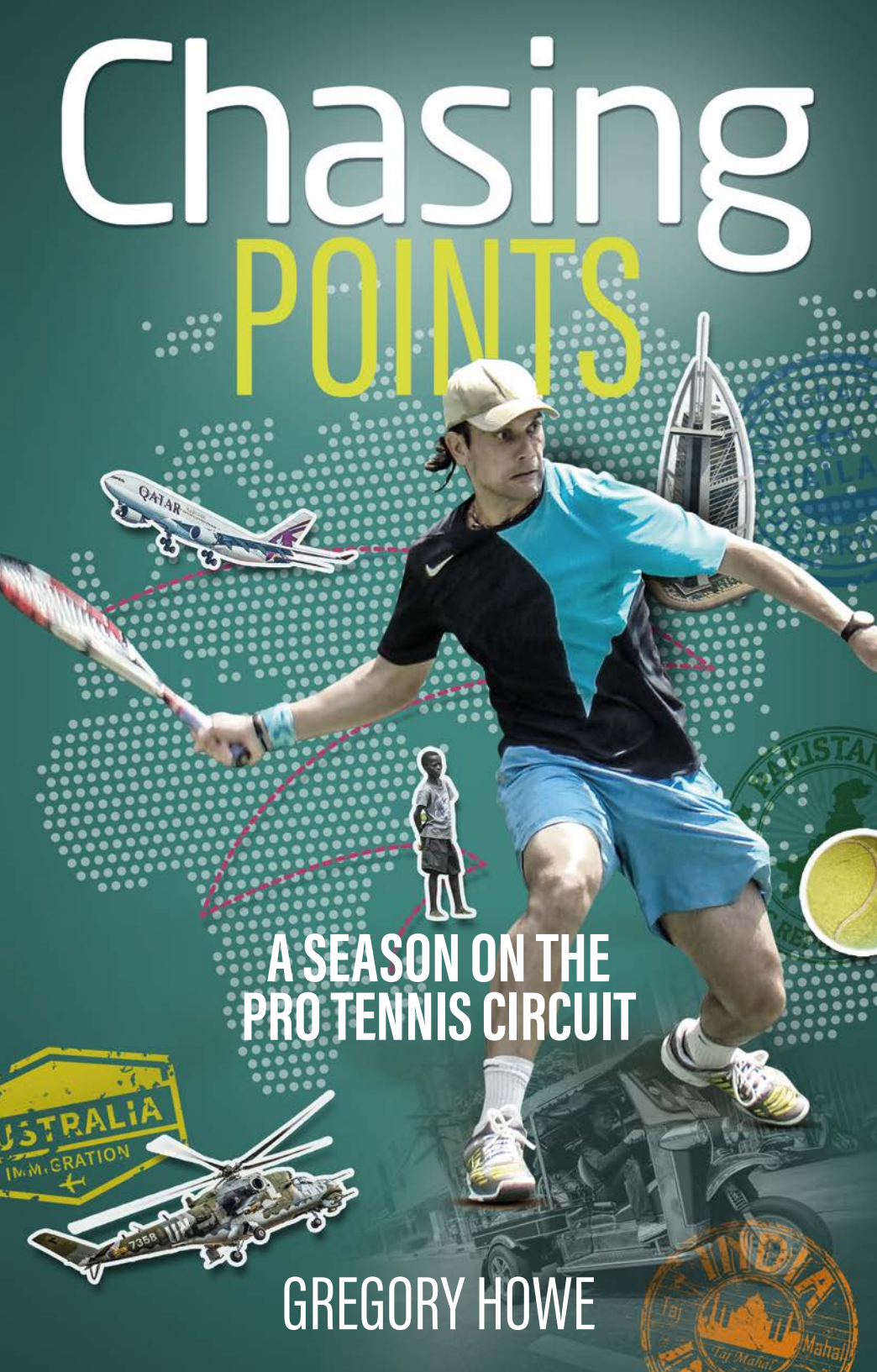
Chasing POINTS



A SEASON ON THE PRO TENNIS CIRCUIT

GREGORY HOWE

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Introduction

'Dreams do come true sometimes.'

Andy Murray's Facebook, on Marcus Willis

ON PAPER, Marcus Willis had no right to be there. Here was a part-time coach – a player who used to be so out of shape his nickname was 'Cartman' (the fat character from the cartoon, *South Park*). Yet, there he was, in the second round of Wimbledon facing the G.O.A.T. – Roger Federer.

You couldn't make it up. Any of the spectators who had bought centre court tickets for the 2016 Wimbledon Championships could have watched Willis for free, only a year before, in small English towns like Felixstowe or Frinton-on-Sea. I bet none of them had.

The British tabloids had a field day. The *Daily Express* ran the headline 'The Fairytale of Wimbledon's Underdog'. Romance, surreal and dream were words used to describe his journey. Roger Federer summed it up, 'It is what our sport needs, where guys come from nowhere.' To the majority of the public, it must have felt like Marcus Willis had indeed emerged from nowhere. Inevitably, people started to ask, what had he been doing?

Reporters attempted to tell Willis's Wimbledon backstory. Obscure facts began to emerge: he had to qualify for the qualifying; he was 772 in the world; his best 2016 result was a quarter-final in a Tunisian Futures event; and so far in 2016, he had won a grand total of £258.

You could imagine the average fan's confusion. Futures… qualifying…a player ranked 772…they play tennis in Tunisia? For them, a whole new world had opened up – a world outside of the Grand Slams and marquee players.

This is *my* world.

* * * * *

Every year, well over 10,000 players will try their hand on the men's professional tennis circuit. They will compete en masse, often in huge qualifying draws in far-flung corners of the world. It is a win – or go home – survival of the fittest where most don't survive. This is tennis's version of baseball's minor leagues – the Futures circuit.

To become a world-ranked professional, a player must battle through the qualifying rounds, and then win their opening match in the main draw of a Futures event, all the time beating established ranked players along the way. By doing this, they earn *one* precious ATP (Association of Tennis Professionals) point and a world ranking beginning around 1,500.

From here they must fight their way through the next two levels of the pro game – the Challenger circuit, and finally the rarefied air of the ATP tour. On the weekend before any tournament, a qualifying competition allows lowly ranked players the chance to fight for a few places in the main tournament.

The weekend qualifying competitions prior to ATP tournaments are brutal: journeymen, rising stars, and top players whose careers are on the slide desperately compete, knowing they are within touching distance of the huge pay cheques, crowds and top stars. When fans turn on their televisions and watch the pros, they are watching the survivors.

The game's big four – Federer, Nadal, Djokovic and Murray – all began their careers early: playing Futures by age 15; at 16, all were world ranked; by 18 they had already moved through the Challengers to play exclusively on the ATP tour. These are truly special players, shooting stars rocketing towards the top

of the game. In reality, most aspiring pros will never achieve a world ranking, while most who do stall well before ever reaching the ATP tour.

Making it as a pro is tough, but at least the professional tennis circuit is a meritocracy. *Anyone* can enter the qualifying of a Futures tournament. Then, all you have to do is keep winning and you'll soon end up on the ATP tour.

If you don't believe me – just look at Marcus Willis. In his first tournament of 2016, he had to qualify for a Futures tournament in Tunisia. In his second tournament of the year – the Wimbledon Championships – he pre-qualified, qualified, and ended up playing Federer on centre court. Willis just kept on winning.

With this in mind, if a 34-year-old schoolteacher – who played a bit of tennis – quit his job and threw himself on the professional tennis circuit, how far could he reach? Could he earn a world ranking? Could he fight his way through to the elite ATP level and play alongside the likes of Federer, Nadal, Djokovic and Murray?

Marcus Willis could do it.

Why *not* me?

Prologue

The Holy Grail, and a Crack in a Window

COME BACK in time to 1988. September to be precise: literally decades ago to an iconic era in tennis. The cool Swede, Mats Wilander, had just become world number one by beating Ivan Lendl in the US Open Final. A brash Las Vegan with denim shorts, long hair and earrings was making his move, while the glow of tennis's glory days could still be felt every time a fading John McEnroe or Jimmy Connors took to the stage.

I was 16 years old at the time, and about to begin my pro career – if you could call it that (and *no one* ever has). Unfortunately, it wasn't at the US Open, but rather in a low-level event on the other side of the world in Australia, namely in my hometown of Gladstone.

Gladstone was anything but a tennis town. It was a tough industrial city, rugby league territory, with no time for a white-collar sport like tennis. It made no difference that the legendary Rod Laver came from a city just up the road; no one good ever came out of Gladstone. The city did have brand new tennis courts though – a gift from the nearby aluminium refinery – and this meant we were awarded a pro tournament.

My coach, Fred Munckton, just so happened to be the tournament director. He awarded both myself, and my younger brother, Andrew, wildcards into the qualifying draw. Andrew had just turned 15 and was the city's men's champion – the best prospect in years. Although I was a year older, my game was

full of holes. If anyone had even noticed my name in the draw, they would have simply assumed I was there to keep my brother company.

Memories from my first pro tournament are still vivid today. For that week, the city burst with international flavour – US college players mixed with tanned Europeans, exotic Mexicans and the best tennis players in Australia. On match day, overly eager to get down to the courts, the Howe brothers turned up at daybreak only to find themselves locked out of the complex. Once the matches got underway, I watched Andrew compete well against a world-ranked pro. Club members had turned out to watch him, with his loss deemed a credible one.

I would prefer not to talk about my match. After hanging around all day, my pro debut began under the floodlights. They might as well have been metaphorical headlights blinding me; I was wiped off the court in about half an hour (including an injury time-out when I almost threw up due to nerves). My opponent, Neil Prickett from Western Australia, was at least nice enough to allow me one game to escape a double bagel.

It wouldn't deter me. This was a glimpse into another world, and I was hooked. In the clubhouse, I discovered tennis's version of the Holy Grail. Taped to the brick wall was the entire men's professional ranking list from number one down to number 990: Wilander, Lendl, McEnroe, Connors, Becker, Edberg and Agassi were at its peak. In these pre-internet days, to find a complete list of the world rankings was virtually impossible.

I spent an eternity scanning through the list, fascinated with each name and what it represented. To be on this list meant something – it was proof of being a world-class player, to be a little part of tennis history. There was permanence to it all, even if it was held to the wall by sticky tape.

The sight of this list changed my life. I vowed then and there to one day see my name on the world-ranking list. What I didn't realise at the time, was that it was to become my own personal Holy Grail – to fascinate, haunt and motivate me for the next two decades of my life.

* * * * *

During the next five years I finished my schooling and attended university. I worked hard at my game. Each year, I continued to play the professional events on the Queensland circuit, eventually winning an occasional match in the qualifying, but never coming close to escaping the huge qualifying draws. To earn an ATP point and a ranking was never a reality. In these events, I saw future stars such as Pat Rafter and Mark Philippoussis start at the lowest rung. They were soon gone – on their way to the very top of the game.

After university, I graduated as an English teacher, moving straight to London to begin my schoolteaching career. Since I was now living in London, I started playing tennis for Great Britain, making use of my British passport (I was born in Derbyshire, England, to Australian parents).

The European summers became my opportunity to dream again of tennis glory. With Andrew, and my best friend in London, Jake Baluyut, we used tennis as a passport to see the world…or at least north Africa and eastern Europe where our money went further. It was like backpacking with a tennis racquet. Chasing Futures tournaments, we slept in Moroccan airports, shared rooms in the fleapits of Cairo and braved earthquakes in eastern Turkey.

It was an amazing experience. Yet, I never got close to earning that ATP point that would give me a world ranking. I figured it was just not meant to be. I told myself it was *okay*. To see the world, travel with my brother and friends, and play the circuit was *reward enough*.

As I turned 30, the tours slowly trickled to a halt. My life was heading places: doing all the things that you were meant to be doing at that age. I moved into a London flat with the girl of my dreams, Sylvie, from the French Caribbean. I got promotions at work, rising quickly to run an English department in a school in north London. I was in charge of ten people, many of whom were much older than myself with mortgages, children and baggage. With more work and stress, I put on weight and was

10kg heavier than in my playing days. I still played the smaller amateur events around London, but year after year my British ranking fell; I slowly slipped out of the top 1,000 in the country.

After one first-round loss, the tournament director asked me, 'What happened? You used to win these events.' His comments stung, and I considered his words for a while. I told myself it was *okay*. Tennis was my hobby; going so well at work and at home was *reward enough*.

* * * * *

Fast-forward four years.

One evening, I found myself working alone in the English department office in the same north London school. Winter had set in, leaving a grey darkness to envelop the city of London. The students had left hours ago, the other teachers not long after them. However, I was middle management, with responsibility, and *accountability* – education's new buzz word.

Through the office window, the concrete back wall of the Tottenham Hotspur football ground could be seen, along with the barbed wire fence that separated the stadium from the real world. Abandoned, looted cars lined the road leading towards the school's front gate. A huge crack had appeared in the window – courtesy of a student who had seen his English teacher in the office, and hurled a rock in his direction.

On the lone computer terminal, I started surfing the internet. Like any other tennis enthusiast around the world (bored at work), I checked the ATP world rankings, seeing who was trailing Roger Federer in the order of merit. After scrolling through the top ten, and then the top 100 players in the world, I did something that separated me from other tennis enthusiasts.

I kept on going: past the journeymen, past good players who had fallen on hard times, and well past the unknowns struggling in the minor leagues. I went all the way to the end, to the players with a lone ATP point who were hanging on to the coat-tails of the pro circuit with everything they had, living the dream – once upon a time, *my* dream.

The crack in the window seemed to be mocking me. Everything else in the office was brand new, but the crack ruined everything. Unable to be fixed or replaced, they said. It would have been better to just kick the whole thing in.

I looked back at the ranking list on the computer screen. I pictured my name on the end of the rankings. I would take any ranking, no matter how low. I pictured being 16 years old again, transfixed by the list of names taped to a brick wall.

There and then I made my decision.

'You're making a big mistake,' the principal of the school told me a few days later. 'Your career in management will be over.'

I was 34 years of age; for my tennis dreams, it was now or *never*. I had unfinished business. He could take his job in management…and shove it.

I was heading for the men's professional tennis tour.

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The Futures Tour

Bangkok

SIX MONTHS later…

August 2006

My tour had begun. It didn't matter that I was only in the immigration queue at Bangkok International Airport. What had been an abstract idea was suddenly real, very real.

Now, I know what you're thinking. This guy quits his job on the premise of 'playing tennis' and heads on a year-long journey around the world, starting in the hedonistic capital of the world: parties, sex and *The Hangover Part 2*. However, Bangkok is precisely the kind of place that the third-tier Futures tour is found – places that people assume have no connection to tennis.

As for the typical Futures player, they're the kind of person who'll fly halfway around the world to a third-world party place to hit a fuzzy, yellow ball. Like myself, I bet there'd be nothing else in life they'd rather be doing.

Starting this tour was a special moment; its significance was not lost on me. Sure, I had just quit my job, landed in the Far East, and held a round-the-world ticket in my hand. That's got to make anyone feel like an adventurer on some kind of spiritual journey. But I'm sure the backpackers ahead of me in the queue, their hair in braids and colourful bracelets on their wrists, were feeling just the same.

It was much more than that.

For the first time in as long as I could remember, I looked out into the future and saw no horizon. There was no job waiting – no place I had to be anytime soon. I had given myself a year to play on the pro circuit, but if things went well, really well, then there was nothing forcing me to stop.

Before, I had always played in my holidays. I'd felt like a bit of a tennis tourist, just seeing the world, playing for fun before I had to return to the day job. This time was different. Now, for the first time, I felt like I was on the pro tour, about to join the thousands of other hopefuls with only one thing in mind – to make it to the ATP tour.

In tennis speak: I was *seriously* pumped.

Returning to reality, my first job was to get out of the airport (not always the easiest task in some countries). After handing over a small fortune in Thai baht for a limousine airport transfer, I was led to a battered white station wagon around the back of the terminal. My driver gave me a cigarette-stained smile. I sat in the back.

It was late evening by the time we left the airport. There was coolness in the air, the kind that follows a torrential downpour of rain. The smell of a nearby swamp mixed with exhaust fumes. A motorcycle raced by – a girl perched elegantly behind her male driver, both legs balancing over one side as she sat sideways. Bicycles fought with motorcycles and cars. They weaved around each other, their lights illuminating the pitch-black road. If I hadn't known it beforehand, then the chaos of the traffic alone would have told me I was in a third-world country.

Gradually the traffic disappeared into silent back roads. The yellow street lamps gave everything a soft, somewhat eerie glow. Stray dogs sleeping beside the road casually eyed the car as it passed by.

The taxi driver turned around flashing his trademark smile. He passed me a worn pamphlet (that I tried not to touch). 'Good girls, only good girls,' he said while smiling again. He opened the pamphlet to reveal rows of girls holding up numbers and a

girl in a bikini about to step into a Jacuzzi. 'You want massage? I use all time,' the driver said proudly.

Strangely, when I dreamt about being on tour, I hadn't pictured dealing with these kinds of people. Maybe *The Hangover Part 2* was more realistic than I had first realised.

After politely declining the taxi driver's offer, we arrived a few minutes later in the car park of the Eastern Lakes hotel: a blandly modern four-storey hotel with palm trees out front. It backed on to a man-made lake that looked a perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes. The Eastern Lakes was the closest hotel to the tennis courts, so it was this bit of luxury or the tennis academy's dorm rooms. At 34 years of age, I was done with dorm rooms.

In the hotel reception, a heavily made-up Thai girl in her early 20s sat chatting to the male receptionist. Behind them, taped on the lift doors, a notice read, 'Don't bring mosquitoes in on your back'. Perhaps the world's biggest gecko hung from the ceiling, its bulging eyes staring at me intently.

The moment I reached my room, I put on my trainers, picked up my skipping rope and headed outside. The giant gecko had disappeared. The girl and the receptionist both looked bewildered as I jogged past them into the hotel parking lot and slowly began jumping rope. Another stray dog popped its head out of a bush to see what was going on.

The clock hit midnight: I didn't care. I remembered once reading an article about the legendary Jimmy Connors, how he would religiously exercise upon landing in a city. It didn't matter if it was two in the morning – they would open the tennis courts if necessary so he could train, preparing his mind for the battles ahead. If Connors – the game's ultimate warrior – was in my shoes, I bet you he would be jumping rope in Bangkok, after midnight, surrounded by stray dogs.

* * * * *

Tennis in Thailand was booming. They had two players in the world's top 100 – unprecedented for a nation where the sport was

traditionally a rich man's pastime. Their national hero, Paradorn Srichaphan, was so popular that his matches were televised live in Bangkok's nightclubs (I couldn't imagine walking into a London nightclub to find Andy Murray posturing on a big screen).

The Thai government wanted to capitalise on tennis's newfound popularity. They bought the rights for an ATP event and built a state-of-the-art national training centre. Their goal was simple: bring in elite coaches from around the world and turn Thailand into Asia's tennis powerhouse.

I had arrived in Bangkok a day early with the idea of training with the elite squad based at the centre. What better way to start my tour – get some advice from a world-class teaching pro and train with Asia's top juniors. You know what they say; if you want to be a pro, train like one.

At least the idea was good.

It was an underwhelming ten-minute walk from the hotel to this new beacon of success. The road was a crumbling bitumen strip. The ever-present pack of stray dogs eyed me sleepily from the dirt roadside. Only when I reached a huge iron gate and a security guard let me in, did I realise how serious the Thai government was. A flower-lined driveway led me to a three-storey glass clubhouse surrounded with manicured gardens, flowing streams and brand new hard courts further than my eye could see. It was hard to believe that just outside the tennis grounds, it had smelt like a swamp.

Juniors from all over Asia – Vietnam, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan – were beginning to assemble outside the stadium court. An Indian coach stood near a flip chart where the theme of the day was written, 'Hit with CONFIDENCE!' It was like Nick Bollettieri's Florida academy had been transplanted straight into south-east Asia.

One of the older players strode confidently across, flashing a smile, and offered his hand in greeting. 'My name's Kevin. Pleased to meet you,' he said with a slight American accent – adding that he was from Hong Kong.

Chatting to Kevin, it became abundantly clear how different his situation was to mine. Although only 17, he was already a fringe player in Hong Kong's Davis Cup team. Being a nation's brightest prospects brought benefits. Kevin had two personal coaches: a technical coach *and* a hitting coach. Hearing this made me realise the last time I'd had a tennis lesson was 16 years ago…a year after Kevin was born.

I became more astounded when Kevin then told me his hitting coach was the former Aussie pro, Andrew Ilie (who himself was five years younger than me). I told Kevin that Ilie had a reputation in Australia as a temperamental hothead – an image helped when, during one run at Roland-Garros, he would tear his shirt in half in a crazed frenzy after each win.

'Andrew Ilie is a very calm person – very together,' Kevin assured me. 'He was going to come across to these Futures and play doubles with me if the organisers promised a wildcard. They didn't, so he didn't come. I originally came with my dad, but he went back. Now my girlfriend is over here. She's not into sports, but writing and English – and probably shopping now.'

It appeared that Kevin wasn't a full-time member of the squad. The Hong Kong federation had paid for him to come across before the Futures event for two weeks specifically to train with the Swiss performance coach in the academy. I guess, like myself, he was just a drop-in touring pro (I'll admit, I liked the sound of that title).

'If you're from Hong Kong, then why do you have an American accent?' I asked him.

'I go to an American school in Hong Kong. I'm hoping to go well enough to get into a college in the States and combine tennis with study. Hong Kong schools are very good, but tough. Every time I come back from a tournament, they give me an exam immediately as punishment for having days off.'

I had always wondered how elite juniors, trying to combine training with school studies, managed to juggle both. It appeared that for Kevin, being intelligent was more of a hindrance to his tennis career than anything else. The tennis

world rarely considered anything outside of the tennis world, while schoolteachers and academics often saw tennis as simply a recreation to be enjoyed before afternoon tea. I wanted to give Kevin my thoughts on teachers, but quietness fell over the squad. Players turned towards an approaching figure.

Dominik Utzinger looked across the assembled players. He was the academy's top performance coach, brought across from Switzerland. At 6ft 4in tall, with small glasses and long, wavy hair held in place by a plastic hairband, Utzinger appeared a charismatic figure. He had the lean, wiry frame of an ex-professional, which he had been during the 1980s. He spent most of his time on tour as a journeyman, before finding some success as a doubles specialist towards the end of his career. However, it was his time as a coach for the Swiss Tennis Federation that established his aura. In Switzerland at the time was a 14-year-old junior called Roger Federer.

When Thailand created its new tennis academy for the future, it needed an expert to develop the best juniors and to teach the coaches. Dominik Utzinger was that man. His first task of the morning was to give Thailand's best 14-year-old junior a stern lecture.

'Why aren't you in qualies? It is a 32-qualifying draw and there were byes last week. I want you to come and talk to me about your tournaments.' His voice had a calm, almost soothing authority to it that forced everybody around to listen. For added effect, he leaned forward when he talked, although the junior was too busy staring at the ground to notice.

'Oh, I'm only 14,' Utzinger continued, mimicking the Thai boy's voice. 'You play one under-14 tournament a year – this is rubbish. This is not professional. You are now a tennis apprentice. If you think what I'm saying is rubbish, then you must say so.'

When the training session began, it was a brutal affair. It was continual drills of four balls where you were moved behind the baseline, before turning defence into attack and ending up at the net. If you missed a shot, you started again. If

you pushed the ball, you started again. I seemed to be starting again a lot.

Within minutes I was drenched in sweat. Neither Kevin nor the Thai junior appeared to be perspiring at all, yet as I sat down, a puddle of perspiration began to form under the chair. My light-blue grip had turned a dark colour and squeezing the handle of the racquet made streams of water splash on to the court.

'How old are you?' Kevin asked during an early break.

'In my 30s,' I replied. I had been *dreading* this question.

'So how old are you, exactly?' Kevin went on.

'Too old to say – but I'm younger than Andre Agassi!'

A couple of minutes later, I smacked an outright winner past Kevin, causing him to shout, 'Are you sure you're 30?'

Kevin, the Thai junior and myself took it in turns until the shopping trolley of balls were exhausted. As we collected the mountain of balls, Kevin mentioned his guitar playing. Utzinger told him something about Dire Straits' Mark Knopfler and then drifted off into anecdotes from the tour. Then the drills began again.

After 45 minutes my legs had turned to jelly. By the end of the hour, I felt like throwing up; I simply wasn't used to this kind of punishment. As the balls were collected, I lay on the ground and promptly told Roger Federer's ex-coach that I couldn't finish – a humiliating acknowledgement.

'When did you fly in?' asked Utzinger, looking down at me as I lay prostrate on the court.

'Last night.'

'It could be jet lag. What are you drinking?' Utzinger asked me.

'Water and Gatorade.'

'In Thailand, water and Gatorade is not enough. I know it's hot in Europe at the moment, but it is different here. You lose so much more water. You need to go to the pharmacy – there is stuff that is safe. I just can't remember the name.'

I replied that maybe I had been a little dehydrated – it was the only way to save face. I thought I was fit, but I couldn't even

finish the morning drill session in this humidity. I pathetically sat in the court-side chairs as Kevin and the Thai junior finished the session without me.

The morning session ended 30 minutes later. I was still glued to the chair listening to Utzinger telling stories from his training days with Federer. I asked him if, at 14 years old, Federer looked like he was going to be this good. He must have been asked the exact question countless times over the past decade, but he paused, and looked at the sky in thought, before returning his gaze towards me and speaking in a tone I can only describe as a kind of hushed urgency.

'I cannot tell you who will make it at that age. I can tell you who cannot make it, and who may make it, but I cannot tell you for certain that they will make it. There are so many factors to be considered. When Federer was 14, his father came to me and said Roger would like to make it as a professional. He was then small and skinny.'

He held up his little finger for emphasis. 'When he used to hit a high topspin backhand, it was like this.' Utzinger pretended to swing with an imaginary racquet that was so heavy that his wrist was limp. 'But he had this amazing timing – it was all timing.' At this point Utzinger paused and looked at me sternly. 'Back then, he was talented, but a lazy, little brat. I told his father he would have to work harder if he was going to make it. Then he came back every two years and the progress he made was amazing. By the time he was 17, he was a physical monster – just the same as he is today.'

With the story over, he turned to Kevin. 'When do you fly out? Before you go I want you to come and talk to me about your tournaments and what you're doing next year.' Kevin nodded. Then Dominik Utzinger wished us good luck before walking off to lunch.

I walked slowly back to my hotel, trying to make sense of what had just happened. Had I been a fool to think I could compete with talented full-time players half my age? Kevin didn't even have a professional ranking, yet he had outlasted

me and looked like he could have continued for hours. To rub salt in the wounds, Kevin and the rest of the squad still had the afternoon session to look forward to. There was no way I was attending that. What would be the point? I'd probably end up lying on the ground halfway through the session…again. This time the stray dogs didn't even bother to look at me; they just sauntered by.

Loser.

The qualifying rounds for the event began tomorrow. It was no time to feel sorry for myself. I was already committed.

* * * * *

Pro tennis is run by two organisations. My personal favourite is the ITF (International Tennis Federation). They are the last bastion of tradition, running the third-tier Futures circuit, the Grand Slams and the Davis Cup. I'm fascinated with the history of the game, and tennis's frontiers, so it's logical I relate to them. Their antithesis is the ATP (Association of Tennis Professionals) who control the ATP and Challenger tours. For them, everything is about *the product*. They care about the top stars…and not much else, and that's fair enough.

What's important is that, despite their hang-ups, they work together so that all professional tennis events give *only* ATP points, towards *only* one world ranking list. What this means is that the number one player on the ATP rankings list is the number one player in the world – without question. Failure to agree on this would have rendered tennis like boxing, which has God knows how many world champions.

Thailand, being a Futures event, was thus run by the ITF. It had a 64-man qualifying draw, so I would need three wins to progress to the main draw where the possibility of ATP points and prize money began.

My first match was against Nat Sornsamran, a local Thai player.

After spending months visualising hungry opponents across the net ready to destroy me, my opening match was…

slightly underwhelming. Actually, it was more than that – it was downright bizarre.

For a start, Nat Sornsamran kept addressing me as 'sir'. I've heard of respecting one's opponent but this level of humility was unnerving. Then, in the warm-up, as the morning wind picked up, the image of my opponent manically chasing an uprooted umbrella around the court became surreal.

The wind soon became a gale, making the opening games an erratic affair strewn with errors. However, it didn't take too long to realise Nat really didn't have a backhand; he swatted it rather than hit it. His game wasn't up to the Futures level and it slowly unravelled in the wind. Before the hour, the match was over 6-1, 6-2 with my opponent performing a traditional Thai bow before shaking hands.

This was tennis's meritocracy at work – *anybody* is allowed to enter the Futures qualifying and have a go at a professional career. In most cases, players have worked their way through the tennis system and know when they are ready. However, there are always a few outliers – players new to the game – who throw themselves in at the deep end, usually to drown.

After the match, a devastated Nat lay down in a corner of the complex with his racquet bag draped across his face. He stayed motionless for over an hour as players walked past him. No one bothered speaking to him, no one particularly cared how he felt. This is just the way it is in the tennis world; the quality of your game determines the level of respect you earn. At a professional level, Nat didn't earn much. I never saw him the rest of the week, and he never played a professional event again.

For lunch, I ate pad Thai in the modern glass clubhouse. From my seat, I could see the Argentinian number five seed in my section of the draw being clubbed off the court by a left-handed Australian with an aggressive game. It was a classic contrast of styles. The top-spinning Argentinian was pinned so deep he was nearly touching the fence, while the burly Australian charged the net at every opportunity. The South American smashed his racquet into the back fence and screamed

'fuck!' as he crashed out of the tournament. With the seeded player gone, my section of the draw had just opened up (at least this is what I tried to convince myself).

By late afternoon, the wind had gone. The day's oppressive humidity was now a balmy pleasantness for my second-round match against the Korean, Gook-Hee Lee. A whole squad of Koreans had descended upon Bangkok, ranging from their Davis Cup team to the nation's promising juniors – all playing identical games. It was as if a factory line had run off a batch of superbly fit, baseline grinders, all with perfect techniques and grim expressions.

When I walked on court, two Korean coaches had already taken their positions in the small, metallic stand. Caps and dark sunglasses masked their thoughts. They made endless notes on clipboards, using pens that hung from strings around their necks. Of course, I couldn't know it at the time, but I would see one of these coaches again a year later, when the pressure – and the stakes – would be much, much higher.

In the warm-up, the Korean didn't miss a ball with his smooth groundstrokes. He was young, fit and deeply tanned. My plan was simple: rush him, hit him off the court and break his rhythm – do anything but let him get into his drilling routine.

I served and volleyed four times. I held to love. I was going to do everything the Korean least expected, and it seemed to set the tone for the next hour where I could do no wrong. It turned into one of those days where the sport seems so easy.

By the second set, my opponent was on the ropes. I even rushed the net behind my returns, anything to keep him under pressure. I served aces – a rarity for me – and my volleys raced off the green hard court for crisp winners. Lee looked confused, while his coaches let their pens hang from their necks and shouted encouragement.

I didn't dare blink until the last point was over (I was scared to think about winning…and choke). When the chair umpire called the final score 6-0, 6-1, I turned to the stand and gave a

clenched fist to one of the academy coaches who had turned up to watch.

My Korean opponent silently shook my hand. Unlike the end of my match with Nat, this time there was no 'sir' and no traditional Thai bow. He slung his enormous Babolat racquet bag over his back and quietly left the court looking a beaten man. I assumed that Gook-Hee Lee would put this match behind him and find success in the future, but like Nat Sornsamran, he would never play another professional tennis match again.

This was a little hard to understand. Lee had all the strokes and had clearly been honing his game for years – so why throw the towel in so early? Maybe, in retrospect, some of the players weren't like me at all – weren't so enamoured with the idea of playing the circuit that they weren't in it for the long haul, no matter what.

I spoke to Andrew that evening, replaying the day's matches for him. 'The next one is the match that will show if you can get points. The others don't mean a thing!' he told me. I realised he was right. To fall in the last round of qualifying, even if I had won a couple of matches, would still mean *no* money and *no* opportunity to play for ATP points. Perhaps that is why they say to lose in the final round of Wimbledon qualifying is the most heartbreaking of all – instead of the fame and glory, you get…*nothing*.

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The next morning, I was scheduled to play Dayne Kelly of Australia in the first match of the day. When the officials' morning briefing overran I found myself sitting on the court with my opponent. Whether it was to calm nerves, or simply finding himself alone with a fellow Antipodean in the middle of south-east Asia, my opponent wanted to chat. I was focused – I didn't want to make small talk. But how do you ignore someone talking directly to you?

'I just lost in the final of the junior ITF event in Darwin,' Kelly told me.

He was wearing a sleeveless shirt, revealing muscular arms that looked like they had seen hours in a gym. 'You're a junior?' I asked, genuinely surprised.

'Yeh, I'm only 16. My father works in construction, so I help out when I can. Also, I want to play in Europe and it gives me some money.'

The umpire eventually sauntered on to the court wearing sports sunglasses, regulation beige trousers and a dark polo shirt. He paused, surveyed his domain, and then promptly demanded that the local workmen repair his wind-beaten umbrella. This meant another ten-minute delay.

Word in the locker room was that, while Kelly was a good player, he had a suspect temperament and he could anger quickly. Having heard this, I made my plan: play him from the baseline, pin him back with topspin, and wait for his groundstrokes to break down. Did I not realise in the pros you don't get things for free?

Perhaps.

I never got the chance to find out. The glaring sun baked the court and turned the balls into missiles. From the opening, he pounded huge, leftie topspin serves, while his groundstrokes created angles, kicking away at speed once they left the court. I changed racquets three times looking for a tightly strung one to control the ball.

The metallic stands were empty; there would be no academy coaches to look to for support today.

At 6-1, 3-1 down, I realised months of preparation were going down the drain. I knew my game had limitations, but I didn't envisage being blown off the court like this, especially by a guy less than half my age. I changed my plan, hoping that it wasn't too late to get back into the match. I attacked the net myself (finally) – anything to keep the burly Australian from getting there first, but to no avail. He was simply too good.

Yesterday's wins seemed far away. They might as well not have happened. All my optimism before the match had been destroyed within an hour. There would be no dream start to my

tour: no ATP points, and more tellingly, no illusion that it would be an easy ride up the rankings to the higher echelons of the game. I had to wonder if this was the realisation that made Nat Sornsamran and Gook-Hee Lee quit the game, there and then.

When we shook hands, I told Kelly, 'If you play like that in the main draw, you'll go well.'

My prediction was correct. Kelly earned his first ATP point and world ranking the next day when he beat my training partner, Kevin Kung, in the main draw. He had achieved a world ranking in only his third professional tournament, whereas I was still struggling after a lifetime of trying.

It was a sobering thought.

* * * * *

Later that evening killing time on the internet, I stumbled upon my name on a tennis forum. In some kind of underground tennis society, it seemed a group of tennis fanatics scoured the internet for results from professional tournaments, posting and discussing the performance of every British player on the circuit. They prided themselves in knowing obscure details and facts about the players – even giving some nicknames.

On their website, BritishTennis.activeboard.com, I read comments about my performance in Bangkok:

Johnnylad, '34-year-old Briton Gregory Howe (with no world ranking) attempted to qualify and won two rounds, but lost in round of 16. I wonder why he bothered?'

Drew, 'Probably on holiday and thought what the heck!!!'

There were no clues about their identities. I wondered what kind of person would devote their time to tracking down unknown players in remote corners of the world? I saw people hunched over laptops in darkened rooms in the dead of night, the sound of their keyboards the only noise. Reading other posts, it was clear they would often be at tournaments, providing live commentary to the rest of the society.

In a way, they reminded me of the bullfighting fans from Ernest Hemingway's first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*. These true

fans, *aficionados*, sat apart from the masses and their simple fascination with the killing of the bull. Hemingway's *aficionados* were instead found away from the crowds, debating the finer points of a matador's style and daring. If Hemingway's novel had been based in today's tennis world rather than 1920s bullfighting, without a doubt, his *aficionados* would be the kind of fans who followed obscure British players around the world, obsessing about their results on internet forums.

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A day later, Kevin Kung and I played in the first round of the doubles draw. Instead of playing with former top pro Andrew Ilie, Kevin had *me* as a doubles partner. We drew the number one players from the nearby Asian countries of Malaysia and Vietnam. Okay, not exactly tennis powerhouses, but the best player in any country was usually good. They would have years of Davis Cup experience to draw on and would benefit from a nation's funding and best coaches.

Our match was played in the stadium court. Rows of empty seats circled the playing arena – a grand total of six spectators sparsely spread out created an eerie silence. A couple of players sat in the stands, shirtless, working on their tans.

The dead atmosphere matched my energy. After training with the academy and playing three singles matches, I was exhausted and played a truly awful match. On one shot, I mis-hit and it went straight up into the air; there was laughter from the stands. Being mocked by one's peers wasn't a great feeling.

Afterwards, Kevin and I were left sitting on the centre court. The palm trees in the corner of the stadium swayed gently in the warm afternoon breeze. 'It's a shame Andrew Ilie couldn't have played with you,' I told Kevin.

Kevin smiled, 'Yeh – it would have been fun. Still, it's my first main-draw doubles match. I really enjoyed it. Don't worry, I'll see you in the locker room.' He picked up his black racquet bag and headed out of the stadium.

The kid had class.

* * * * *

In the handful of days I had been in Bangkok, I had seen the hotel, the tennis complex, the road and a lot of stray dogs. I didn't mind.

I craved to live the life of a touring pro – sightseeing wasn't on my to-do list. After my doubles loss, I had no more reason to be in south-east Asia. The tour was moving on – to another tournament, in another part of the world. I booked my flight for that evening.

As chance would have it, Kevin Kung wasn't hanging around Bangkok either. We shared one of the tennis academy's buses to the Bangkok International Airport, and loitered together in the airport waiting for our respective flights to be called. While sitting on the polished floor of gate 73 in the departure terminal, I asked Kevin how he found juggling school with his budding pro tennis career.

'I missed the first day of school yesterday,' Kevin explained. 'It was important. You find out what courses you're doing.'

Kevin explained how he took his studies seriously; he aimed to go to Columbia University in New York, one of the top-ten academic universities in the USA. 'I plan to combine my studies with tennis. I'm sure I'll get ATP points in the future.'

I told him he sounded like James Blake, who had studied at Harvard. 'But he only finished one year,' Kevin responded quickly. I wanted to point out Blake had completed two years of his degree, but with Kevin, it seemed a moot point. To not finish a university course was unthinkable. When I asked Kevin if he wanted to try to play on the tour, he replied, 'I'd rather go to university. I wouldn't like the continual struggle for money.'

I had to admire his maturity towards everything he did – when I was Kevin's age, the last thing on my mind was worrying about making money.

Kevin stood up, 'I've got to go.' He held out his hand and flashed his trademark smile. I watched him briskly walk away without turning back. It had been a real pleasure, and in some

ways, an inspiration. He played aggressively – *without* fear. He went for his shots, fully believing he would make them, both on and off the court.