

PART 02

The Middle: Ages 18-26

The Division 2 PeachBelt Conference and NAIA is a super tough level of play! I had no idea what I was getting into but this was a very high level of competition. Our college was in a transition period from NAIA to NCAA Division 2 when I arrived for the 2005-06 season. Our first official year in D2 was 2006-2007, which was also my last year at Georgia SouthWestern. The PeachBelt Conference that we competed in was likely the toughest conference in the Nation for Division 2 tennis. We had the likes of Valdosta State, Columbus State, North Georgia and Georgia College & State. Valdosta and Columbus were both National titlist and the remaining two Georgia schools were both solid programs in their own respect.

The NAIA as a whole is quite an interesting place to be for collegiate athletics, especially Tennis. The governing body has a bit of a loophole where former professional players (who are no longer competing on the circuit) have a chance to attend college and compete on scholarship. They are given partial eligibility to do so which typically results in a 2-3 year eligibility status. This made a very attractive competition grounds for many Futures/Challengers circuit players to try their hand at the pro level and see how they do. It allowed them to train and compete in some of the most unforgiving tennis atmospheres and then come to secure, scholarship college opportunities to play for a couple more years while getting a degree. You are not a kid anymore when you go to the Futures level of tennis and beyond. The ones who did this for even just a year would have had an expedited advanced level of training that would set them apart from their peers. I wasn't a bad tennis player in my own respect; however, but I was a 3-star recruit coming from junior tennis. I came in starting at #1 singles for a program known to have the toughest conference in the nation. The guys I had to play (some were fully grown Men) were absolute competitors, physically developed and deployed all measures of tactics and gamesmanship. The skinny, 140lb 5'9" Indian child was not equipped for this mentally or physically. It was a whirlwind of emotions, confusion, desire, and self-doubt.

In both years of college tennis at Georgia SouthWestern, my win-loss ratio was not the best and it actually took many matches in the first year to finally get my first win. Claiming my first college tennis singles win was a massive achievement for me. I had not faced so many losses in a row since I was 11 years old. However, this time period did something to me as a tennis player that I didn't quite understand until much later in my 20s. I had to learn to lose, lose often, and lose to players who were in some cases far superior to me in tennis abilities. I was playing against some amazing tennis players, guys who trained at a high level of junior competition and likely even Futures/Challenger qualifying circuit from their youth. I didn't know anything about ITF Circuit except what I slowly uncovered in that first year. Some of my opponents were

playing entry pro level qualifying events from the age of 15 onwards. My opponents hit the ball hard, ran me around, served big and played fearlessly. I noticed a specific common trait among all the opponents I faced. They all had incredible self belief and a massive desire to win! I don't say this to sound like I didn't have belief and wanted to win, I did, but they were at another level. I didn't quite know how to bridge this gap but was determined to make it happen. All I knew and could attempt was what I did in High School, push myself to my physical limits to increase my ability and level of play. So I did....

The Assistant Coach, Romain, was previously on the team when they made the semifinals of the NAIA National Tournament. In my eyes, he was one of the best tennis players I'd seen in my life thus far. I realized that I needed to train and play against players better than me for any chance of winning at this level. To be honest, the rest of my team didn't give me the competition I needed to improve my game. It's not because I was great at Tennis by any measure, it's from the sheer fact that I needed someone to beat me pretty badly at tennis every day. Romain was the only person I knew in Americus, Ga who could. I asked him to train with me after practices as much as possible and he agreed. So my days in college started to look a bit different with a focus that shifted towards development and improvement. My Mornings and early afternoons were filled with attending classes and studying. We had team practice in the late afternoon and typically went to dinner right after that. When we had time, Romain and I would go to the courts to practice again and play points. This training with him is what made the most improvement in my Tennis from my first year at GSW to the second. Point-play was crucial, especially against a quality training partner. However, no matter what format we did, I got crushed! Drop feed point play to 10 always resulted in losing 5-10 or worse in his favor. Sets were embarrassing for me as he took smoke breaks in the changeovers and still managed to beat me with a score of 6-2 score or worse. I was frustrated by these score lines and also in awe by his talent and ability. It was in these moments he shared with me about his childhood playing in tournaments that included players like Gilles Simon (Top 50 ATP at that time) which didn't make me feel so bad. I was learning a lot from each day we trained together and was never too upset with the results. How could I be? It was exactly what I needed to improve. Over time I did get better and started to bridge the score gap by a small margin. Whether or not I was improving at Tennis, I'm unsure. It's possible my game was acclimating better to the quality of shot that I was up against. Thought I would like to believe that I was also improving my Tennis IQ and abilities. The training did paid off and resulted in the first of 2 most pivotal moments in my college tennis career.

Moment 1 – It finally happened

This was ironically the final match of my entire college tennis career as a NAIA athlete. After this season, we moved on to the PeachBelt conference in NCAA DII. It also happened to be my most favorite and best result. This one was recorded online as records for the Conference Tournament were required to be submitted on the NAIA website. I remembered the match from memory but found the date/opponent though the recorded data. Our team was playing against a pretty solid team (Berry College) in

the first round. This was a team that beat us pretty handily during the regular season and had expected a similar result this time as well. They swept us in the doubles and knocked out all the singles lines rather quickly with one-sided score lines. I experienced something in this match that had never happened to me before in competitive tennis. I was toe to toe with the #1 player from Berry College. I lost the set 5-7 but was feeling pretty good and playing well. Something happened in the 2nd set that stays with me to this day. Somehow I tapped into a feeling on-court that was fluid and allowed me to hit any shot I wanted at the right moment within points. It didn't create any super human qualities where I never missed, but I did feel a sort of time period (end of 2nd set and 10-point Tiebreaker) where I didn't make many mistakes. I rallied back and won the 2nd set 6-4. As the match was already decided, we played a 10 point Tiebreak in lieu of the 3rd set. I started to see and feel an imaginary window over the net. My body and mind were able to execute shots that crossed into that window and land into my opponents half of the court with ease. I didn't miss many and started to feel a sense of calm and tranquility at this stage in the match. It was like I was in a dream-state and nothing phased me. I was absolutely enjoying striking the ball, floating around the court, and hitting freely as if I was the only person out there. To this day, as I recall the memories (which are still quite vivid), I can only describe what happened as a light, airy feeling of being in a sort of time slowing experience. It's quite strange but I was so happy, peaceful and playing without any fear. I claimed my final match in college tennis against a very quality opponent, 10-8 in the tiebreaker. That was it, my final match for GSW, and my final time stepping on court to represent a college. Fast forward to today, January 2005 and I'm researching this portion of my tennis journey. A small part of my heart is saddened that I never played to a caliber to get ranked in college tennis. Of course, was thrown into the deep end in 2005, but felt like I had gained a lot of ground and was ready to compete for a ranked position. As I'm searching for these results, I stumbled upon the score line and realized that the #1 player who I beat from Berry College was ranked #22 in the NAIA. I finally beat a nationally ranked player. 18 years later, a small void in my tennis career has been fulfilled from a simple archives search. I came home and I told my wife about my discovery and how excited I was about my discovery. This was a small closure for me with the chapter unfinished of my college tennis career. She looked at me with a smile on her face and said, "It's the small victories that we have." It was all I needed in that moment. I was happy to share this with my best friend and moved on from that moment to share the evening with her and our beautiful (almost 3yr old) daughter.

My second year at GSW was a lot better for my Tennis with results and a season ending match that I can still remember today. To start, we had a handful of new recruits that could really help our new season. I distinctly remember driving to campus the weekend before classes start and having a conversation with Coach Sewell. I was happy to have trained all Summer and really looking forward to getting back to a new season and having results for myself and with the team. Coach was informing me on the new additions to the team and as the conversation progressed, he told me that he increased my athletic scholarship. I was completely shocked and confused at the same time. I had never asked Coach for something like this or expected it for any reason. Too be honest, I never asked Coach for anything at all. I respected him to the highest

regard and always wanted to put my best foot forward in how he saw me as student-athlete. He continued by telling me that he increased it because he saw that I worked hard last season and trained extra with the Assistant Coach. I was very excited and felt a rush of emotions in that moment. Receiving praise and acknowledgement from my Coach and noticing my extra work was a very big deal to me. I never liked to share a lot about how I trained and what I did outside of team practice/fitness so no one really knew about the additional daily running, fitness and hitting I did. I wanted it to show in my tennis and our team fitness sessions. I wanted to be the fastest and the best on the team, especially for the new season!

We had brought in several new players to join the program. It was an inspiring time as one of them was a familiar name to me, yet I'd never met or played against him. Little did I know that our paths crossing at this time was just at its beginning stages. Brent Bjerregaard was a left-handed player and had quite a solid junior career. He came in off of 2 seasons at ABAC with a lot of competitive experience. Looking at our junior stats, Brent had surpassed me in every ranking opportunity possible (State, Southern, and National) as well already had an extra year of competing in college tennis as this would have been his 3rd season. I already knew that we would have made excellent training partners as he was beating me in all our running and fitness exercises. It was a little difficult to see this as I was the fastest and strongest player on the team the year before. However, it was a more exciting and compelling situation than I realized at that time. I now had someone on the team who I could train with as a teammate and compete against in all our running/agility fitness. Unfortunately, Brent was unable to compete with us that season due to a transfer eligibility situation since we had just joining the NCAA Div II. This was quite disheartening as it meant, he was not allowed to be on court for any team-related trainings or practices or compete for us the entire season. If we wanted to train/practice, it had to be outside of normal "team" sessions. This was something I was used to so we did exactly that. Brent, Romain, and I would go out and play points against one another trying our best to improve and be ready for my final season at Georgia SouthWestern. I was mentally prepared and had already planned to transfer to Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech) after that 2nd year at GSW. The goal since High School graduation was to knock out all core classes needed from GSW, play 2 years of scholarship Tennis, and then complete at Bachelors in Science in Architecture at Tech.

This new season (2006-07) was even tougher than the previous one. We were in a trial period for NCAA Division 2 PeachBelt Conference. This meant that we couldn't participate in the National or Conference Tournament for that season. However, we did have to complete the regular season Conference matches as usual against our new DII opponents. I was exposed to an even greater level of tennis that I had not seen before. The Conference we were in was absolutely stacked with Nationally ranked teams and ones that too ranked quite high. We had the likes of Armstrong State, Georgia College & State, Lander, Columbus State, Francis Marion, and USC Aiken. All of them were solid tennis programs with very strong squads at that time. We also regularly played against Berry, ABAC and University of North Georgia. Simply put, our season was filled with fantastic match-ups against very strong teams. However, every college tennis

team always has at least 1 star player. Typically, the best on the team was the #1 singles player. This was the one guy who I always had the privilege to play against.

The entire season, I did my absolute very best to end on a high note and to keep the matches as close as possible. I played against the strongest player on the opponent team and always did my best to keep up. Matchups were just way too difficult and my losses were piling up. However, my attitude and mental resilience was steadily improving as the season progressed. I was more competitive points against my opponents and this resulted in closer scores in sets. My tennis was improving and I was gaining confidence. There was a pivotal moment in this year that I can recall as well.

Moment 2 – The realization

This was likely the most tennis I had ever played in my life in a single day. We had a double header as it was a travel match and multiple colleges were playing at one location for a weekend. Both matches were against Top ranked opponents in the Nation. I don't remember the first one too well but the 2nd match was an important one. We had played doubles and singles for the first match, had a lunch break and stepped on court for the next one. I believe we were playing Valdosta state or Armstrong Atlantic, both of which were National Champions in the NCAA and NAIA respectively. The last singles match of the day, I had split sets against my opponent. I believe I was the final men's match on court and was having a very tough battle. Since the overall match score was already decided (in favor of our opponents), we did a 10-point Tiebreaker to decide our singles match. There were a ton of nerves, adrenaline and all sorts of emotions at that time. I didn't know it then, but my opponent (at that time) was ranked top 10 in singles in the NAIA singles rankings at that time. The score line in the tiebreaker wavered back and forth until I believe I had a small lead in the second half, possibly 7-5 or so. We had a long exchange and I remember hitting a forehand and the racket almost falling out of my hand in the follow-through. Needless to say, I lost that point. Three fingers on my right hand, along with my forearm, began to cramp. As a tennis player, if you start to have cramps, it's going to be a painful rest of the match unless they find a way to dissipate. I had actually never experienced this in my life in the middle of a match so I was unsure what to think of it or even express to Coach. We continued to play and I eventually lost the match. It was a difficult loss and one that I can remember to date as I'm able to write about it almost 20 years later. Nonetheless, it did give me a lot of confidence that I could compete with some of the best in the Nation in Division II. I just needed a little more time to develop and acclimate to this level of play. However, my college tennis journey was officially complete. In the Fall of 2007, I transferred to Georgia Tech to pursue a degree in Architecture that would conclude in 2011.

Upon arrival at Georgia Tech, I was immersed into a completely new experience. This place was amazing and truly a polarizing experience to my first 2 years in college at

GSW. It was an entirely new experience with a curriculum and course rigor I was not used to. I stumbled my way through the first year as I was commuting from a 30 mile distance to save money on housing/meal plan costs. This was very difficult and resulted in a necessity of on-campus housing for the next 3 years. I'm not sure if I really enjoyed Architecture until the final year and a half of the degree program. I started to understand what the field was and how I could design in a way that I felt comfortable expressing myself. As I buckled down and made sure I was excelling in my design studio class, I began to take up distance running. This was 100% not out of my own random desire. I was asked by a High School Tennis friend to sign up for a 10k race for the weekend. I knew nothing about running and had only ran a maximum of 3 miles in my life. Race day came and I had a very mediocre result and struggled for the entirety of the event. My friend completed the race by a margin of at least 5 minutes. This was a massive blow to my early 20s ego and I decided to pursue distance running. The few days following the race, I started training with a few miles every other day and signed up for my own 10k that next weekend. I had ran a much better time but ended up with tendonitis in my right knee. Little did I know running 20+ miles in 7 days is not the best recipe for your body if you've never done anything of the sort in your life. The tendonitis healed and I went all in for distance running. I competed in multiple 5k, 10k, and 3 half marathon races before I stopped. I had significant running improvement and ended up with a 1:28:40 Half marathon personal best. For a tennis player turned runner, I was feeling pretty good about my training in this new sport. I was quite fond of trail running and started signing up for events quite often. I began a training program (I created myself) on the upstairs track of the Georgia Tech athletics center. I attended class during the day/afternoon and trained for races in the evening. I was back to an athletic fitness routine in 2009 that I continued till 2013 for distance running. In 2010 I somehow gained knowledge about entry level pro events called Futures. These tournaments are the first line of competition you sign up for in hopes of achieving a pro (ATP) ranking. You have to make it through 3 rounds of qualifying to gain a "qualifier" position into the main draw of the Futures event. I began this journey in 2010 for training with my first ever qualifying event in 2011.