

# **Going to College or Turning Pro?** **Making an Informed Decision!**

October 2010

An FAQ prepared by

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*“It’s all about your work ethic, talent, and  
the right timetable!”*

One of the most important, and often difficult, decisions that top ranked junior tennis players have to make (in consultation with their parents and coaches) is whether to go to college or whether to “turn pro.”

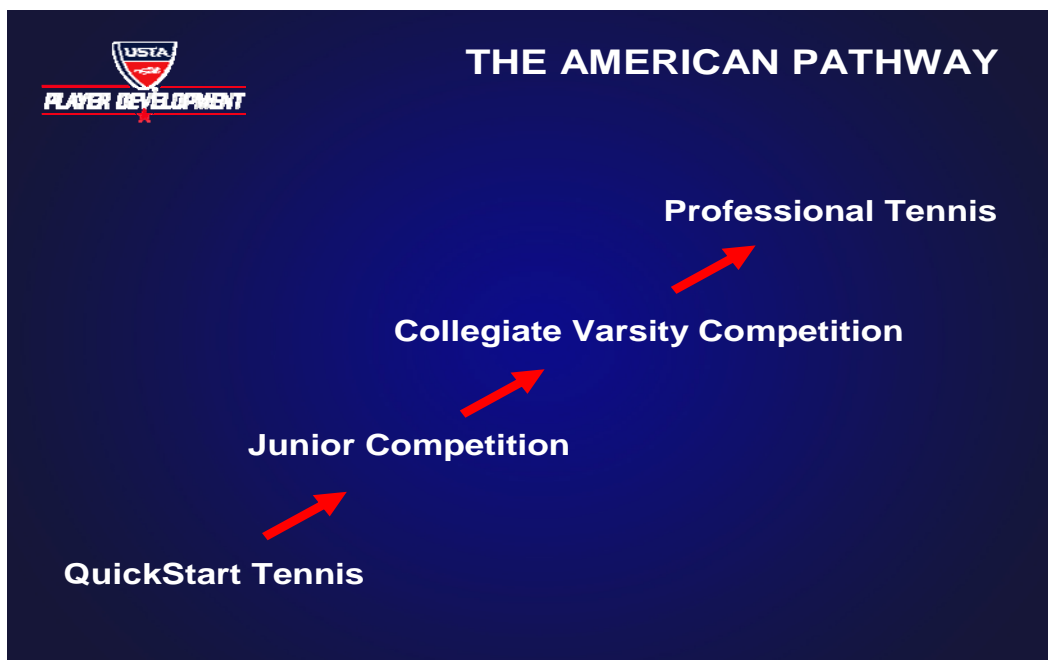
What follows is real data that will assist these players and their support teams while pondering the future and enable them together to make informed decisions . . . information addressing financial, personal, educational, and professional development perspectives that should be considered when making the very important decision as to whether the young athlete should choose to attend college or turn professional. The following questions are posed and answered:

- (1) What is the USTA player development pathway?
- (2) What is the monetary value of a college tennis scholarship?
- (3) What are the annual costs for playing the professional tour at a highly competitive level?
- (4) What ATP and WTA rankings (earnings) are needed to break even financially playing professional tennis?
- (5) What can you make as professional tennis player at the progressive levels of professional tennis?
- (6) Can you share any sample case studies of professional careers, including career earnings?
- (7) What are the average ages of tour professionals at various rankings?
- (8) What does a career progressions of playing records in the developmental pathway look like for a successful pro, including the average number of years it takes to become top 100 and the “life expectancy on the pro tour”?

## USTA Pathway

Patrick McEnroe, General Manager of USTA Player Development, has said that **“Ninety-nine percent of junior players should aspire to play collegiate varsity tennis. Only the truly exceptional should be planning to proceed directly from the ranks of junior tennis to the world of professional tennis.”**

The USTA’s player development pathway now proceeds from junior tennis, to collegiate tennis, and beyond.



The USTA is supporting college players who demonstrate the talent, desire, and work ethic to be successful pros – through a series of programs that include summer teams, pro tour transition camps, training at the Boca Raton, Carson, and New York facilities, sponsorship of the ITA National Indoor Championships at the Billie Jean King National Tennis Center, sport science/strength & conditioning resources, and much more!

## Financial Considerations

### **(1) The Monetary Value of a College Tennis Scholarship**

See [Appendix A](#) for specific breakdown and a detailed explanation.

- The average yearly total = approximately **\$90,000\***
- The four-year total = approximately **\$360,000\***

\*Notes: (a) These figures are the averages of the costs for Tuition/Fees/Room/Board/and Books plus the average estimate expenses for Coaching/Physical Training/Mental Training/Travel/Equipment using the following eleven highly competitive tennis schools as a representative sample - USC, Stanford, Duke, Baylor, Northwestern, UVA, Georgia, Tennessee, OSU, Texas, and Florida. The following conferences are represented: ACC, SEC, Big 12, Pac 10, and Big Ten.

(b) FYI, probably only 30 – 50 major universities in the country have large athletic budgets. In considering these numbers please know that “mid-major schools” have a much more restricted travel/equipment budget.

## **(2) Annual Costs for Playing the Professional Tour at a Highly Competitive Level**

See [Appendix B](#)

The average annual costs for playing the pro tennis tours = c. \$143,000

Note: No costs for equipment and clothes are included as most top players receive these from clothing and racquet manufacturers.

## **(3) What you can make as professional tennis player at the progressive tournament levels?**

There are apparently misconceptions as to how much money a young professional tennis player will make competing on the tour, especially pertaining to the early entry level professional events.

See [Appendix C](#) for a listing of the range of prize money and points to be earned within the progression of professional tennis tournaments.

## **(4) ATP and WTA Rankings needed to BREAK EVEN playing Professional Tennis from prize money alone**

In 2009, you would have to have been ranked 164 in the world on the ATP Tour (Nicholas Mahut, who made \$144,290) to simply break even from prize money alone playing men’s professional tennis at the highest, most competitive, level.

In 2009, the number 250<sup>th</sup> ranked player, Grega Zemlja, earned \$71,270 in total prize on the ATP Tour; the 500<sup>th</sup> ranked player, Walter Trusendi, earned \$16,197 in total prize money. These are the figures for what they *earned*, not accounting for what they *spent* in expenses while competing.

In 2009, you would have to have been ranked 119 in the world on the WTA Tour (Pauline Parmentier, who made \$142,034) to simply break even from prize money alone playing women’s professional tennis at the highest, most competitive, level.

In 2009, the number 250<sup>th</sup> ranked player was an amateur (so she had no prize money); No. 249 was Natalia Orlova, who earned \$16,202. The 500th ranked player was Sara Del Barrio Aragon, who earned \$9,333. These are the figures for what they *earned*, not accounting for what they *spent* in expenses while competing.

Note: It is important to recognize that other potential revenue sources do exist for these players (e.g., endorsements, sponsor appearances, exhibitions, money tournaments, club tennis matches, etc). In creating this document we recognize that many players do make a good percentage of their income from these types of events (not just professional prize money). We have no quantified objective data, however, to report in any systematic way in this regard.

#### **(5) Sample case studies of careers for both men and women tennis professionals**

See [Appendix D](#) for a listing of the following: player name; birth year; whether attended college (and, if so, where); how many years attended; if graduated; year turned pro; career high singles ranking; career high doubles ranking; career earnings

#### **(6) The average age of tour professionals**

There are apparently misconceptions as to how old the average professional tour tennis players actually are.

See [Appendix E](#) for both the ATP and WTA Tours, broken down thru the top 500

#### **The average ages are as follow**

##### **Men**

- Top 20 and Top 200 = c. 26 years old
- #'s 200 - 400 = 25 years old
- #'s 400-500 = 24 years old

##### **Women**

- Top 20 = 25 years old
- the rest of the Top 100 = 24 years old
- #'s 100-200 = c. 23 years old
- #'s 200-500 = 22 years old

**(7) Career Player Progressions - match records plus number of years it takes to become Top 100 + “life expectancy on the pro tour”**

See [Appendix F](#), which shows the match records of a variety of tennis professionals – including the ITF Junior Records, ITF Circuits Records, ATP/WTA Tour Records, as well as David Cup/Fed Cup history, annual total matches played, and end-of-year singles and doubles rankings.

Some Findings:

(a) Studies have shown that an average professional tennis lifespan is approximately seven (7) years regardless of the starting age; for example, while many young girls are interested in turning pro, they might wish to note the amazing success that Samantha Stosur is having at the age of 26 years old.

(b) A study by USTA Player Development Staff discovered that successful pros do not skip steps in the player development progression [“unless they are good enough” – i.e., meaning that they win tournaments quickly; a good example is John Isner who played one Futures event (won it) then played one Challenger (won it) and then made the final of the Washington, D.C. Legg-Mason ATP tour event.] In the words of Jay Berger (USTA Player Development Head of Men’s Tennis) . . . “You have to dominate at each level before you progress to the next level.”

(c) Studies have shown that it takes an average of three (3) to four (4) years to break in to the Top 100 once joining the professional tour for those players who do reach that level.

In playing college tennis you learn to win and increase your much needed highly competitive match count; the best college players are winning c. 30 college matches per year (losing only c. 10). Their winning percentages are usually greater than 70 percent. In fact, the very highest ranked collegiate players might only lose a handful of matches in a given season.

As will be addressed at the end of this document, please recognize that top collegiate players still play 5-8 Futures/Challengers/10 K’s, etc. during the Summer and Fall as well.

The two Campbell/ITA “College Players of the Year” recipients for 2010 definitely built up their confidence and match count throughout the college season; this performance level then carried directly into the professional arena the next summer. Their collegiate records were as follow: Robert Farah: 38-6; Irina Falconi: 40-3

Their 2010 summer records through the US Open were as follows:

Farah = 33-3

Falconi = 16-3

Both are now pros. At the time of this writing Farah's ATP ranking = 192; note: coming out of college Farah did not have an ATP ranking (and, yet he quickly won a \$100,000 Challenger event); and, Falconi's WTA ranking = 229.

Many peak performance experts have noted that if you are consistently getting "beat up" your confidence suffers; and, confidence is one of the greatest reasons for successful performance!

## **SUMMARY**

- (1) The average annual costs of attending college = c. \$42,000
- (2) The average annual total educational + tennis developmental value of accepting a college scholarship = c. \$90,000
- (3) The average total educational + tennis developmental value of accepting college scholarship for four years = c. \$360,000
- (4) The average annual costs for playing the pro tennis tours = c. \$143,000
- (5) To break even playing professional tennis you must be ranked c.119 on WTA Tour and c. 164 on ATP tour (based on 2009 end-of-year rankings)
- (6) The average age for a top male tour professional = 25-26 years old; the average age for a top female tour professional = c. 23-24
- (7) The average number of years it takes to enter the Top 100 = 3-4
- (8) The average life expectancy on tour = c. 7 years

## CONCLUSIONS

- Given that the average age of top tour professionals is 25-26 years old for men and 23-24 for women and that it takes three to four (3-4) years to break into the Top 100, from a developmental tennis perspective one conclusion may be that an optimum timeline calculus may be to go to college and then turn pro at age c. 21-22; if you are a top player, you can spend three to four (3-4) years cracking into the Top 100 after completing college and still have approximately an additional three to four (3-4) more years to perform at your highest levels as a touring professional (most capable of playing at the highest levels of a game that has become and is continuing to become much more physical, faster, and more powerful) and earning the most possible money while playing at your peak.
- For players like Irina Falconi, John Isner, and Robert Farah, NCAA collegiate competition effectively became their “Futures.”
- Accepting an NCAA or NAIA tennis scholarship can add four years, on average, to your tennis life; as the average age of top tour professionals is c. 24 -26 years of age some might argue that the potential for ultimate success at the highest levels of the professional game is between the ages of 22-29 instead of 18-25 (as others might believe).
- Your college experience gives you an opportunity to develop your game (with lots of top competition, paid coaching, strength training, nutritionists, mental training/peak performance trainers, travel, expenses, etc.) while developing physically, mentally, personally, emotionally, and educationally.
- You will be receiving an average value of approximate \$90,000 instead of spending c. \$140,000 – for a NET GAIN of c. \$230,000 per year (an approximate \$920,000 net benefit to you over four years – using the present values).
- You will be the recipient of a valuable college education (a degree that you can carry proudly with you the rest of your life). Education is among the highest values in American life; a wonderful type of personal socialization will take place in an “educational” environment, different from that which transpires in the “professional” world. Studies have shown that, on average, possessing a college degree versus a high school degree is valued at over one million dollars across the lifetime of a wage earner; and, this does not take into account those who continue their education and gain a graduate or additional professional degree.
- Those who have been successful in developing top professional careers have “followed the right steps,” (i.e., they have not “skipped steps” – e.g., accepting wild cards into top tier tours events when not even winning matches at entry level events, etc.)
- There is no substitute for winning and match count; college gives you a high confidence by winning lots of matches compared to losing a great deal in the Futures/10 K events.

## SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

- A truly elite junior tennis player should have a proven track record of success before even considering embarking on a professional career. Some good preliminary guidelines to consider are:

Boy's scenario – 18 years old; Top 10 ITF; Top 5 in United States; Top 500 ATP and has won at least one national US junior championship.

Girl's scenario – 17 years old; Top 10 ITF; Top 5 in United States; Top 300 WTA and has won at least one national US junior championship.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** Please know that there are tennis experts who have suggested that it would be a big mistake to turn pro, and not go to college, unless you are already capable of truly competing with the top 100 players in the world!

- From a financial perspective, unless you can get at least \$250,000 of “real money” (hard cash dollars) placed into an escrow account in your name (e.g., not promises, not simply clothes, etc.) you should go to college. . . . “Keep pursuing your dream of playing professional tennis, keep working hard, keep developing your game, keep winning lots of matches, continue to work with the USTA, but go to college.”
- **A TEMPLATE FOR DEVELOPMENT** - The USTA national Player Development staff is committed to working with the top college coaches to develop a template for how a college tennis player, one aspiring to be a top professional, will maintain a developmental pathway to the pros while playing college tennis. The goal is to put our top collegiate players in the best possible position after their college careers. It will address playing pro events during the fall season as well as during academic breaks; in addition it will provide advice as to formulating a plan / timeline for breaking into the Top 100 after you turn pro. Finally, USTAPD, teaming with the best college coaches in the nation, can and will assist you in formulating a plan for leveraging your pro tennis experience as your first 'real life' pursuit.

It would appear that in contemplating and planning a career as a professional tour tennis player that it is important to remember:

***“It’s all about your work ethic, talent, and the right timetable!”***