

“Focus on the Pros”: Philip Faulkner

by Gwynn Thayer

Like several other RRC pros, Philip Faulkner was a junior tennis phenom who experienced a taste of the intense pressure and demands on those who are preparing for a life on the pro circuit.

Born in Brockville, Canada, Faulkner tried out various sports before settling on tennis. Not surprisingly, he played ice hockey, which helped to hone his athletic talents. Soccer and skateboarding were other sports that Faulkner enjoyed. But when he was nine, his family relocated to the United States. They initially moved to Florida, but eventually settled in North Carolina.

Philip was about eleven when he started to focus more seriously on tennis. Although he loved other sports, he recalls that “it got to the point where I had to make a decision as to what I was going to develop and have a lifelong future with, and it ended up being tennis. I really enjoyed tennis for the fact that it was all me, an individual sport. I liked that, I was in total control of myself and everything was reliant on me to win or lose.” He was coached by Pam Gillbert and Eric Saunders, and started playing tournaments at Wakefield under their tutelage.

After some successes in junior tournaments, Philip saw his progress accelerate to the point where he was top ranked in the state, and then in the South. He was invited to try out Nick Bollettieri’s famous tennis academy in Bradenton, Florida. Initially, he enrolled in a two-week summer trial. He was 15.

Bollettieri is a legend in the tennis world. He created the academy model where promising young players leave the security of their homes and live full time at the facility where they both train and take classes nearby (many of his students were bussed to a nearby school). His most famous successes were Andre Agassi, Jim Courier, Monica Seles, Anna Kournikova, and, to some extent, the Williams sisters.

The Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy opened in 1978 and continued operations under this name until 1987, when it was bought out by IGM, which continues to manage the Academy (not only tennis, but other sports as well). The emphasis on early youth specialization in a highly competitive training environment is now widespread in youth sports, but at the time, it was a new concept. Even though there are clear successes, the reality is that 1% or less of Bollettieri’s athletes became successful professionals,

although many enjoyed successful college careers. (Data cited from a 2012 thesis from Iowa State University graduate student Mark Barlett).

Andre Agassi writes about his experiences at the Academy, and likened it to a prison camp. In his memoir *Open*, Agassi is direct about the misery of his early years at Bollettieri's:

"People like to call the Bollettieri Academy a boot camp, but it's really a glorified prison camp. And not all that glorified. We eat gruel -- beige meats and gelatinous stews and grey slop poured over rice -- and sleep in rickety bunks that line the plywood walls of our military-style barracks. We rise at dawn and go to bed soon after dinner. We rarely leave, and we have scant contact with the outside world. Like most prisoners we do nothing but sleep and work, and our main rock pile is drills."

Fortunately, Faulkner had a significantly better (and more modern) experience and he has no regrets for choosing to train at Bollettieri's. After his two-week session in the summer, he returned home and had a heart-to-heart with his family and his coaches, Butch Young and Eric Saunders. Not long thereafter, he found himself on a plane along with his parents, headed for Florida, and ready to enroll at Bollettieri's full-time for the fall. He was 15.

The Faulkner family located a school nearby where Philip could study -- St. Stephen's Episcopal School -- but the grind of his training at Bollettieri's still managed to dominate his day-to-day life in Bradenton.

Bollettieri's style was factory-driven: you "do what he says, no questions asked," Faulkner recalls. Bollettieri put his students in lines, and trained them to hit in one particular way. He would identify certain unique qualities in a player -- someone could be labelled a pusher, or a grinder, for instance -- but the training method was not customized to the individual. Phillip likens it to making Model Ts, or license plates, in an assembly-line format, rather than forming tennis players with unique playing styles.

Bollettieri was extremely energetic and passionate about what he did -- almost maniacally so, as can be seen in a recent documentary *Love Means Zero* -- so nobody could accuse him of not working as hard as he expected his students to work -- but he imposed his will and regimented training style onto his clients. Faulkner explained that at Bollettieri's academy, "You are hitting balls until you can't think straight. That is what Agassi means by prison work. You aren't (enjoying) free time, you are working and honing your craft."

Faulkner recalls that as a child, he was “obsequious” and did not really reflect upon what Bollettieri was telling him; rather, he simply followed Bollettieri’s way unquestioningly. But now, as an adult coach of juniors, he likes it when junior players express their own thoughts and question him on what he is asking of them. In retrospect, he sees this as a weakness in the way he was trained.

Likewise, he feels that Bollettieri also falls short when it comes to supporting families. He explains, “Where Bollettieri falls short in the Academy is when kids are away from their families, when (kids) disconnect with their family and siblings. One of the biggest things I have learned as a coach from my playing days is that it’s good to have your family around, and close by, so I felt like I was jealous of the kids who had family nearby.”

As Philip’s game developed, he began to see more broadly the extraordinary level of talent around him. Like RRC pro Max Desmars, who trained in France on the junior circuit, Philip, too, began to see the depth of the international talent and adjust his goals accordingly. He reflects, “When I was at Bollettieri’s, I wanted to go pro. There was that dream, and even when I came back (to North Carolina) after Bollettieri’s, there was still that dream. When you get older and see the world and the talent that is out there....reality sets in. After that, it dawned on me that college tennis was more my reality.”

Phillips believes that only as an adult can a tennis player really comprehend what it actually takes to go professional. This knowledge helps Faulkner be a more effective junior coach, and it helps him interpret his past experiences on the court, but for young talent, there is rarely a sense of perspective in terms of what is required to make it in the pro circuit. This can actually work in a young player’s favor.

To that end, Faulkner describes tennis as “one of the most delusional sports,” namely in that the level of belief in oneself and one’s game might even have to surpass reality. A young person can’t understand the developmental process required to get to the professional level, but an unwavering belief in one’s own talent -- whether or not he or she actually has it -- is required to be a champion. For the best players, Faulkner explains, “They are their number one fan.” He elaborates, “You aren’t old enough to have the perception to what it takes. That delusion is a thing, it keeps you believing, and never giving up.” These experiences have helped Philip learn how to communicate more effectively with juniors, manage expectations, and also convey the level of commitment that success actually takes.

After playing successful high school tennis at Wakefield High School (as the number one singles and doubles player, 2005-2009) Philip earned a degree in economics at NC State, all the while playing club tennis.

To this day, Faulkner feels fortunate to even be on the court and enjoy the game of tennis. He describes the process of playing: "It almost always starts with: I step on court, I'm humble, and to that degree, I'm happy that I'm healthy. I am thankful to play the game." He notes that it's important to always respect one's opponent, to stay positive, and be humble on the court.

That being said, he acknowledges that emotions can easily overtake a player during a tight match. "I tell the kids and the adults, we are not robots. We are human. It's bad to think we won't have a negative emotion, but don't let it take over, that is where it really affects players and they make bad decisions and say things they don't mean."

Philip started working at RRC in 2014, but when he became the director of the "green dot" program two years ago, his goal was to develop the program as big as it could get, and to develop at least half of the kids to high level junior players. He continues to aim towards being a better coach, and "to hopefully stay with a kid long enough to see them go on to high level college or professional tennis."

What is the biggest challenge, in a nutshell? Patience: it is the key to moving forward in tennis, but "it's a marathon. We are looking for long term development."

--Gwynn Thayer

(see below for 6 images)



Philip Faulkner with RRC juniors



Philip Faulkner with RRC kids



Philip Faulkner with USTA Junior Team Tennis players



Philip Faulkner on clay



Philip Faulkner with USTA Junior Team Tennis kids



Philip Faulkner at RRC wiith young player