

An Unforgettable Tennis Journey

Seven years ago I discovered the amazing world of Wheelchair tennis. The first time watching real Professionals battle on the tennis court with their wheelchairs, I was hooked and simply amazed with their tennis skills within the first five minutes and more so with their wheelchair skills

(I also noticed how sore the muscles on my face were due to my "jaw-dropping expressions".

They hit a tennis ball like a real professional player- strokes are technically perfect, the speed, spin, placement and control is just incredible. And to watch them maneuver their wheelchair with such precision; chasing balls that seemed impossible to reach, changing directions on a dime and judging the bounce of the ball to perfection. It's just unreal. How can they make a sport that is very difficult to master, in addition to their "handicap", look like it's a fairly easy task for them. It's truly unbelievable!

This year the PTR Wheelchair Tournament celebrated their 25th year playing in Hilton Head Island and once again the level of players was exceptional. In the men's singles final Takuya "Taku" Miki from Japan (ranked 10th in the world) won over Daniel Rodriguez from Brazil (ranked 16th in the world) 6-3,6-4. WOW, what a match. There were so many points that were just incredible!

I really wanted many folks to know about this tournament, so I emailed about 250 local tennis fans to please come out Sunday and watch the finals.

Many tennis friends came out to watch these talented players and supported them by simply being there. Having a nice fan base watching the finals was appreciated by both players as well as the tournament director Julie Jilly.

What an unforgettable treat it was to see this amazing level of tennis displayed by these two professional players.

This tournament represents the level of ATP 250 in the Pro Tour with a total prize money of \$20,000 with \$1400 to the Men's Open Singles winner and \$750 for the finalist.

Their next stop is Montreal, Canada.

Takuya Miki was ranked as high as #6 in the world 3 years ago. His ranking declined a little due to a shoulder injury but now he is on his way up again. He told me: "my goal is to get back to the top 8 in 2018 so I can qualify to play all of the Grand Slam events". Only the top 8 players get to play all 4 Grand Slam tournaments.

I really want to share with you "my story with Taku, behind the scenes". I want you to meet the real person behind the racquet, the beautiful man behind the professional player.....

On Friday evening Taku was practicing by himself, hitting serves and drop hitting groundstrokes. After watching him for a few minutes I approached him: "hi, I have taken pictures and videos of your serve. Would you like to see them and if you want me to feed you balls/work you out, I'm happy to do so". He smiled and asked me: "you play also?". I said: "yes, I'm a coach and I can play so if you want I can do whatever you want me to".

I did not have a racquet with me so I asked him if I could borrow one. He pulled out a Yonex racquet from his huge bag and asked me if I needed him to put on a new grip since all his racquets have worn out, dirty grips due to the way he has to handle his wheelchair. I said no thanks but how nice of him to offer this right away.

We had the most intense/fun practice for 45 minutes playing singles, hitting drills and playing points.

The most incredible/memorable point I've ever had in my tennis life goes like this.....

During one point, we were having a great baseline rally and in the middle of the point I hit a very deep, heavy topspin ball from my forehand side to his backhand. Taku got the shot as a very high backhand only a few feet from the corner fence. His wheelchair crashed into the fence as he managed to stay on balance, turn himself around and continued playing the point. As the point continued with a few more rallying shots, he changed the pace of the point and hit a super sharp angle drop shot to my forehand. By one of my hairs (for those of you that know me, I'm bald), I managed to run it down and get it, sending him a super sharp angle to his short forehand corner. Just when I thought I won the point, Taku wheeled himself at top speed and from the next court's doubles line (yes he is pulled that wide that he is on the next court), he hit this incredible forehand topspin winner where the ball traveled in between the 2 net posts. I just couldn't believe it! But then again, this is why this guy is ranked 10th in the world. What a point!!!

As I walked back towards my baseline, I looked at him and with my biggest smile ever I said: "nice point man". He replied: "and you too" and gave me a thumbs up. Instead of feeling defeated or even a little upset because I lost the point, I felt as if I was the luckiest tennis player on this planet. To play a point of this magnitude, a point that I have never experienced before in all my years of being on the tennis court. I'll never forget this one!

We had great chemistry and I told him I would watch him play his Doubles Finals on Saturday with his partner Ben from Australia (which they won in 2 sets). While we shared some personal quality time off the court on Saturday, we discussed a timeframe to get to the courts on Sunday and have a great practice session prior to his Singles Finals.

When I arrived to the courts on Sunday, Taku was already doing all of his body warm up stretching/exercises. It was a very interesting routine with lots of abdominal and upper body stretches. Then he got on his tennis wheelchair and began doing some sprints and quick turns. He was going at top speed around two courts three times non-stop. So prior to hitting the first warm up ball, he did about 30 minutes of very detailed exercises.

Our hour of practice was very intense and purposeful; just the same way you would expect from any professional player.

By the end of the hour, I was exhausted and I looked like I had jumped in a pool. I looked like I needed an "oxygen mask". Not kidding!

With our Friday and Sunday practices, "my tennis bucket list" just got smaller. What a lucky guy I am to be able to have this tennis moment. Wow!

Here's where my tennis story becomes much more than tennis. For me tennis is just the vehicle to many bigger and more important aspects of my life. Tennis is just Tennis. What you gain from tennis.....that's a much bigger picture: relationships, friendships, experiences, travels and most of all, "L.L.L." (Life Learning Lessons).

As soon as Taku received his winner trophy, he said to me: Royce, let's take a picture with "OUR TROPHY". Yes, that is what he meant, "OUR".

What an incredible, humble champion! I just couldn't believe he said that but most of all, he truly meant it. He told me in the most sincere way why he felt it was "our trophy".

And to continue demonstrating how truly humble and appreciative he was for the time we shared together, he offered to pay me for my coaching/practicing with him. I told him it should be me paying him, but he insisted on paying me. I respectfully declined as I was choked up and ready to get a little emotional.

What an incredible L.L.L.!

Taku was so professional, funny, approachable, humble, respectful, appreciative, playful with my 2 boys, etc, etc. the entire weekend. He is such a beautiful person!!

We shook hands several times and gave each other a big hug. I told him that next year when he comes, I would like him to consider coming a week earlier to train with me and several other great local coaches. He was very touched by this offer and he told me if I come to Japan I can stay in his home in Tokyo. I said to him: "that would be so cool, but with my family and busy lifestyle I don't even go pass Beaufort 😊".

As I was leaving with my wife and two boys, Taku asked the Tournament Director if he was allowed to use court #2 to practice by himself before getting a ride back to the hotel. That just made me smile one more time; after a long day of tennis practice and a very tough finals match, Taku was not yet ready to rest his racquet. Just like a true top professional, he needed to get back on the court again and work on his skills. And instead of just going to the empty court assuming it's okay, he asked permission very respectfully. Even the King of the Court does not display an attitude of "entitlement" but instead he remained humble.

I guess we just never know when we are going to have the most UNEXPECTED BEAUTIFUL EXPERIENCE and share an unforgettable moment with another person that will make an impression in your life and teach you the most valuable principles in life.

Lucky and Blessed, I Am.

Royce Silvan,
Director of Tennis at Indigo Run and PTR Tester