

Frances Tiafoe: aiming beyond the lines

How humble beginnings in College Park shaped tennis' next big star

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Frances Tiafoe loved tennis even before he was old enough to play on the main courts. At just 6 years old, he seized every opportunity to hit balls against the wall and watch older players train.

"I always remember Frances, so small that his feet were hanging off the benches, watching tennis all the time," senior director of tennis at the College Park Tennis Club Vesa Ponkka says. "When the coach was done with training, [Tiafoe] would jump [off the bench] and talk to the coach: 'How about this, how about that, can I do this and that?'"

His devotion to the game endures. Today, at 21, Tiafoe sits on the same benches where he first soaked in the sport. His game stacks up with the best in the world and his feet reach the ground with ease. As of publication, Tiafoe ranks fifty-first worldwide in men's tennis, having reached a career-high of twenty-ninth in February.

But his rise to stardom has not been easy. The path was riddled with struggles.

Playing with holes in his shoes

As kids, Tiafoe and his twin brother Franklin spent a lot of time at the College Park club. "They lived here twenty-four-seventeen, basically," Ponkka says. That was a result of his dad's employment there.

Tiafoe's parents immigrated from Sierra Leone in the 1990s to escape civil war. In America, his dad, Constant Tiafoe, found a job on the construction crew building the club. "He was one of the guys that built the place night after night," Tiafoe says. After that, his dad was hired as the custodian.

But as Tiafoe spent more time at the club, it became easier for him to see that he was falling

his game. "Pops always told me to just keep your head up, try to beat those cats that are laughing, and at the end of the day you'll be laughing if you do things right," Tiafoe says.

Tennis was a way out. "Just knowing from where I began and understanding where I can go with just hitting a tennis ball, that was very motivating," he says.

His admiration for the game itself pushed him, too. "He was in total love with the game," Ponkka says. "Tennis was his best friend, and he took care of his best friend."

In 2008, his play started to attract eyes—one pair in particular. Misha Kuznetsov, a new coach at the club, noticed Tiafoe practicing one day. "I saw potential and I decided to go to work," he says. They began training in the clinic together after school.

As they practiced, Kuznetsov sensed a strong competitor in the making. "He was definitely hungrier than the other kids," Kuznetsov says. "He wanted it badly."

Eventually, Kuznetsov started taking Tiafoe to tournaments. The first tournament Tiafoe played was at the College Park club. He won. "I remember falling to the ground," Tiafoe says. "I was like eight or nine years old—that meant everything to me."

That was the first step in his career, which then grew by leaps and bounds. Tiafoe won various events at the junior level and climbed to second place in the International Tennis Federation junior rankings. He appeared in his first Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) tournament at 16 in the 2014 Citi Open in Washington, D.C. The following year, Tiafoe went fully pro.

Tiafoe won his first ATP title in 2018 in Delray Beach, Florida.

BELOW Tiafoe still trains on the same courts he grew up playing on at the College Park Tennis Club.

Addressing racial inequality

Today, not so long since the days when he relied on the club for support, Tiafoe has accumulated almost three million dollars in winnings alone, plus various endorsement deals. However, for Tiafoe, success is about more than just the money.

"The money's cool, the fame's cool, but at the end of the day, it's what you're doing to change somebody else's life," he says. One way he looks to do that is by helping diversify the sport: "I want more black people playing tennis when [it's] all said and done."

Their effect on tennis is evident today, with young women of

"I want more black people playing tennis when [it's] all said and done."

-Frances Tiafoe

color like rising star Coco Gauff and two-time Grand Slam win-



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in love with a rich man's sport. He needed help covering racket and equipment costs, along with entry fees for tournaments when he started to compete. That was where the club stepped in.

The College Park Tennis Club is home to the Junior Tennis Champions Center, an initiative which, according to their website, offers "opportunities for junior players from all backgrounds to reach their full potential on the court and in the classroom." Under this program, the club covered costs that Tiafoe and his family could not.

However, the club's generosity did not resolve all of the issues that Tiafoe faced. "I was getting made fun of for the things I was wearing, wearing cargo shorts and Pokémon shirts, and cats obviously be clowning you," he says.

Despite these distractions, he found the motivation to focus on

da. This past August, he lost in a competitive five-set match at the U.S. Open against the world's sixth best player, Alexander

"Tennis was his best friend, and he took care of his best friend."

-Vesa Ponkka

Zverev. Despite his first-round exit, Tiafoe feels confident moving forward. "I'm actually playing great tennis," he says. "I've beaten so many top guys, it's just a matter of doing it each and every week."

Men's tennis has historically been dominated by whites. Arthur Ashe is the only black man to ever win a men's single's title at Wimbledon, the U.S. Open, or the Australian Open.

Non-American black players like Jo-Wilfried Tsonga and Gael Monfils have enjoyed successful careers, respectively reaching fifth and sixth worldwide. However, few American black men's players have been relevant since Ashe's retirement in 1980, almost 40 years ago. Tiafoe aims to change that.

Across the aisle in the women's game, prominent players of color are plentiful. African-American sisters Venus and Serena Williams have propelled the sport in the past two decades and counting. They have won 30 Grand Slam titles between the two of them—seven for Venus and 23 for Serena.

ner Naomi Osaka at the forefront of the sport. 23-year-old Taylor Townsend plays on the Women's Tennis Association Tour with the Williams sisters and agrees that the sisters are helping pave the way for more players of color, including women like herself. "When you see people that look like you in a sport and you have representation, it gives you hope that it can be you," she said in an interview with Newsday.

Tiafoe marvels at how far the sport has come. "Serena and Venus did an unbelievable job, Arthur Ashe did an unbelievable job, because [they're] bigger than tennis," he says. But he considers the work incomplete.

He wants to make a difference in the men's game, and if there is anyone that believes in Tiafoe's ability to be the change, it is himself.

He recalls a moment in his junior career when his parents said that he should use tennis as a path towards a college scholarship. Tiafoe wanted to go pro.

"They said, 'You're too young, you're talking, whatever,' and I was like, 'No, I'm serious,'" he says. Tiafoe has always been fueled by his humble beginnings and a desire to change his circumstances. Now, he wants to promote tennis as a way for kids from similar backgrounds to elevate themselves as well.

Building a platform

Tiafoe lives in Washington, D.C. now, but he still trains in College Park at the club he grew up playing at. He is happy to be in the area. "Every training place in the world would love to have

LEFT Tiafoe talks about his vision for the future from the same benches where he first soaked in tennis.

limit," he says. But beyond the glory of hoisting a trophy into the air, he understands that winning a Slam could afford him an even greater platform to make a difference.

"I want to start a foundation," he says. "I already do tennis stuff with the inner-city kids. Talking to my friends, foundations that they have, and [the Washington Tennis Education Foundation]. I'm going to try to do stuff with them. I just want to be able to give back."

One way he looks to make that impact is by improving accessibility to tennis. Rackets, strings, and tape are not cheap, while equipment for other sports is more readily available. "In basketball, every cornerway has a hoop, you can hoop. Football, you need a football and you can play," Tiafoe says.

Also essential to changing the framework of the men's game is popularizing tennis with young kids. Ponkka thinks Tiafoe will do just that. "We are hoping that



COURTESY OF COLLEGE PARK TENNIS CLUB

ABOVE Even at age six, Tiafoe was a hungry and fierce competitor.

him, [but he chose] to move back from [Florida] to here because he wants to be close [to the place where] he grew up," Ponkka says.

At the club, says Ponkka, Tiafoe inspires the young kids who are playing in his old shoes. "It's not only coaches telling, 'Hey, you, work harder and you can do this and that,'" he says. "They now know that, 'Hey, if I work hard, I can be just like that.'"

Despite his success, Tiafoe has not lost sight of the racial barriers he faced throughout his career. "I always feel like you always [have to] do double the load because of being colored," he says. "You have to work just as hard, on and off [the] court, you just [have to] be that much better because you're of color. They're waiting for us to mess up; that's just a fact."

And yet, Tiafoe has shown that these barriers can be broken. He has not won a Grand Slam, but Ponkka thinks he will. "There's no question about it," he says. "He will be top 10, and when you are top 10, you compete for a Grand Slam."

Tiafoe is confident in his potential. "I think the sky's the

club will] get great 6-year-old athletes and their parents [to say], 'We want to go into tennis instead of football,'" he says.

At the same time, children need more than just a role model. "[We have to] come together and really try to make things happen," Tiafoe says. "Let's create things and structure for these kids."

He hopes those structures will be geared towards diversifying the game. He has noticed more kids of color playing tennis, but he is not satisfied.

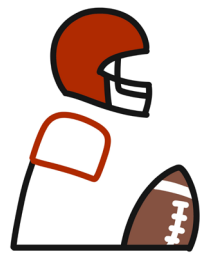
Tiafoe wants to spark change like that of the Williams sisters. Rewriting the racial dynamic in the men's game on a similar scale is a tall order, but the opportunity for him to lead the charge is here.

Whether Tiafoe will win a Grand Slam and emerge as a superstar remains to be seen. For now, at least one thing is clear: The kid who used to play with holes in his shoes is ready to leave his mark on the game.

"If I can be anywhere on that level and be able to be in a position to make a difference, I will," he says.

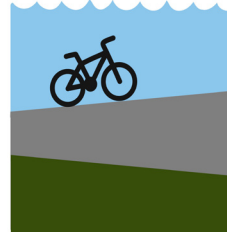
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