

Where did talent go? U.S. tennis' 'Lost Generation'

By Douglas Robson, Special for USA TODAY

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MELBOURNE, Australia – At eight years and counting, this American men's [Grand Slam](#) drought is the longest in history. The singles' dry spell dates to Andy Roddick's 2003 [U.S. Open](#) victory.



By Oli Scarff, Getty Images

Brendan Evans, at Wimbledon in 2010, was a hot U.S. prospect only a few years ago. "When I came up, everything was, 'Go pro! Go pro! Go pro!' " he says. Evans never made it on the circuit, retired and is now enrolled at the University of Virginia.

By Oli Scarff, Getty Images

Brendan Evans, at Wimbledon in 2010, was a hot U.S. prospect only a few years ago. "When I came up, everything was, 'Go pro! Go pro! Go pro!' " he says. Evans never made it on the circuit, retired and is now enrolled at the University of Virginia.

Three rounds into the [Australian Open](#), the wait was assured to continue. No American man reached the fourth round for the first time since 1973 — a year when none entered. Though a decade separates 29-year-old Roddick and the USA's brightest prospect, [Ryan Harrison](#), the spigot of talent in between didn't suddenly slow to a trickle.

But the players once pegged for success rarely can be found on the sport's biggest stages. Few of these players, all highly touted juniors between 24-26 years old, has ever cracked the top 100.

Swayed by easy money, pushy agents and the example set by previous generations, they chose the trial-by-fire rigors of the pro tour instead of the seasoning of college. The decision took a toll on young bodies and still-developing psyches.

Some, such as [Brendan Evans](#), [Scoville Jenkins](#) and Scott Oudsema, hung up their rackets and returned to school. Others, such as [Alex Kuznetsov](#), Phillip Simmonds and Nikita Kryonos, slog away on the outer reaches of the sport.

For top [U.S.](#) tennis officials, they represent a lost generation.

"I believe we lost a generation of players that turned pro too early and could never really get out of the Challenger-Futures realm," says [Patrick McEnroe](#), the former [Davis Cup](#) captain and general manager of USTA player development. "I don't want to name names," he adds, "but basically they all went out on the tour and got the crap beat out of them for 3-4 years and never progressed."

Bright prospects

Evans might be the poster child for this group.

With blond hair, good looks and bright prospects, agents and companies came knocking, dangling money and promises of stardom.

Lost Generation

Brendan Evans

Age: 25

Turned pro: 2001

Highest rank: 117 (Dec. 2009)

Current rank: retired (enrolled at [University of Virginia](#) 2011)

Best major showing: Second round, Wimbledon (2008)

Alex Kuznetsov

Age: 24

Turned pro: 2004

Highest rank: 158 (April 2007)

Current rank: 167

Best major showing: Second round, Australian Open (2007)

Scoville Jenkins

Age: 25

Turned pro: 2004

Highest rank: 187 (April 2009)

Current rank: Retired (enrolled at Kennesaw State University 2010, where he is also assistant men's tennis coach).

Best major showing: Second round, U.S. Open (2005)

Phillip Simmonds

Age: 25

Turned pro: 2004

Highest rank: 219 (October 2006)

Current rank: 496

Best major showing: First round, U.S. Open (2006)

Scott Oudsema

Age: 25

Turned pro: 2005

Highest rank: 255 (May 2007)

Current rank: retired (enrolled at [University of Michigan](#) 2010)

Best major showing: No main draw appearances

Nikita Kryonos

Age: 25

Turned pro: Unknown

Highest rank: 389 (Feb. 2007)

Current rank: 1,621

Best major showing: No main draw appearances

Tim Smyczek

Age: 24

Turned pro: 2006

Highest rank: 158 (Feb. 2011)

Current rank: 273

Best major showing: First round, U.S. Open/French Open (2010/11)

Evans had contemplated college — both his parents have master's degrees — but he found that dream at odds with his pro aspirations as his junior career took off. Plus, opting for higher education felt tantamount to giving up on a big-time sports career. Such was the mind-set at the time.

"When I came up, everything was, 'Go pro! Go pro! Go pro!' " says Evans, who by 15 was the top-ranked player in his age group.

Evans had signed with management company [IMG](#) and inked a six-figure deal with Nike before he turned 16.

Put on the fast track, Evans and players such as Jenkins — a hotshot talent who in 2004 became the first African-American to capture the prestigious Kalamazoo boys' 18s title in the tournament's 89-year history — faced instantaneous expectations.

Cut loose on the pro tour as undisciplined 17- and 18-year-olds, they bonded quickly. But on the court, it was cutthroat. Lacking discipline and maturity, their competitive world became a mild tennis version of *Lord of the Flies*.

"It immediately put a bull's-eye on me and a ton of pressure," Evans says. "We had to be really good, really fast. We got caught up in results instead of getting better. We were not mature enough to handle it."

Evans was hardly an isolated case.

Kuznetsov, a former [French Open](#) junior finalist who later broke his femur in a car accident, signed substantial contracts when he turned pro as a teenager, according to fellow players and other agents.

Oudsema, another top junior who went pro in 2005, dreamed of attending Stanford. He was torn, but figured that with agents promising wild cards into tournaments and endorsements that going pro "aligned to give me a better advantage than college."

"At the last second, I decided to turn pro," says Oudsema, who is now a junior at the University of Michigan. "I felt if I could make it I should do it now while I was a hot commodity, so to speak."

"You have people in your ear telling you how great you are when maybe you really aren't that great yet," says Kuznetsov, who qualified for his second career major last week at the Australian Open and lost to No. 2 [Rafael Nadal](#) in the first round.

Taking a toll

Over time, minds and bodies ground down.

Evans didn't make it out of lower-level Futures and Challenger events until he was 19 or 20. He found himself swallowing losses about half the time when he was used to winning 90% of his matches.

The other players weren't out of his league, but they were good — and hungry.

"You get stuck," he says. "Your confidence erodes."

Though he reached a high of No. 117 in December 2009, Evans struggled that season with herniated disks in his back. In early 2010, he shattered his ankle.

Hampered by injuries and watching his ranking dip, Evans says he lost his motivation and decided after his back flared up during the three-week [World Team Tennis](#) that he was done.

Evans, who last fall enrolled at the University of Virginia, has few regrets. But he thinks he and his cohorts would have benefited from some time in school.

"I think we all should have gone to school for a year or two," says Evans, who is pursuing an economics degree. "I think we got the wrong message. We were supposed to be the next great generation. That's a lot to put on the shoulders of 17-year-old kids, expecting them to be in the top 20 in a year or two. People propped us up to be better than we were. By 21, we were cast off."

"Everybody misguided us," he adds, "including ourselves."

The college option

Jumping to the pros wasn't always the only route to big-time success.

For the first two decades of the Open era, all the best U.S. players attended college, from [Jimmy Connors](#) and John McEnroe in the 1970s to Tim Mayotte and Todd Martin in the 1980s.

But the siren song of bigger prize money as the professional game expanded paved a swifter, more lucrative path.

None of the Golden Generation in the 1990s — Pete Sampras, [Andre Agassi](#), [Jim Courier](#) and [Michael Chang](#)— studied past high school.

Neither did many of the best players that followed — Roddick, [Mardy Fish](#), [Robby Ginepri](#) and [Taylor Dent](#), among them. ([James Blake](#) spent two years at Harvard and reached No. 4 in 2006, higher than any of this group except Roddick).

Their example influenced players that followed.

"Watching Roddick, Fish and Ginepri all emerging and doing great things on an international stage excited us and motivated us to 'bring up the rear' in a sense, and solidify American tennis," commented Simmonds, a journeyman pro ranked 496th who

has struggled with injuries but remains committed to a life on tour. Simmonds responded by email.

"We felt we had comparable drive and talent," Oudsema says. "Seeing those guys make the leap had some indirect appeal," he says.

Every generation is different. Injuries occur, priorities change, motivation plateaus. And the talent may not have been there in the first place.

Fish, the top-ranked American at No. 8, recalls that when he turned pro during his junior year of high school he was unprepared for day-in, day-out work ethic. "I didn't handle it as well at 21," says the 29-year-old Fish, who is playing his best tennis after a late-career rededication.

He wonders if the players right behind him fell into the same trap, and just never learned how to cope. And he is not alone in thinking that perhaps this group of players was never destined for greatness in the first place.

"You have to put in the time," he says. "You have to do the right things. Some of those guys did. Some of those guys didn't. You gotta work. You have to be talented. You have to make sacrifices. We had a few guys in that era that didn't."

A different game

The game changed, too.

The physical style of today has made it hard for young players to swiftly climb the ranks, much less make a big impact.

Whereas players such as [Boris Becker](#) and Sampras won Grand Slam titles before age 20 in the 1980s and 1990s — Rafael Nadal in 2005 was the last teenager to win a men's major title — just two teenagers rank in the top 100 at present (Harrison and Bernard Tomic of Australia).

While Evans and his peers struggled, a few others of similar age that chose to spend time in college have generally had more success, none more so than [John Isner](#).

The 26-year-old, who spent four years at the university of Georgia, reached the U.S. Open quarterfinals last year. He is at a career-high No. 17.

"I think they thought it was going to be easier than it was," says the nearly 6-10 Isner, who rode his serve into the top 100 within a few months of going pro in 2007. "For me, I went to college. I didn't put any pressure on myself. I had the experience of college tennis under my belt. I won a lot, whereas these guys early in their career didn't. When I left college I was ready to go."

[Ryan Sweeting](#), 24, is another. The Bahamas-born player ranked 68th spent a year at the [University of Florida](#) before turning pro in 2007, though he cautions that talents such as [Novak Djokovic](#) or Nadal would have wasted their time in college.

"I had a lot of maturing to do," says Sweeting, who nearly upset fifth-ranked [David Ferrer](#) in the second round here. "It was a good steppingstone."

What happened?

There are multiple explanations for the USA's lack of big-time success in recent years. The globalization of the sport, the rise of superstars such as Nadal and [Roger Federer](#), and a cyclical downturn have all played a role.

The experience of the Lost Generation has not gone unnoticed. Increasingly, top juniors are taking a second look at college. Higher education is gaining credence.

Many of the USA's best talents such as Evan King and Chase Buchanan have enrolled in college. More Americans coming out on tour, such as [NCAA](#) champion Steve Johnson of Southern California, are showing signs of promise. Buchanan was a 2009 U.S. Open junior finalist who won Kalamazoo that year. He is now a senior at Ohio State.

USTA officials have also been working to rebuild frayed bridges with collegiate institutions and change the mentality that college would retard progress for pro aspirations.

"We've gotten great support from colleges and coaches," McEnroe says. "We've brought in college coaches to some of our trainings and tried to reach out to them as much as we can. We feel there is a group in there that can become players."

Still, it's dangerous to generalize. The decision to go to college or turn pro is influenced by many factors from physical maturity to financial situation.

Some players are better off jumping to the pros and grinding it out while others are better served by spending time in the more structured environment of college.

"It's such an individual situation," U.S. Davis Cup captain Jim Courier says.

Courier is pleased the pendulum has begun to swing back from a time when college was an afterthought.

"College is a viable option, no doubt about it," says Courier, adding that some of the Lost Generation "should have gone to college" and "weren't ready to go" pro.

"They were probably lured with contracts out, took the bait and went out there," he says.

"When they came off the diving board and figured out how deep it was, (it was) pretty deep out there."

It remains to be seen how the latest batch of teenage pros — Harrison, Denis Kudla and Jack Sock, a 19-year-old from Nebraska who lost to Roddick in the second round of the U.S. Open — will fare without college experience.

It will be worth observing how they progress compared to peers who attended college such as Johnson, Michael Shabaz and Bradley Klahn.

For Evans and his group, there are tinges of regret but little remorse about the choices they made. In hindsight, they say college might have helped, but jumping to the pros was worth the risk.

"At the end of the day, I'm happy with my decision," Simmonds wrote. "All the winning, losing, struggles, challenges, and experiences that I've had has helped me become the person that I am today. I will continue to play and hopefully sooner rather than later be successful on a higher level."

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