were serving the boys' food. Samu waited for us to exit and wanted to tell me personally how well I did, and really hopes to see us again. We made our final wave and got into the hot Volvo, that familiar smell of material and leather was comforting as we drove out of the fields onto the motorway.

I was bombarded with questions about training, food, and general day-to-day curiosity as everyone wanted to hear how the last three days had been. I told them the training was very good and intense, and how my whole body hurt from day one, but I thought that generally the time was well spent and worth it.

I was allowed to relax and recuperate for the weekend, and I remember just sleeping and being taken out to the local restaurants, where I had in-depth conversations with my parents about moving forward. They have learned that Arturo is not getting his Visa back into the U.S, and his only option is that he and his family must go back to Venezuela. This now leaves our options limited, so we decided that we would finish the training year with Arturo, and when he goes, I will go back to the Spanish academy until he gets his visa in order and arrives in Florida, then we would all meet up there and continue to progress forward in the U.S.

The plan sounded great, I really wanted to go back to Florida, and I knew that I could really progress my tennis and fitness in the academy, meanwhile. My dad was happy with the idea as his ideal dream retirement was to have a small bed and breakfast near Manatee Beach and live the golden life in a place we all knew we would be happy, as my mother also loved the U.S as well. We just needed to hold on for whatever time Arturo needed to get himself and his family sorted out, and soon the plan could be activated.

I continued to train hard with Arturo and get some good results in some local tournaments, and soon the monotonous routine of waking up to train, then sleep, then train again, and finally sleep.....came to an end, we took Arturo and his family to the airport and said our goodbyes and hopefully we would see him soon back in the Sunshine state.

The next thing I remember is that I was back in the Volvo watching the sunrise over the mountains of Alicante, feeling nauseous about starting a new stable routine back at the academy. As we arrived down the bumpy dirt roads, the nauseous feeling intensified. We got out of the car, there were a bunch of "hola's" and similar faces, and high-fives as I was received well by most of the students with whom I had more interaction last time I was here. I knew what to expect, and as my parents left, it was back to work, and hard work it was.

# CHAPTER 17 – THE HARDENING PROCESS

The first two weeks were grueling, as each week is roughly 40 hours of physical activity, and it is taken as seriously as any other job. During this time, my body had gone through multiple blisters on both feet, and my right hand was raw in places (as I play with a single backhand), along with constant soreness as my body adapted to the new routine.

I went through heat strokes, skin burns, constant exhaustion and dehydration, leading to severe headaches, and on top of that, added stress to keep up with the players around you, as respect came from trying hard and not wasting your colleagues' time, as they also needed to be pushed. Add on top of all that, the constant concentration needed to understand simple directions and to keep up in any conversation was relentless and tiring.

Giving up is not an option here, you are drilled hard that you must be tough, and even though you have no chance of winning, you try your hardest EVERY single shot until you have nothing left to give. One thing these guys never did was tank a match or give up or stop trying EVER!

After being there for two weeks, I saw a different side of the training that I hadn't seen before during my trial phase. This

was more brutal and raw; the coaches really expected you to listen and apply. The smiles were reserved for off the court, and once set foot on court, it's dead serious. I'm only fifteen, surrounded by older guys who are playing international tournaments and lots of pressure riding on them, it's one of the toughest jobs on the planet, as I would later find out.

The biggest jump for me was not just the physical improvement but the maturity needed to be able to dedicate my mind, body, and soul to this all day long, every day. This isn't 'playing' tennis anymore. I knew things were more serious with Arturo, but here it's a different level of seriousness brought by the players themselves, along with the knowledge and high-intensity training added on by the superb coaching team.

After a month or so, I was part of the gang, always marginalised due to not understanding fully what was being said or being completely culturally in tune with the rest, but at least now everyone knew me, and the pecking order was established. What I was unaware of was that I was the 1<sup>st</sup> to arrive of what was to be a new 'younger' group to be formed; it just took time for the new students to arrive from the far corners of Iberia.

Carlos and Jota were the first two to arrive that weekend. They must have looked like I did when I first arrived, shy and reserved. They did have the upper hand as they were from Portugal and understood Spanish very well and could at least communicate right off the bat. My pidgin Spanish was

enough to break the ice with them at least, and be part of the upcoming welcome pranks! Both were great players as we hit the courts on Monday morning training, but Carlos was superior, he was Portugal's U16s champion. Carlos had a very Portuguese look about him, golden skin, wavy dark blonde hair, a protruding jawline, and a well-built athletic body. He looked more like a surfer, and we were around the same height. Jota was just weird. It looked like he fell off the ugly tree and hit every branch on the way down. He had a nice enough personality, but I remember he was already balding at 15 and had a nose that would make a witch gasp. It was nice to play with guys at my own level, as I was realising that the older ones pulled faces when they were selected to train with me, as I didn't have the ability to push them hard. It was also nice to beat Jota, as I hadn't won a single tiebreak or match in over a month. Carlos and I had some good battles, but he was just snatching the wins, which motivated me to play better and train harder.

Next arrived a Spanish player named Javier Viguera, who came from Badajoz, which is on the other side of Spain, on the border with Portugal. He was very friendly but mature at the same time. He is a year younger than me, and he spoke Portuguese with the other boys and dabbled in English to me, which was a perfect mix as he was a great mediator and center part of the group. He was slightly shorter than me and had a round face, side-swept hair, slightly stocky but with no muscle definition, and was very hairy. His tennis was slightly weaker than ours, but he trained hard and was serious. Off

the court, he was super funny, and we gelled instantly. We seemed to have our own coach now and sat at our own table for lunch and dinner, so we really started to form a great group spirit and bonded well together. Javi was also a type 1 diabetic, so he taught me about his condition and about insulin in general and how he needs to be on top of it or he could die. He had to inject insulin 3 times a day into his leg, and all his belongings were in perfect organisation as if he came from a military training camp. He told me that his condition made him organised because if he had an emergency sugar issue, he would need to know exactly where all his things are to be able to administer himself his medicine.

He also told me that no professional tennis players were diabetic, but he was hopeful there would be breakthroughs in medicine before it was too late. He knew deep down it was a losing battle, but he loved tennis so much and had this one opportunity to have the best shot he could of giving it a go, at least he could always look back and say, "I tried the impossible and I tried my best". He had a winning attitude!

# CHAPTER 18 – DIAMOND FRIENDSHIPS

Three or so months had gone by, and things were going well with the new Jr. group. We were training hard and having good laughs all inside a friendly, competitive environment. We all wanted to beat each other desperately all the time and be better than everyone else, but at the same time, we had respect for each other and enjoyed the comradeship that came with living together after triumphs and defeats on the court. One day, when I was feeling great in this comfort zone, a new guy turned up out of the blue. A 6'3, well-built athlete with a monster serve, in my opinion, he has just atomic bombed the group. This guy truly should have been a model, not a tennis player, with perfect dark hair, a chiselled face with strong Latin features, and a body that shamed even the older, seasoned players of the academy. What pissed me off even more was that he was really nice, humble, and funny. His name was Antonio Marquez, and he had just beaten Rafa Nadal in the Spanish U14's National championship the year before.

This guy supercharged the group into overdrive; he was the new target to beat. His work ethic was phenomenal, and his attitude towards self-improvement was constant and never wavered. Totally focused doesn't start to describe him, it was pure obsession with strong mental focus driven by a 1000hp

engine of a body that he never stopped tuning, even as everyone wound down in the evenings, he would be doing extra fitness in his room.

Antonio was always talking about everything and nothing; he just always had something to say, and even when everyone was quiet, you could hear Antonio in the distance chewing someone's ear off down the hallway. We used to joke and say that he could talk a beggar into giving him his money! I really liked him, and so did everybody else; we all got on really well.

Five 15-16-year-olds formed this Jr group, and we had another coach now, and the fitness trainer Carlos oversaw our fitness routines for both groups, and lots of times both groups were joined, either in tennis or fitness.

I now bunked with Carlos Pinto in one room, and Jota, Javi, and Antonio shared a larger room. This was the time I remember most from the academy, as our group was solid and we travelled all over Spain playing national tournaments and travelling to Internationals as well. We really got to know each other's deeper personalities and knew how to annoy or support each other at the right times.

Another guy later joined the group, but he lived close by and did not board at the academy, and his name was Miguel Alapont. He used to turn up every morning and get dropped off, and then get picked up in the evenings, which made us a bit jealous as we all missed home. I remembered him from previous tournaments, as we had played against each other in the local clubs whilst I was still travelling and training with

Arturo. I normally had the upper hand on him, but once in a while, he snatched an infuriating win from me. He had an ugly game, but what he lacked in technique he made up for with extreme consistency and huge determination, speed, and a fiery heart the size of a dragon, which made him very hard to beat emotionally on court as he fought for every ball as if his life depended on it. Off court, he was a funny, outgoing, smiley guy who came from basic beginnings, which made him more rough and ready than the rest of us. He was very streetwise and didn't take no for an answer. He was skinny and defined and slightly taller than me, with dark black hair and very tanned skin. Always a cheeky smile on his face and chains around his neck and wrists to uphold his street cred. He got on really well with all of us and was part of the gang in no time.

6 strong now, and the group was buzzing, lots of matches and fiery outbursts on court, great team building on and off the court, and long-lasting friendships were being forged without us knowing.

After about a year or so, small changes started to happen at the academy. Juanqi was now #1 in the World and steadily bringing in the wins. There seemed to be more money being invested in the facilities, as a small pool was built and land was being cleared. Big changes were coming.

# CHAPTER 19 – WHEN THE SHINE WEARS OFF

For the last couple of years, we have all watched how Juanqi rose through the ranks to finally achieve what all of us are dreaming of doing: getting to #1 in the world. It was a fascinating journey to be part of and watch it all evolve day by day. It came with unforgettable experiences, such as being present with some of the older boys watching Juanqi win the decisive match in the Davis Cup final against Australia in Barcelona. It turned out to be a historic win for Spain!

We were in the stands close to the players' box, and I was instructed to shout profanities at Patrick Rafter right before he served, which caused him to look and stare at me with profuse hatred, along with complaints to the umpire. The boys and I started to keep moving around the stadium so he and security could not pinpoint me. He was trying to get me expelled from the stadium, but we were slippery. I would like to think I had a crucial part in that iconic win, as we were all sure I rattled Patrick to the core. I was confronted by a few angry Australians afterwards, but my Spanish friends had my back; we were a pack of hyenas not to be messed with. I wasn't proud of it, but I would do anything to see my friend win, plus, the after-party was worth it! All I remember is feeling sick in the fanciest club in all of Barcelona and then waking up in a van at the side of a road surrounded by 6

snoring guys with legs and arms hanging out of doors and windows everywhere. We looked like we had a bad traffic accident with no collision needed.

It was great afterwards when we all got back, as we were all so closely knit, and to still be sitting with Juanqi, the new #1 player in the world, at the same table, eating the same boring food as if nothing had changed.

But things were changing quickly, more accommodation had been built, and courts were being marked out. Juanqi started to separate himself from the group as he now had the money to build himself a house on the grounds of the academy and was moving out of the main house.

I was in my 3<sup>rd</sup> year now, I'm almost 18, and playing good tennis, the group has grown, and we have had some new players arrive, this time further North than usual. We had two Russians arrive who were over 6'3 and built like mules. They said they were 15, at least that's what their passports said, their beards kind of gave it away though. We also had Australians turn up, and more players by the month started to trickle in and take the better, newer accommodation. You would think more players, more competition, and more variety would have been good, but on the other side of the coin, the training started to get diluted. More trainers had to be sourced in, and looking back, probably didn't have the experience or knowledge that Samuel had, and I didn't gel with a couple of them.

This now means personally, I had a dilemma; I knew I was not going to improve in this current situation, and started to feel more pressure, and did not feel comfortable with what was happening around me. I started to feel I was time-wasting, and in any professional sport, there is zero time to waste.

I knew deep down I had to leave, but I was lost in how to do so. I always feared what my parents would say if I said I wanted to leave, and I had no idea where I would go, as I knew of nothing outside of the academy, and Arturo was now long gone. As far as my parents were concerned, this place was amazing and growing with the influence of Juan Carlos Ferrero, and what better place to be than next to a #1 player to learn from.

It was inevitable that things were going to change now with Juanqi being so famous and sitting on the throne of international tennis. A lot of attention from the outside world wanted to know, ‘Where did he come from?’ Every parent with money wants their child to be in the best place possible to have the best opportunity at achieving the dream. So the transformation of a humble Spartan training ground was starting its metamorphosis into an industrial ball machine.

One evening, whilst lots of players were travelling and the academy was quite empty, Juanqi jumped on a quad and said to me, “Hop on, let’s go for a ride!” So, I jumped on the back, and David Ferrer and Santi got on the other quad, and off we went for a terrifying experience as Juanqi was doing 100kph

and going over bumps and drifting fast through the dirt tracks outside the academy. Juanqi was having a great time, but I was shit scared. It reminded me of a time I was in Florida on the back of a jet ski and the driver kept turning hard at high speed, and I went flying! I thought if this happens to me now, I'm not landing in water but hitting concrete and rocks.

We ended up at a petrol station, and everyone got out and headed in to grab some snacks and drinks. I got some packs of sweets and remember thinking "I need to hide these well or they'll be gone in seconds", We jumped back on the quads and off we went racing through the countryside like absolute maniacs, I wondered why the new #1 player in the world would risk his whole career in such an unprofessional manner, we had no protection and no helmets on! I guess when you've reached a height so high, you feel untouchable, and you feel invincible. Juanqi has always loved his speed, with fast cars and his famous track days.

Later that evening, the academy felt very calm after so many new changes had happened. David Ferrer came to me and said a few of the lads were outside, so I went and joined them. Juanqi must have been upstairs with Santiago, but about five guys were there smoking and drinking beer that David had smuggled in from the petrol station earlier. So, I sat down and smoked and drank with the big boys. It felt very wrong as I knew this was not what professional athletes do, but I also felt I needed a release.

As the academy started to grow rapidly, the old finca was struggling to find its feet, teething with new problems. I was losing weight as I never really liked the food, and my focus was starting to be diverted.

We were allowed out one Saturday evening, and the Russian boy Alex, who was twice my size, said, "You pussy, I drink more than you." Guess what, I fell for it. A few vodkas in, and I thought I was fine. Mix a few Baileys and some rum and Cokes in there as well, and all that security was gone, and so were my legs. My inexperience in controlling my drink and lack of physical ability to process the alcohol, as I didn't drink habitually, was also a recipe for disaster. Alex had to carry me in, and as he laid me in my bed, I felt sick everywhere! He was kind enough to redress me and clean it up the best he could.

The next morning, I woke up, and my 18-year-old liver and impeccable clean system were very good at quickly rejuvenating itself (now it takes three days!). I cleaned up the area a bit better and went about my morning routine as per usual. A few stares from my group and Alex whispered, "You good?", but apart from that, I was good to go. I had breakfast and went outside with everyone else to get ready for our 45-minute morning run, and just as everybody set off, I heard Samuel call my name out loud, "TOM, UN MOMENTO", which translates to, "just a minute, Tom." My stomach turned, as I could sense everybody knew at this point what had happened, and I was in trouble.

As I stood in the main courtyard, I could tell he was serious as he walked my way. He asks me to explain what happened last night. I knew I couldn't lie, so I just told him. I told him I was also starting to burn out and wasn't thinking properly. He started to seem a little more understanding, and I thought he was going to tell me, 'Never let it happen again, and run fast to catch the group up.' I was wrong. He said, "OK, call your parents and tell them to pick you up, you're suspended for two weeks." I couldn't believe it. It was the hardest call of my life.

# CHAPTER 20 – UNEXPECTED TURN

A few conversations needed to be had with my parents, as you can imagine. It was a lot less painful than I thought it was going to be; they were very understanding, and they said I needed a small break to collect myself together, as being enclosed for the past three years in practically a self-motivated military camp was starting to take its toll. The first thing my mother wanted to address was the weight loss issue and see if I was up to date with growing patterns, so Antonio Cascales knew of an endocrinologist who practiced in the city center of Murcia. We got an appointment, and off we went to see him.

The private medical practice was in an apartment block smack bang in the center of Murcia, and the Dr. had converted a small apartment into his office. He told us that across the floor was his actual home. I thought how convenient it was to literally work from home; his commute was 7 meters.

Dr. Soriano was tall, broad, and handsome. He had perfect, fashionable, side-parted, greying hair with a modern look. He wore glasses and was obviously well dressed, being a doctor and a Spanish speaker. He was educated, kind, and also came across as very confident.

He went through the basics with me, I weighed me, measured me, etc. The appointment was very awkward for me as quite personal questions were asked about my general health, and a full body checkup needed to be done, and my parents were still in the room.

He couldn't find any problems but offered solutions to regain more weight and gain muscle, too. Coming to the end of the appointment, he now knew I was a tennis player and was training at Ferrero's academy. Knowing this, he told my parents and me that to be great at a sport of such high demands physically, you needed a bit of 'extra help' as he also specialized in 'sport enhancement vitamins' and said he administered growth hormones to all of his own children to make sure they had the best chance at developing to their full potential.

This was my introduction to the world of sports enhancement drugs. Due to being underweight, my parents and I agreed that I would take HGH (Human Growth Hormones). Just like that, seamlessly and effortlessly, I am now in the world of taking Illegal sports enhancement drugs. Naively, I don't think my parents even thought about it in that way, or even asked the question of whether they were legal or not. The purpose of the treatment wasn't really to improve my performance but to get me back to a healthier weight.

I was given a kit which included an EPI pen, the same kind of injector pen that Javi used to administer his insulin, of which I have watched him stab himself in the leg hundreds of times.

A couple of boxes of disposable screw-in needles, and I was handed a smaller box that was retrieved from a small refrigerator, and inside it was full of small vials that worked with the EPI pen. I was instructed to inject myself with a dose there and then to make sure I understood how to administer the correct dosage and that I knew how to use the pen correctly. I'm not a fan of needles, and watching Javi used to make me cringe, but here I am with my shorts pulled up, exposing my quadriceps, ready to stab myself.

I'm feeling nervous, as the only injections I've ever received are from trained doctors giving me some sort of vaccine. After being told how to insert the vial inside the pen and how to twist the top for a specific number of clicks, which sets up the correct dosage, you then grab a needle from the box, which is all individually wrapped, and screw it in at the bottom. The pen is now primed, and with one quick movement in a straight line, as instructed, the thick needle goes in, and a sharp pain is felt. I press down the button with my thumb, and off it goes straight into my system. I pull out the needle from my leg as everybody's eyes are fixated on me, and Dr. Soriano hands me a small waste basket for the needle and a cotton bud to mop up any drops of blood that are coming out of the puncture wound. I'm told to put pressure on it for a few seconds. The conversation restarts, and the appointment is coming to a close as final instructions are given on how to maintain the vials.

I would have to keep the hormones in the fridge and, after every dose, throw away the screw-in needle. I would have to

inject into my leg after dinner before bed for a few months, along with taking other supplements of which I had no idea what they were, but they were some type of full vitamin complex, along with chocolate shakes that were huge carb weight gainers. So, we said yes, and the prescription was verbally signed, no papers.

He told us that his boys were also tennis players and trained at a local club, and that his eldest was ranked in the top 600 ATP. We found this very interesting, and he invited me to train with them this coming Monday, which came in handy as I had not touched a racket in over a week. So not only am I on my way back to get to a healthier weight, but I am also invited to play and train with some decent players. So, all feeling positive, my father pays the doctor in cash, and we leave for home to La Manga.

That next Monday morning, we got in the car early and drove to Murcia to a club called 'Club de tenis Cordillera'. It was just before the main city of Murcia, on the outskirts, and after a few turns here and there, we found it. There was ample parking, and you could see the volcanic mountains of Murcia in the distance, which is why it's called the 'cordillera', hence the name of the club, which translates to 'mountain ridge'. There was a nice lady at the security reception who asked why we were there, and just inside the gate was a short, chubby fellow with medium-long, black, balding hair, dressed in tennis gear, which I thought looked awkward. Wobbling forward, he took one extra-long drag of his

cigarette before he extinguished it on the floor. He told her that he was waiting for us, and we were guests for the day.

He introduced himself as Toni Zapata, and as he smiled, you could see his badly stained teeth, but he seemed pleasant enough, although a bit rough around the edges. He asked us a few simple questions as pleasantries as he led the way to the closest courts. As you enter the club, there are some ground-floor buildings to the left which look like offices, and straight ahead is a grass football pitch with a large oval track with people jogging around it. A lot of vegetation around, which housed thousands of cicada crickets, and a larger building at the end of the pitch, which extended up to 2 floors.

As we were walking and talking for no longer than 30 seconds, you could hear the thumping and popping of tennis balls getting closer, as the 1<sup>st</sup> set of 6 hard courts was just up ahead, hidden by a thick hedge of laurel bushes. Then I realised that I had been here before and played one of my matches against Miguel Alapont!

As we turned the corner and headed into the 1<sup>st</sup> court, two guys were cracking the ball, and Zapata shouted out, "OYE, VEN AQUI", which I now perfectly understood meant, 'hey, come over here.' The two boys stopped playing and made their way over to us. They were very friendly and educated, they introduced themselves, and their names were Ricardo and Federico. They were Dr. Sorianos' sons, and Zapata was their coach.

Ricardo was the older brother, he had black hair, dark tanned skin, and was quite stocky. He stood around 6 feet tall, and he looked like a Latin Pete Sampras. His brother was taller, reaching around 6'4, with blonde hair, light blue eyes, and was slimmer but not weak, a handsome guy who stood out. I got my racket out and started to warm up with them as they started general chit chat with me, mostly about the academy. My parents were sitting now with Zapata next to the court, as there were some concrete bleachers/steps, and were gathering all the information they could whilst getting acquainted. The boys were good tennis players, and as we got warmed up, the pace started to kick in. I had to play my best to stay with them, but I was also a good tennis player now, so I didn't feel uncomfortable or out of place.

After a couple of hours, the session finished with some points, and we all gathered just off the court and had a quick chat. Dr. Soriano dropped by at the end of the session to say hi, and it was all very nice and friendly. I was invited back to play for the rest of the week, which was a positive sign. As we exited the club, my parents seemed to be in a good mood about the session and asked me how I felt. I said I was very happy with how it turned out, and everyone seemed very nice. They agreed.

For the rest of the week, it was the same routine, and my parents were having meetings with Dr. Soriano, and they came to an agreement that my parents would contribute a third towards the training, and I could start once I had sorted

out what needed to be done back at the academy, and tell them that I would not be continuing there.

As a family, we also had to sort out the logistics of getting back and forth every day to Murcia, which was a 50-minute drive away from our house in La Manga Club. As the weekend arrived, I stayed with the brothers on Friday night, and they took me out to see the nightlife. It was a great experience, we bonded really well during the week, and that weekend solidified the fact that leaving the academy and starting a new training chapter in Murcia was the right move.

Monday morning, the alarm went off early, and I felt nervous but excited at the same time, although I still find it hard to differentiate the two feelings. I knew this was the last trip to the academy, and I felt comfortable as I knew the next phase had been set up and was ready to go.

As we pulled up the dusty road and parked in front of the reception, it felt very quiet, like the first time I arrived over three years ago. I knew the boys were inside, probably finishing breakfast and getting ready for their run, as the routine never changed. Samuel came out to greet us with a smile. I was expecting him to still be upset, but he seemed to be genuinely happy to see me. He asked me if I had a good break and if I was ready to come back a new man and restart training.

As we broke the news to him that I was back to collect my things and that I would not be continuing at the academy anymore, his face sank. He went from being happy to being

confused, in shock as he was overconfident that I was returning, but I also sensed he was a little nervous that, on his watch, a promising student was leaving, as Antonio was away travelling with Juanqi. As the conversation continued with my parents, the boys came out, greeting me and asking me how I was. I told them that I was here to collect my belongings and that I was permanently leaving. A mix of shocked reactions and questions bombarded me, and I told them that I needed a break to look after myself mentally and physically.

I said a few quick goodbyes as I knew I wouldn't catch them again, especially to the ones in my group like Antonio, Javi, Carlos, and Miguel. They were all in shock as well and couldn't believe that I wasn't going to be there when they got back from their run. I didn't know if I was ever going to see them again, but just like I've done my whole life, you pick up your possessions and emotions and move on.

As Samuel went into the office to start getting some administration done and finalise the outstanding bill, my parents and I went into my room to start packing. I was in shock and very disappointed to find out that all my belongings had been looted, and I was missing quite a few things, such as all my rackets had been taken and played with and left scattered around with broken strings, clothes missing, my TV was in a different room altogether, and so on. While I was searching for as many things as I could, the more I really wanted to get out of there. After everything was all packed and ready to go, I said my goodbyes to whoever was

around, my parents settled the bill, and I gave my final goodbye to Samu, and off we went down the dusty road, never to return.

It was a bittersweet feeling to get out of there and know a new beginning awaited within a couple of days.

# CHAPTER 21 – A GREENER GRASS?

BOOM, BOOM, BOOM, every day back and forth for hours, weeks, and months, I exchanged blows with the brothers, doing my best to try and keep up with the pace and get some wins. Some of the time we did fitness together on our own accord, and other times, supervised by a fitness trainer called Juan. Juan was slightly shorter than me, very skinny with almost shoulder-length dark blonde hair, but he knew his stuff when it came to fitness, especially in terms of footwork, sprints, and cardio training. There was also a physiotherapist who would come in once in a while and check our performance stats and make sure our bodies were running smoothly and no injuries were nagging us.

I was feeling strong again with proper meals, and the HGH injections were doing their job in helping me put on muscle and get me to the best shape of my life. At times, it felt wrong to inject myself, but as you get to know more and more players, it seemed that almost everyone I talked to was on one thing or another. I knew that the two brothers I was training with were on it, as their father openly admitted administering it to them. It also made me think about how Ferreros' coach knew exactly who to contact when it came to sports enhancement drugs. Is there something bigger going on?

My parents would come and watch the training as they were dropping me off every day, but were looking for ways where I could travel up independently, as slogging it every day morning and afternoon was not sustainable, as they had now set up a pizzeria in La Manga club called 'TOM'S PIZZA' and had to be present running it.

The travel plan was now established; it was going to be tough and demanding, but I did it. My general day was 17 hours from start to finish, and the self-discipline needed is enormous if you are serious. Below is how my normal day panned out:

05:45 Wake up, get dressed.

05:55 Cook breakfast, eat, and clean.

06:20 Brush teeth and check equipment.

06:30 Get into a pre-arranged taxi towards the train station.

07:00 Get onto the train and read a book for 50 minutes.

07:50 Get picked up by Zapata on a moped.

08:00 Start morning tennis training for 2.5 hours.

10:30 Fitness for 1.5 hours.

12:10 Get on a bus with the brothers to the center of Murcia.

12:40 Get off the bus and walk to their house for lunch and rest.

15:20 Get back on the bus towards the tennis club.

15:55 Walk to the club and start afternoon training for 2 hours.

18:00 Start 1 hour of strength training at the gym.

19:00 Moped ride with Zapata back to the train station.

19:10 Get the evening train back to Cartagena.

20:00 Get picked up by the same taxi driver.

20:30 Arrive back at La Manga Club.

10:30 2 hours to shower, have dinner, which was usually at TOM'S PIZZA, and rest up before going to bed, and then repeat this process for around 9 months. With only Sunday off to recuperate, which more than half the time we played National tournaments on the weekends.

I never complained or said I didn't enjoy it, I just did it and got on with the job. This was by far the hardest routine I have ever had to date. This hard work ethic, dedication, and self-motivation are the basis of who I am today. I look at other teenagers and young men today, and I don't see that hunger, that drive which is needed to succeed; they all say they want to, but don't show it through their actions.

The number #1 cyclist, Alejandro Valverde, was from Las Lumbres, in Murcia, a town not far away from the same city where I was currently training. One day, his Physiotherapist dropped by and watched us train from a corner as he spoke to Zapata. I assume Valverde was doing some training back at home after the Tour de France. The boys disappeared one at a time with him for around 10 minutes while I continued

training. Zapata called me over, and I went over to him, and he said he wanted to introduce me to somebody. I walked into a small room with Zapata close behind, near the reception of the club. The physiotherapist was in there. He introduced himself and told me a little about what he does, how he looks after some of the most prestigious athletes in the cycling world. He continued to ask me a few questions about myself, about my health, including how I'm feeling, and asked me to jump on a scale. He jotted the readings down in his notepad and then continued to measure my height and chest width, and so on. He asked if I was OK with needles, and I said yes, I didn't realise that then and there he was going to put on some latex gloves and pull out a vial with a syringe. I froze. I didn't really know what was happening, nor was I prepared for any of this. Zapata reassured me that everything is OK and the boys have just had theirs, and that this will help with the process of getting me fit and strong, so I can compete better. He asked me to drop one side of my shorts, and as fast as a shot, the needle was in my right buttocks, and a second later, all done.

The physiotherapist told me not to worry about anything and that this is normal and will help with recovery and strength, and that he will return in 2-3 weeks to administer another one, as he explained these are 'cycles. I was told I just had an injection of Testosterone. He also gave me some pills to take and instructions on when to take them. The only ones I can remember were the pure caffeine pills that were half white, half black; they gave you an immense buzz. Those ones you

had to take 30 minutes before a match. I didn't feel bad taking these from a moral perspective, because in my mind, it was just an easier way to get a buzz instead of drinking 8 espressos.

I did feel dirtier about the testosterone injections, because it all seemed to be very hush-hush, and the boys and Zapata never mentioned it, no one talked about it, as if nothing happened. I've always been brought up to be very honest, and this seemed darker than my education had taught me to be, but I didn't want to feel out of place due to peer pressure, and it's not like I went out of my way to find all of this; it was just there, available, seamless, and acceptable.

They say, 'You reap what you sow,' and here I was sowing fast and hard. I was playing the best tennis of my life, and my Spanish National ranking was soaring; I was nearing the top hundred in the most competitive ranking system in the world after the United States. Ricardo was playing international tournaments consistently, and Federico and I jumped in for the ride. This is where I really started to travel internationally and play on the ITF Men's Circuit, taking me to different corners of the globe, soaking up all the good and rough experiences that come with it.

Whenever I was back in La Manga at my parents' restaurant, helping out at TOMS PIZZA, I would engage with clients and answer their questions about tennis and training. Clients would tell me, OH, how extravagant being a tennis player,' I would explain to them that it's definitely not glamorous like

everybody assumes it is. The image most people get is that we all have money, fast cars, and travel the world in luxury; they are basing this idea on the very top of the tennis world. If they had my routine for 1 week, that would be enough to deter most people from this 'lavish' lifestyle.

We always travelled economy and stayed in cheap hotels. If we could walk to the club, we would, just to save money on taxis.

Once, I had to sleep on the floor of a Mexican bus station, as the bus had technical problems and we couldn't leave. I've been threatened with death by African locals in Nigeria, as they try to intimidate you, so I would tank the match and go home. I've had equipment stolen in Egypt, leaving me in a very precarious situation where I am left with only the clothes on my back. I've lost a friend to murderous local police in Bolivia, as he decided to travel by bus instead of a plane and got stopped, checked, and then shot as he contested the police for stealing his belongings. I always got detained every time I entered the U.S. (as I had a cancelled Green card stamped in my passport), because my mother cancelled it, amongst many other experiences, which I definitely would say are not glamorous by any means.

I'm sure those people would not see any glamour in what I have just described. But most people just see the top hundred players in the world playing Wimbledon, getting picked up in luxurious cars, and staying in 5-star hotels, not understanding that they only see the tip of the iceberg, that

97% of players who aren't making it are living experiences like what I have just described.

It is a brutal, but crucial stage in developing and becoming a better player, to move on to the next ATP Challenger events and then move up into higher grade tournaments, and the 1<sup>st</sup> stage is where the majority of professional careers die. All these amazing players who can't break through into stage 2 still form the top 1% of quality players worldwide. It's mind-blowing how competitive it is.

A normal tennis career is more like the Titanic, an exciting journey which, depending on the class you are in, can be more or less painful. What is inevitable is that for most players, you can't escape it as it sinks to an expensive icy death, of which, on the way down, a depressing panic sets in, and the only thing left is the dark unknown.

Training, travel, training, travel, and so on for 2 years with Zapata and the boys. Even though their parents were a well-off Spanish family, the cost of paying for two tennis players and maintaining another 5 children in this large family was taking its toll. They were now having to take turns travelling with myself and Zapata, which caused a little bit of a stir between the boys and started to create a small feeling of resentment towards me, as I was able to attend all the international tournaments, while one brother was always left behind.

On one trip to Mexico, Zapata and Ricardo had a disagreement, which led to a falling out with each other and

ultimately with Zapata deciding to leave Ricardo in Mexico as we moved on to Bolivia. Unfortunately, Ricardo rolled his ankle and booked the next flight home by himself, which did not sit well with his father (understandably).

After finishing an 8-week tour through South America and returning to Murcia, Zapata finds a deteriorating situation with the boys and their father, and they decide to go their own separate ways.

Now I am left by myself with an overweight coach with a bad smoking habit who can't really play tennis. With no other option at hand, my parents signed a contract solely with Zapata, and he is now my private coach. We are now paying him the full amount, covering the loss of the boys' payments. We carry on with the training and the travelling over the next year with consistent results, but not getting better results either. Without the boys, I felt more lonely travelling with just a trainer, as so many hours together resulted frequently in empty silence where we both sometimes needed some time to ourselves. But also, the quality of the training went down, as I had no one good to train with.

You are a lot of the time just hanging around tennis clubs as you never know when your match is going to be on, if you are not hanging around clubs, you're just at the hotel lying in bed watching the news for the tenth time as it's just on repeat, airports are the worst, as I would hate to think how many weeks of my life has been wasted sitting in airports.

There is not a lot going on around the hotels, either on the ITF Futures tour, as sometimes they are out-of-the-way tournaments. I remember in the Czech Republic I was in a town called Most, I asked the taxi driver to take me to the center, he dropped me off on an abandoned road next to McDonalds, I thought he didn't understand me, so the next day I asked another taxi driver to drop me off at the center, and he dropped me off 200 meters down the road from the day before. There was literally nothing around to do to help pass the time. This was a common occurrence in a lot of tournaments, and I would just bury myself in my portable electronic chess game for hours and hours, there weren't fancy telephones with colourful screens and endless apps and games to lose yourself in. You would find yourself just sleeping in until late to try to make the day shorter and make it less dull. At least I got really good at chess.

# CHAPTER 22 – THE FINAL ACT

My parents, after setting up another restaurant in La Manga Club, decided to fly to Brazil and set up a hotel/hospital completely out of the blue, and spent the next 2-3 years there building it up and running it. I continued my same routine with Zapata, and there was one trip that changed my whole life and tennis career upside down.

Zapata found a tournament in Germany, which he decided, with my Spanish ranking now in the top 100, which was the equivalent of approximately being ranked top 900 in the world ATP, that we would go and give it a try. We booked everything from flights to hotels and transport. All was reserved and booked in as usual, and we set off. We got to the hotel and checked in before heading off to the club to get our bearings. I get warmed up and book a court to have a quick half-hour training slot to get used to the courts and loosen up after the travelling.

We then made our way to the tournament office and signed up. After going through the process of signing in, which involves giving your name, IPIN, and showing your passport, we then started to head back to the hotel and to have a shower and wind down. We went down to the hotel restaurant to eat some dinner, where sometimes you would see a few familiar faces, as the tennis world is quite small and there are not that

many tournaments to choose from, depending on the time of year. Everyone must wait until 9 pm to go and check the draw, which was normally posted at the designated hotel's reception, to see the order of play for the next day. During this period, you can either walk around to find the local shops, orient yourself to your new surroundings, or just sit in your room and relax, or stroll around the hotel and check out the amenities as you bump into other players who never make eye contact.

As 9 pm drew near, we went down to check out the order of play. To our surprise, I was not in the draw, and this was confusing and concerning. A feeling of dread comes over when this happens because this trip is costing money and time, and to travel all this way and not get in would be catastrophic in planning because flights and hotels all need to be rescheduled, and then you would need to go back to the drawing board and replan another trip somewhere else. So, the next morning after breakfast, we headed out to the club to have a word with the tournament referee to ask why I was not in the draw, as it closed around 1,100 ATP rank. To my utter shock, we were told that overnight, the Spanish Tennis Federation (RFET) had completely wiped out all foreign players' points in the national rankings, as the top players in Spain were not predominantly Spanish anymore.

This was due to so many foreign players flocking to Spain to train in the best conditions, and most of these players had a lot more disposable income than your typical local Spanish player. So, the idea behind it was to completely erase all

foreign players' points to allow space in the top hundred for Spanish players to be able to play internationally. This would allow Spanish players to automatically rise through the ranks without having to beat the rich foreign players who were dominating the circuit.

My problem was that my whole life and rankings were solely based in Spain, and I had no other ranking anywhere else. In a nutshell, I had 10 years of my hard work and at this point over £800,000+ invested in my career that completely evaporated in 24 hours. It was the hardest blow I've ever received, and it destroyed me within. I became angry, depressed, and demotivated.

This also demotivated Zapata, and we had to return to Spain and the Spanish circuit to try and recoup all those lost points as soon as possible.

This was demoralising and arduous, and after a short while, things were starting to break down between us, and we decided to go our separate ways. It was here that travelling alone around Spain, playing tournaments by myself, was the loneliest time of my career. Absolutely nobody to talk to, day in, day out. The players on tour and off tour are the same; they don't talk to you, they ignore you if they can, and never help you. You will never make friends here, as most of them will fizzle out anyway, and no one is here with the mentality to make friends. Trying to warm up before a match was impossible; everyone has already miraculously warmed up when you ask them. Warming up by myself was the norm,

mainly running, stretching, and praying that there was a practice wall somewhere.

Leaving my bag and belongings alone was always on my mind as well. I even took it into the toilets with me. I remember an experience with a fellow teammate who had all his strings cut before his match by another player, just so that he had to default the match. Often, things went missing from your bag, or your bag would be hidden behind a bush somewhere in the club just to rattle you before a match, so all my belongings were always with me at every moment, as there was no one to watch them for me.

This went on for a few months until I received a warming call from an old friend.

My best friend from the academy was now living in Murcia as well, and he also decided to leave the Ferrero academy and was trying to find his own way onto the international circuit, and needed some more national points to help achieve this. He was the tall, good-looking chap called Antonio Marquez, and we still got on like a house on fire, so we started to train every day together and became travelling buddies.

We would often bump into old friends when we were travelling around playing national tournaments like David Ferrer, Guillermo Garcia Lopez, Nicolas Almagro, along with a few others, and we all had a great time in each other's company. Deep inside me, I still felt this wasn't the way forward, just travelling with no coach and making all the decisions for ourselves, from choosing tournaments to

booking hotels and making all the travel arrangements completely unsupervised. But in hindsight, it was a great time and experience for both of us, with very fond memories.

I got back a lot of points, but it was a hard year. I was able to travel to easier international tournaments again, but they had to be selected carefully; otherwise, I would be left out of the draws, and then all the hotels and travel expenses would have been wasted. And this did happen a couple of times, which was very costly.

We tried to find a trainer, and Antonio recommended an old coach of his who was training up-and-coming players in Andalucia, but it backfired, and this split Antonio and me unwillingly for both of us.

Now, completely alone again, with no coach, no travelling buddy, and parents thousands of miles away. Big doubts were starting to enter my mind that becoming a top professional player was not achievable, and the dream was transforming into a nightmare very quickly.

I found my final coach, another Venezuelan guy called Victor, who knew of Arturo and his brother back in Venezuela. He was a newcomer and found his first job back in the club, where I previously trained with Zapata and the Doctor's sons. But he had a permanent job in the club and a family to look after, so he was very clear that he could train me, but not travel with me, which was not really what I was looking for.

After a few months of training and solo travelling, it was becoming apparent that this was now the end of the road for me, and I had to make one of the biggest decisions of my life.

# CHAPTER 23 – A NEW LIFE

I was now 22 years old, and I made the decision to have a break from tennis, not ever knowing if I was ever to return. My backup plan was to reopen the main pizzeria that had been set up by my parents 10 years ago. How hard could that be?

When I arrived at the pizzeria that day, it was cold, windy, and the dark clouds were fighting hard to keep the winter sun from getting through. There were leaves accumulated in every corner of the open terrace, with paint flaking from the walls; obviously, for some time, it had been abandoned and left to die. As I walked down the ramp, the place was completely lifeless. I got the keys out of my pocket and placed one into the keyhole. A tiny spark of life surged through the place as hope for a new beginning was about to happen. As I opened the door, I could imagine an eye opening ever so slowly of a near-dead creature, wondering if this was its last breath.

It was almost my last breath! The smell of rotting meat hit me harder than a serve to the groin. I had to wait a few minutes to clear the stench with the doors fully open. As I dared to go back inside to do a full inspection of the damage, it was worse than expected. Everything was left as it was on the last shift, fridges and freezers were full, the dishwasher still had plates in and prepared food in tubs, all neatly stored 6 months ago.

The electricity was cut off, and everything was left as it was by the old manager. The previous team literally just walked out and never came back.

As I opened each freezer and fridge, it was just disgusting to see what blocks of ham and bacon looked and smelled like after all the ice had melted, and they had been brewing there for 6 months in a septic soup. I walked out in despair and weighed up my options that evening.

I woke up the next morning and decided to go to the shops to get cleaning materials. I decided that I was going to start to clean the place up and take it from there. I was on a mission, so I went back into the pizzeria and started with the freezers closest to the door. I pulled them out onto the terrace and started cleaning them one by one. It was a quiet time of year, so not many people were around to witness the horrors and smells coming out of the once-famous pizzeria.

Day after day, I kept buying more cleaning items and went into cleaning the restaurant area by area. I bumped into the old cooks who worked in the other Italian restaurant that my parents had called TOMS PASTA, which had now also closed due to a lack of management, as my parents had now been in Brazil for too long to be able to manage anything back in Spain. I asked if they could come in and give me a hand with the cleaning. We agreed on a price, and the next day, the three of us were bringing the beast back to life, like a whimpering dog, just happy to see help arrive every day. The electricity was now back on, and things started to take shape. The

commotion caused the locals to gossip that TOM'S PIZZA is going to reopen under new management. The gossip went around fast, and a couple of former staff members found their way to me and asked if they could work. I obviously said yes, as I had absolutely no idea what I was doing and needed their expertise in making the pizza dough and understanding the daily procedures. It was all coming together and slowly getting ready to be opened for the preseason to tease out any problems before the summer surge.

As we progressed to clean every inch and repair anything that needed repairing, we also re-painted the interior from white to sunburst yellow and organised the working area to be a much more productive system to cope with the stress of the summer surges, which I witnessed firsthand when my parents were still there. It was crazy to see the lines of clients waiting for over an hour to grab one of TOMS' famous pizzas.

I sat down with the new team (all three of us) and went through the list of suppliers needed to get the place stocked up as we were opening that week. This is where things got interesting. Each supplier I called up said they would not supply me until the former invoices were settled. No supplier wanted to do business with TOM'S PIZZA due to the infamous reputation it had for not paying its debts. After numerous phone calls and meetings, I partially paid some of the bills off from the main suppliers with any leftover money I had from tennis travelling expenses, but I was now running on fumes. I needed to pay something to get them interested

again through gestures of good faith, but with my tennis travelling money so low, I was starting to panic.

I had to go to the shops and buy minimal stocks and sell them at a higher price just to start, I had just 12 soft drinks of each flavour, a few bottles of water and 2-3 bottles of wine to start, I had to drive each day to pick up a bag of flour at a time to be able to make the dough daily as there was no money for a delivery. I was just able to skim through on a skeleton business; there was no money left. My diet during the day was pasta or rice, and a free pizza at night, no money for any luxuries, not even a €5 takeout.

But day by day, I was making a small profit and saving enough to pay the two staff I had, and once I had enough for them to be covered, I allocated in equal amounts of the leftover profits to pay back all debts, even if they weren't supplying me anymore. To my nasty surprise, as the rumors went around that TOM'S PIZZA was open again, a line of company salesmen started turning up with backlogged past debts that were never paid, not just from TOM'S PIZZA but from the other Italian restaurant, which was also closed down. In total, I estimate there were around €50,000 worth of debts spread across unpaid suppliers, community fees, taxes, financial accountants, and so on.

I was now committed fully to paying back all debts, and I had my two staff members relying on me to get them paid every month. I was enjoying the responsibility, but also the fact that my parents didn't even know what was happening, along

with creating a new image of trust and service to be better than ever before. It was working well, the same diet and plan every day, and seeing how the business started to grow.

After my 1<sup>st</sup> year, I paid off all debts, and the beast was alive and kicking. I now had suppliers begging me to be their client, every salesman in the region was trying to get a piece of me, even bringing over pretty assistants to woo me. It didn't work. I was truly grateful for the businesses that helped me re-set up and believed in me, so I created great relationships with my trusted suppliers, and this lasted for the next 10 years. I never looked back; tennis was over to the great disappointment of my parents. I had now moved on, and the only comfort they must have had was that at least the pizzeria was there and available as it was always intended to be as a backup plan, and the fact that I took to it like a duck to water made it easier for them to digest it, even though I had to learn how to paddle very quickly. I made a lot of mistakes, but this is how you grow, just like improving a stroke in tennis, you need to make 10,000 mistakes to deserve a trusted forehand.

I grew and opened three more businesses simultaneously within two years. It was a lot of hard work as the days would often be from 9 am - 4 am 7 days a week in summer, but my old tennis training kicked in every day as hard work was the norm. NOTHING was or ever has been or will be as hard as my days of training tennis; this basis of discipline and work ethic is embedded in me forever, along with the mentality that nothing grows overnight, and you NEVER give up.

At the time I'm writing this book, I am now 41 years old and have had over 10 businesses in three different countries, and I continue to invest wisely. I have never been an employee, and if the day comes when I need to be one, I would be the best, as I know exactly what an owner is looking for that separates the good from the best.

For now, I enjoy starting up smaller businesses and moving on from one project to another, diversifying myself in as many areas as I can, from restaurants and bars to running my Airbnb business in Portugal and even a landscaping company in Manchester. I also coach performance tennis as I am a Professional Tennis Director.

# CHAPTER 24 – HOW TO DO IT!?

This short book, apart from helping me mentally, I truly hope it gives an insight into what a crude tennis career looks like. As a high-level tennis coach myself and having countless parents ask me if their son or daughter has potential or what I recommend, I hope this can help in your decision-making after reading it.

It started one night when I was awoken abruptly with such a loud, clear message in my head, the introduction was SO clear on how to start to write this book that I got up at 3 am and started to write it. My wife was perplexed and possibly worried about me as I started to sit down and write it, but I reassured her that this was what I needed.

Below are some tips and information on questions I get asked frequently. This should help put things into perspective and what is needed to have the best go at trying this career if you are going to take the plunge and avoid as many pitfalls as possible.

**What I have written below is probably the most important knowledge you will ever be given in one place on how to make the right choices to save time and money.**

Even though everybody's path is unique, the basic formula has been tried and tested over the decades and has not

changed. I have tried to include as many topics as I think are necessary to make the best choices. I wish my parents could have read what I have written below, and maybe some decisions would have been made differently, as mistakes are very costly in this sport. This 'manual' below has been verified personally by some of the best directors, coaches, and players in the world, and they all agree this is the correct plan of action to take to minimise damage and have the best possible chance to develop a competitive player to their full potential.

### **Family:**

Being a professional sportsperson does not affect only the individual but their family as well. The individual will not succeed if the family does not support them. This comes with unconditional love and support, not only when things are going well, but also when things are looking bleak and dark.

If there are siblings, either older or younger, you will have to take this into consideration as well, as tennis is a very selfish sport and will take up every single moment the family has to support this lifestyle.

Siblings may be left aside emotionally unknowingly and made to feel less important, and start to create resentment towards their brother or sister, as all efforts will be focused on the player. They can become depressed and demotivated over a period of time, and no one, not even themselves, realises it until it's too late. Keeping an eye out for this is extremely important to maintain a healthy, strong family, and regular

family discussions need to take place to identify issues quickly.

All family members will be affected one way or another, as there will be very limited or no 'family' time that is not tennis-oriented. Communication is and always will be the key factor for any relationship, whether it be business or personal, but needs to be more concentrated and transparent when dealing with someone who is going through a high-stress environment, especially at a young age.

For any reason, the supporters/carers of the player feel that the player is closing emotionally, a family/sports therapist could be a good way to express true feelings, leading to better decisions. I feel the best way to communicate is one-to-one meetings with the player and a parent, which are crucial to really and honestly open up about current feelings and situations. Once the parent establishes the outcome, if possible, there should be another meeting with the other parent to see if the feelings coincide and are coherent. I would leave a space of 1-2 weeks between parents' meetings to not pressure or corner the player; these should take place in a relaxed environment, i.e, having a coffee or participating in a relaxed hobby of your child. This should take place with all siblings if possible.

### **Travelling:**

The travelling is relentless, starting from a young age, every weekend will be going to local tournaments close by and further away to fill in schedules. Constantly finding

competitions to compete in is already time-consuming, let alone travelling time, especially if the player has good results. Repetitive journeys to the venues are not only time-consuming and costly but also sometimes stressful. Sometimes, spending full days at the clubs, days on end, can wear down even the hardest of parents and players.

As the player progresses, they will need to not just travel locally, but nationally and eventually internationally on a constant basis. This suggests a parent or carer needs to be present, which also assumes that a parent does not work or can work remotely.

Trying to set up a group of like-minded parents who can maybe take turns in taking the children to venues can help if the relationship and trust are in place. Maybe renting a 7-seater van and bringing along a paid coach for the day is a way of not just cutting costs but sharing time as well, as not all families can sacrifice the time needed on such a consistent basis. I know this is hard, as many parents veer away from any contact with other parents, especially in a competitive environment, but if you constantly work hard to communicate with other parents and also get the local coach on board with the idea, it may be achieved more easily.

It is here that I will add the work needed for the psychological part of tennis. There is so much downtime in tennis where you find yourself waiting around, such as in airports, on long flights, or waiting around in the clubs or hotel rooms. This is a golden opportunity to work and study on the most

important aspect of tennis. If it is agreed that tennis is over 60% mental, then why are we not working 60% of our time on the mental part of the game? This is where reading, in particular, books on sports psychology is so valuable, and where a better place to do it than travelling, filling in those duller moments. Notes should be written down in the players' journal about the aspects of the books that seem more prevalent and discussed with the coach on how to implement them into their game. There are many great books available to read and to up your game. Here is a list of the main books that have been revered in the tennis world.

- 1) Vic Braden's Mental Tennis
- 2) The Inner Game of Tennis – Timothy Gallwey
- 3) Winning Ugly – Brad Gilbert
- 4) The Best Tennis of Your Life – Jeff Greenwald
- 5) Tennis is Mental Too – Steven Renwick

Here is a staple list to help you start reading and gaining a better understanding of 'interior' tennis. There are many more great books out there, along with workshop books that are interactive, such as 'The Tennis Psychology Workbook'.

This travelling time is also a great time to catch up on academic work that needs to be completed if the player is home-schooled or just needs to catch up on homework or college/university work. Whatever the situation, there is a lot of time to be useful with, rather than just sitting around wasting it.

## **Finances:**

Heres is the big one, unless your child is TRULY gifted, not just in your loving parents' eyes, but after various genuine professional assessments, then you could possibly get some kind of financial support through your country's tennis association. 'Genuine' is the keyword, not from your local coach who is being paid by you and will not want to lose one of his revenue incomes, telling you that your child is not talented.

You need a no-bullshit assessment from various experienced professionals. This may take a few months as there would need to be considerable improvement in weak areas to prove the student can learn and apply information quickly if the 1<sup>st</sup> assessments are inconclusive.

If these assessments have not been done, then don't invest any more money other than social tennis for your child at their local club. Maybe a few private lessons if they feel they would like to compete in local or regional tournaments, and assess their results and desires to make better and more committed decisions in the future.

The tennis journey investment can range between 5 to 10+ years, and gradually the cost will increase as the player will need more international travel time and the right coaching, fitness, and nutritional plan, etc.

Before sponsorship, the annual cost for a travelling international player is around £50,000 to £100,000+ (including the salary of the coach, which is the highest expense). This is

an investment that is ongoing annually with a very high possibility of zero return. Effectively, a money-to-burn scenario based on hopes and dreams. As dire as it sounds, you have a better chance of winning more money back if you invest £500k in lottery tickets if the Return on investment is your end goal. But I will be brutally honest, this is just the starting point. The goal during this period of investment is to find either a private sponsor with unlimited resources or a sponsorship from a large company that views you as an investment opportunity. This way, you can afford a professional team around the player that all have one goal in common.

Also, be aware that travelling costs for your coach, along with any other training staff, will need to be paid for as well. This includes their flights, food, and hotels; this is probably the highest cost in tennis, apart from the coach's salary.

Carlos Alcaraz, when he was younger, was sponsored by an industrial meat company from Murcia called 'El Pozo', which invests in many different areas, including aspiring athletes. With this kind of financial backup, and picked up by a former world #1 player (Juan Carlos Ferrero) with all the contacts and team members in place, it is no wonder he is where he is. He definitely did not make it on Daddy's yearly budget.

If your end goal is not money, then you need to ask yourself why you would do it in the first place!? Tennis is a rich sport; I'm not saying this monetarily because we have just covered that, but in the sense that the whole experience will be

enriching and intoxicating at the same time, not just for the player but also for the entourage.

Don't get me wrong, there are HUGE obstacles to be negotiated along the path, but these are what make all individuals of the team stronger in the end, or break them. There will be a great sense of achievement along the way, but also some dark tunnels of despair. Just like life, it will not be a completely trouble-free journey that we experience, just a highly concentrated dose in a short time frame. So, in essence, you have chosen to invest in experience.

Money problems in a family can be very stressful and even break up families, so whoever is paying for the player needs to understand that this is long-term and needs to always have the money available throughout the career. Just like buying a house or anything of a substantial amount, you need to be able to see it through; there is no point going broke halfway through the investment process and then wondering how this happened.

I was very fortunate that my parents also had enough money to set up a restaurant, as in the back of their mind, it could be a fallback plan for me if tennis did not work out. I never showed interest or love in owning or running a restaurant, but in the end, I quite enjoyed it, albeit starting from a financial deficit.

What I am recommending is that there is also a thought from the parents to include a backup plan, whatever that might be. Talking to your child and seeing what their interests and

hobbies are could help in organising a future for them when the time arises. I say hobbies and interests because money can be made everywhere, and it's so much better to earn money doing something you enjoy rather than sitting in an office from 9-5, thinking you could have been a famous tennis player. Future-proofing the player's life takes a lot of the stress away, not just from the parents, but from the player as well.

So, whatever it is, from a restaurant to a study plan, everyone should know that tennis is not the sole end to this journey, as this journey is already a very short one, as most players will stop playing in their mid-twenties, and their young life is really just beginning.

What a shame it would be if they would now have to start from ground zero, as most people would already have a degree and have started work. Which is why I feel very strongly about having a safety net in place.

Don't get talked into or fooled by other parents or coaches that you can finance this differently through organisations or other means, because if, for any reason, this breaks down, you are then left to carry the full load on your own.

So, this gives you an idea of what is needed to start. This book's purpose is for parents and players not to waste time and money during this 'building' process, to try and give the best possible shot at developing a player in the eventuality that he or she gets good enough results to be noticed and

sponsored to sign that business contract that will provide everything needed to achieve a ranking at the top of tennis.

### **Education:**

In my career, I did not finish school because I left America and went to train in Spain. The initial plan was to take a break from school for a maximum of one year, and even then, my parents tried to find an education for me in Spain during this period. This did work out as explained previously.

It didn't work out at the Spanish academy either, as everyone there was a full-time tennis player, and all the students, along with their parents, made the decision to drop an academic education and opt for a sports education. In hindsight, if it were my daughter playing tennis, I would make sure she finishes her school years, and then she will be able to start university at the date of her choosing. This is my personal view after not having finished it myself. I personally believe school should go hand in hand with tennis, whether this means homeschooling along with tutor support.

It would be nice to know the outcome of the other players who didn't make it at the academy, who decided not to go to school, and to see where life/success has taken them.

I do know of a few of their outcomes: Miguel went into wedding gifts and started his own wedding gift company that now exports countless amounts of containers directly from China and is a main supplier in Spain, earning him a lot of money and a wonderful travelling lifestyle.

Antonio became a police officer and a businessman, running his own nightclubs, and is currently in the process of building his own sports academy in southern Spain, which will be monumental once finished.

Carlos from Portugal went back to the Algarve to run his father's tennis clubs there and has been doing so for many years.

Javi (the smart diabetic one) became the director for Ferrero's academy in Spain and moved on to be the main guy who sets up big tennis adventures in China for Ferrero and now has his own tennis club in the region of Murcia. Also studying law, he became a prominent sports lawyer for athletes in Spain while being the head of tennis for the region of Murcia along with a string of multiple businesses and speaking 4 languages fluently (we always knew he would do well) So apart from Javi who studied, the ones that I know of, all have been successful in their own ways without going down the academic route. Which begs to answer, do you really need it?

Again, a backup plan is essential, having something set up or that can be set up in the eventuality that the player does not achieve the desired level. At least they can hit the ground running in a different direction and have the best possible start, hopefully doing something they love to earn money, as many years may have been lost due to pursuing a tennis career, whilst other 'normal' people were building their lives. In the last two decades, due to more advanced techniques and technology, careers are now lasting longer than ever before.

So, this outdated theory that you ‘have’ to make it at 20 is starting to be a myth. Which does give a little more mercy when it comes to studying, because you can finish school at 18, and then you can put the turbo on training and see where this gets you in the next 5+ years. In the worst-case scenario, you can start university a little later and still have a decent degree before the age of 30, which goes back to what I said in the travelling section above, that there is a lot of downtime travelling, which can be utilised in a very productive way, with both academic study and working on your mental side of the game. This way, you can help close the gap on other people who solely have an academic education.

### **Personality:**

“I don’t know what to do with him.” “What do you think should be our next move?”, “Do you think she can make it if she has more lessons?”, “Do you have a plan or a guideline we can follow to make better decisions?”, “Should I cancel all their group sessions and only have privates?”.

These are all questions I get asked frequently by players’ parents, along with countless others. Unfortunately, there is no straight path to becoming a professional tennis player. Each journey is unique to that player, and if you tweaked something in Juan Carlos Ferrero’s game or training, he might never have made it to number one in the world. There is no ‘guide’ or ‘formula’ that works for the masses, which makes success so frustrating to achieve.

This makes for a hard pill to swallow for parents ready to potentially invest their life savings into a tennis career.

Even asking 10 millionaires how they made it, each one would have a fascinating story filled with dark moments, tough decision moments, and lucky moments. What you will find consistent while listening to them is that they never gave up, and they always worked hard and even harder when things were down. Grit in your personality is hard to install, and especially harder the older you get. It can, however, be spurred on in the right environment, and motivation can be found with positive support. Few are born with real grit; it's like a talent, you either have it or you don't. This does not mean you can't incorporate grit and heart into your life, but as I said, the seed needs a nurturing environment to grow.

Different processes and analysis of the players personality can help in finding the better path to take, for example: If the player is very shy, they will probably take on information with more private sessions compared to a fiery outgoing attitude who will still learn in a closed environment but will be more anxious to get out and compete with a squad and learn through hardships. This does not mean you shelter or try to protect the shy individual from the fire of combat; you just adjust the needs to make sure they thrive in a competitive environment with the right setup.

What is certain is that the player, regardless of their personality, needs to demonstrate 'real want' and constant determination, because without this, the journey will be near

impossible. I was told my whole career that I needed to suffer more on court. I was lucky that I had a personality that allowed me to have a great capacity to suffer, as this is essential to any player who wants to become great. Without this ‘suffering’ trait, the will to give up will outweigh the desire to fight and win, just like my experience earlier in the book when I first did the trials to get selected into Ferrero’s academy. There, I had to keep going and suffer immensely and NEVER give up.

With a constant attitude that is always positive, energetic, and passionate, this paves the way for a successful life. With these building blocks, you can create a player who never gives up and understands that every mistake is a step in the right direction rather than a setback. Let me explain: Everyone who is learning thinks that they are starting from 0, and moving up towards a goal, and that every mistake is a stumble or setback to achieving this goal. This leads to frustration as we feel we are ‘slowing’ the process to achieve the goal. If you completely change your mentality, you can see this from a completely different perspective if I shine the light on this matter from a different angle.

Imagine that the player is not starting at 0, but at -10,000. Each shot, forehand, backhand, serve, etc., is at negative 10,000; you need to hit 10k mistakes to reach your goal, that in fact every mistake is a baby step towards your end goal, which is 0.

I find that this mentality, if explained properly to players, drastically reduces frustration when it comes to learning and progressing forward. Teaching them how to manage this ideology and incorporate this into their thinking leads to a more mature approach to their game.

**Below is a template training program that I have consulted with some of the best tennis directors and ex-professional players in Spain and internationally, and we all agree that this is the best way forward, understanding the circumstances and demands of tennis with years of experience behind us.**

### **Training:**

Training worldwide is very similar around the tennis globe, new techniques and information are always being introduced in seminars, but the basic routines and drills are universal. You'll see the same drills given to kids in Africa, South America, China, and in Florida, and so on. This does not mean the coach is unimportant; if anything, the coach is one of the most important factors in any tennis career. There are many teachers in the world, and then there are great teachers. A great teacher needs to be patient, empathetic, have a deep knowledge of the subject matter, and have flexibility while being positive and enthusiastic. Kindness is crucial, along with being stern as well. My father is a great teacher.

The most important factor, though, is being able to give information to a student in a way that the student can really and truly understand what the information is and be able to

apply it quickly. This may be verbally or visually, and the coach must understand the needs of each individual student and understand how to regurgitate their knowledge in the most efficient way for each student to digest.

What is the best training setup? As mentioned earlier, it is very individual, but there is a standard setup procedure that can then be refined.

1) You NEED a private coach. A private coach is the person the player needs to look up to and trust. Trust that the instructions given are authentic and are in their favour. So many parents during my sessions say, "I've been telling them that for ages!" Yes, but you're the parent, not a professional tennis trainer, and because you are the parent, the information given is ignored because they don't trust your nonprofessional judgment. It's not that the information is wrong; they just need to hear it from what they perceive as a trusted source.

The parent may find a coach, but it is the player who needs to connect with the coach; without this connection, there is no future. Juan Carlos Ferrero, unfortunately, lost his mother at the tender age of 16. He didn't need a coach; he needed a person he could trust and rely on, and so the bond became unbreakable with Antonio Cascales.

This chosen coach, once the player is on board emotionally, can now start to train them and guide them through the process. The coach needs to be serious and hard working, but create an environment where the student feels comfortable

and open to learning. If the student is uncomfortable in any way, they will clam up, and the learning process will stop, which is why I personally do not like parents on the court during training sessions, as most students get diverted by comments, negative emotions, or distractions from the parents. You can visually see the difference when a parent suddenly arrives or leaves halfway through a session; the shift in their mood is almost instant.

I would recommend starting with 2 sessions per week of individual coaching, ideally 1.5-2-hour sessions each, equating to 3-4 hours of private coaching per week. The worst-case scenario is 2x 1-hour sessions.

2) This needs to be mixed with performance group sessions with players of a similar level or better, at least 2x per week, and sessions lasting approximately 1.5-2 hours each.

This is a vital part as well, since players need to keep comparing themselves to others of a similar standard and be in a competitive group environment. As many of these sessions as possible, they should have their private coach observing from the side (not involved or on court) but taking notes. An open-minded coach, at the end of the session, would talk to the main coach of the group session to get a second opinion on the best ways to improve the player in the upcoming private sessions and work on any areas that the players' coach might have missed. In total, between 6-8 hours per week should be invested in a player to start in the early stages of training.

As the player progresses, fitness routines should be introduced either by the coach, if knowledgeable in this area, or should be sourced out to a specialised tennis fitness instructor. Again, working closely with the coach if this is the case, and giving fitness homework for the coach to apply when the fitness trainer is not able to be present or to uphold a maintenance training plan. At least once a week, a fitness instructor needs to lead the session, then leave a weekly training program with the coach to follow and be present during the players' allocated fitness training hour(s). As a player starts to develop and moves onto full-time training, this should increase up to 30-40+ hours per week, including all aspects of training from mental, physical, and technical.

3) A competitive player needs to play approximately 24 tournaments per year. These tournaments should primarily be organised by the coach and discussed with the parents to agree on the schedule. I would recommend that the coach be present for half of these, up to 75%, so present at approximately 12-18 tournaments. The reason for this is that the player needs to be able to fend for themselves and solve problems that occur in matches without always having inside help and constant chats before and after matches, which can be saturating at times. This also gives the player responsibility to warm up, stretch, communicate with the referees and tournament directors, etc., without having to always rely on the coach to do all the work or give the orders. This is also a perfect time to show some self-discipline and organisation. This obviously is a recommended setup, if the player needs a

more personalised approach, by all means listen to the player, i.e., the coach is always travelling, or has less time travelling with the player.

When the coach is not present in these circumstances, the 'parent' does NOT become the coach, but rather relays/supports the information given in training and is there to solely support the player emotionally.

4) Regular meetings with the parents discussing all aspects of training and travelling are crucial to make sure all parties are on track and are not just on the same page, but on the same chapter. Goals are to be introduced by the coach, which should cover long-term and short-term goals with the player and parents.

The coach should also in addition give the player micro-goals and nano-goals, for example:

1) A long-term goal is establishing the finish line, which is 'we are here to achieve top 100 or better in the world'. Another goal might be, 'I want to use tennis as a tool to get into university to set up my life and have a career, somehow involving tennis or not.' So, these are goals that are set to determine a destination, so to speak.

2) Short-term goals could be 'We need to achieve 1 win, 2 semi-finals, 4 quarter-finals, and get past the 2<sup>nd</sup> rounds in every tournament this season'. This helps the player and the team to work towards a more realistic goal for a season and tournaments. This also sets a mental achievement box to be

ticked by the player and takes huge amounts of pressure off, as most parents and coaches will always be looking for the win.

This also helps with planning properly and choosing the competitions to align with these goals. For example, if it is a hard national tournament, try to apply the 2<sup>nd</sup> round goal. If you are looking for a win, try to find a tournament that matches the level of the player, and the goal is realistic. Hopefully, all the goals can be met at the end of a season, and the sense of achievement can be felt by the whole team, and really motivate the player in preparing well for the next season.

3) A micro goal is something or various things to work on during a match, for example: every bad ball toss on the serve in this match does not get hit, or working on time management for mental concentration in between points. Using free time in matches to understand the patterns of play and figure out different game plans according to the changing patterns. Trying to get 3 first serves per game is another great micro goal. If the player has trouble keeping score, they should try to say the score on every point, which not only does the evident in keeping score, but also heightens the awareness of the game situation so they can apply more or less pressure depending on the score, for example, 15-15 in a game which the score is 3-1 in games, is obviously less important than a 40-30 when the score is 3-4 in games with a break point, and so should be played in a different manner.

Small details like these should be enforced so the player can find the subtle changes in body language from the opponent to the weather changing at different times during a match. All these little cues can be trained into a player to find the best possible outcome in an ever-changing environment.

Another great micro goal is enforcing a timeline between points. What I mean is that after each point, the rest period needs to be organised into 5x 5-second routines.

1<sup>st</sup> 5 seconds are to register and allow the human side to feel emotion. Positive or negative, it doesn't matter; allow 5 seconds to digest these feelings.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> 5 seconds are to analyse the physical state of the body, i.e., how tired are you? Does anything hurt? Was there a tough shot where you overstretched? etc.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> 5 seconds are to analyse the last gameplay and if you made the right shot selection, or did the opponent make the same pattern of play? Is there anything to fix to improve on the next point? etc.

The 4<sup>th</sup> 5 seconds are to concentrate on your breathing, not just to lower your heart rate, but to create as much calmness between the storms of points. Three large breaths are about right.

The last 5-10 seconds are all about getting ready to focus on the next play, game score awareness, and nano-goals (which are covered below in the next paragraph). This is how a top player administers their precious time in between points. This

routine takes immense discipline and needs to be implemented during training as much as possible.

4) A nano-goal is focusing on new routines, in point techniques, rhythm finding on individual shots, and general application of instant information, etc. Such as working on 'bounce...hit' techniques, or working on their breathing during their shots, they can also try to find the ball earlier than normal, or work on keeping their footwork tight and organised, maybe trying not to go for the lines on uncomfortable approach shots. Small goals like these, which are actually happening in real time and working on specifics, I would call nano-goals.

Moving on from goals, I highly recommend not having more than one private coach for various reasons. If you are doing this, then that means you have not found 'the' right private coach yet. Especially if the coaches do not know each other and are not in contact with each other, this can create conflicting information, resulting in a loss of trust in both (or more) coaches for the player.

This does not mean that the chosen private coach cannot receive help or insight from other trusted coaches; in fact, different opinions and views should be welcomed from the coach to then relay this information as his own conclusion to the player. As an Example, my coach would often bring his brother along, who was an ex-Davis Cup player for Venezuela. They would watch me, and his brother would give my coach a different view of what he saw. After the

match, it was ONLY my coach who would give me the information; otherwise, it seems that my coach is somewhat unable or inadequate and needs support, which can lead to a lack of trust from the player.

I see so often parents budge in and take over in the coach's pep talk or coaching advice, cutting the coach off, undermining the coach, and his knowledge. The student is now being bombarded with two or more trusted sources, which can lead to confusion and emotional shutdown.

Another reason not to have more than one coach is that there is divided trust from the player, and the sense of direction can be diluted or hazed as there is no concentrated source, which can then lead to inner frustration with the player. This is also highly demoralising for the coaches as they can feel left out or do not know what is happening on the other side. This will eventually result in all coaches involved losing interest, and the quality of the training will go down, leaving parents and players back to square one, trying to re-find a quality coach that the player trusts and connects with. Good luck.

If all is going well and the player is developing into a rounded competitive player and results are coming in, then the training can start to be enhanced with sports psychologists and nutritionists, along with physiotherapists.

# EPILOGUE – FINAL THOUGHTS

The tennis world is a magical one, in so many ways. Even though I lost affection for the game due to my experiences, deep down, there will always be a part of me that loves it. It has helped me become the person I am today, with all my faults and strengths, and I am able to recognise what those are. It has also given me my best friends for life and experiences that many dream of. It has also hardened me, psychologically and emotionally, and even though it has also given me depression and anger, it has also given me the tools to deal with them.

It has also made me realise how important family is and that no family is perfect. I have deep gratitude to my parents who separated their marriage for years for me to play tennis, and the huge economic expense that was invested in me. I also know how hard it was for my brother to be so far from all of us for so long, and I deeply thank him and apologise for what must seem like all the family's attention was stolen and spent on me alone. Thank you.

The coaching world is littered with failed tennis players who had nowhere else to turn except for the world of coaching. These are the coaches who have that 'real' deep understanding of what it takes and will generally be more performance-oriented than your average club coach. Seek

them out, and you can find some incredibly good ex-players around with loads of knowledge and who are hungry to find and help the next kid to achieve what they might not have been able to themselves.

I hope this book has given you some good tips and a peek into the darker, unseen belly of tennis. Most books you will read about tennis talk to you mainly about only the ones who 'got there' because they 'sell' due to the player being famous. This is for all the players who have dedicated so much and have been left aside.

If you are a player reading this or a parent/coach, I truly wish you all the best, and I hope some inspiration can be found in these writings, and may the journey and path you take come to fruition exactly as you have dreamed of. From the bottom of my heart, I wish you the very best of luck.

If you are an ex-player and have finished reading this, I just want to say that I know the pain and suffering you have gone through, and leaving the only real world that you have dedicated yourself to is suddenly gone, you may feel lost and try desperately to find some kind of worth in life, which is very hard. The constant desire to tell people who you are and to prove yourself for validation in a world that does not care much for ex-players or coaches is depressing and leads to depression.

I have met many ex-players, and some are really struggling to find their next move in life. If you are in this situation, just remember that not many people can relate or contemplate

what you have gone through, but I know for sure that you are made of fire, and you burn brightly, just keep trying to find the right place and at the right time and people will see the flames from miles away and people will never forget the warmth of your fire.