

A Dream Come True

By Matt Phillipps

Like many other collegiate tennis athletes, Florida men's tennis senior Trey Johnson remembers developing a love for the game at a very young age.

"When I was five years old, I would go to Westside Tennis Club here in Gainesville and hit balls against the wall at the racquetball court while I waited for my sister," Johnson recalls. "When I was about seven years old, my parents started getting me lessons, and from that point on, I stayed pretty focused on tennis."

As Johnson's enthusiasm for the sport grew, so did his drive to compete at a higher level. Around the age of ten, he began taking lessons at the Don Blair Racquet Club. He played mostly in small local tournaments at first, but by the time he turned 12, Johnson was competing in tournaments all over Florida.

Johnson didn't stop there, however, as he went on to compete in numerous national tournaments over the next several years. By 17, Johnson had competed in the national indoor, clay court, and hard court tournaments garnering a national ranking of 11th in the boys 16's doubles division.

Next up for Johnson was to succeed in athletics and academics at the high school level. As a member of an extremely competitive boy's tennis squad at Eastside High School in Gainesville, Johnson played at the top position in each of his four seasons with the team. His accomplishments included four team state championship appearances as well as an individual singles title, a doubles title, and a 3A team championship all in his senior year. On top of that, as a student in the International Program at Eastside, Johnson was still able to graduate with a high GPA despite the numerous hours of practice he would put in each week.

In the spring of 2000, it was time for Johnson to make one of the biggest decisions of his life. He could attend Cornell where he would probably be able to start on the tennis team immediately or he could stay in Gainesville and hopefully fulfill a lifelong



Trey Johnson

dream of playing tennis for the Gators. Ultimately, Johnson would take a chance with the Gators.

"I was very proud of Trey for having enough confidence and determination to do everything necessary in order to walk on to the team at Florida," said Trey's father, Dr. James Johnson. "He has truly impressed us over the years with his disciplined approach to every single goal that he sets out to accomplish."

Trey's hard work would pay off sooner than expected as he not only made the team in his freshman year, but he also played in a majority of the team's matches during the 2000-2001 season. Although Johnson's freshman campaign would feature a respectable doubles record of 9-7, the team as a whole did not fare quite as well posting an overall record of 9-17 on the year.

With Andy Jackson's arrival in Gainesville for the 2001-2002 season, the Gators had a new and experienced head coach who was ready to get the team back on the right track. After several months of seeing Johnson play, Coach Jackson remembers being optimistic about his ability to contribute

to the team's success against top-notch SEC opponents in the 2001-2002 season.

"Trey is extremely explosive on the court and is capable of playing very powerful tennis," Jackson said. "Not only that, but he is also an exemplary student and teammate who shows leadership on and off the court."

In his sophomore year, Johnson ended up doing much more than simply contributing. His stellar mark of 21-11 in singles matches was instrumental to the complete turn around that the men's tennis team experienced as they went 18-7 overall and 7-4 in SEC play. The season featured an upset of then sixth-ranked Ole Miss, a match that Johnson remembers very well.

"I had been playing at the No. 6 singles spot, but that day Coach Jackson had enough faith in my ability to give me a shot at the No. 5 spot," Johnson recalls. "I was matched up against Martin Selin who was No. 83 in singles at the time. I knew I had nothing to lose so I just walked out onto the court that day with the mindset that I would play the best tennis that I possibly could."

Johnson's performance on that afternoon in late January was nothing short of spectacular. He captured the victory over Selin in straight sets 6-1, 6-3 in a match, which barely lasted over an hour and proved to be decisive in the 26th-ranked Gators 4-3 victory over the Rebels.

Coming off a 25-5 overall record in the 2002-2003 season, Johnson realizes that expectations for the team in 2004 will be extremely high. He is also prepared to take a lot of responsibility on his shoulders as a senior leader on the team. If the past is any indicator of the way in which success seems to follow Johnson wherever he goes, then you can count on the men's tennis team to make a deep run in the NCAA Championships again.

"Trey is very positive and vocal in his support for the team and his fellow players," said Jackson. "Being from Gainesville, he is a true Gator in every sense of the word."