



GREENSBORO'S JOHN ISNER

Poster child for 'Go to college and improve,' Isner stayed close to home

MOST YOUNG PLAYERS WANT to take the express train to stardom. Greensboro's John Isner was more than happy to take the local.

Instead of heading off to a tennis academy when he was a youngster, Isner chose to stay home and grow up like any other normal kid. He learned the game on the courts at Spencer Love Tennis Center, not Bollettieri's or Saddlebrook. He graduated from Page High School, not Boca Prep.

Instead of pursuing a professional career immediately after graduation, he headed off to the University of Georgia. And then he did something even more unconventional. He stayed all four years. It has been the route to personal growth and happiness, and the results speak for themselves.

Since turning pro in 2007, Isner has reached as high as No. 18 in the South African Airways ATP rankings, has won two ATP World Tour singles titles and three doubles crowns, and has been a member of the U.S. Davis Cup team.

Oh, and his name is forever etched into Wimbledon history.

"I think it just proves that a kid can live at home, play some high school tennis, go through the system – NC, Southern and USTA – and it can work, and then you can go on to college and continue to improve," said Kelly Gaines, the Greensboro-based executive director of NC Tennis. "I think the fact John stayed in Greensboro and was able to compete and work with local coaches and has been able to have the success he's had, that speaks highly of the choice he made."

"He is the poster child for 'Go to college and improve,'" said his first coach in Greensboro, Oscar Blacutt. "He is a role model to so many kids. You know, kids face difficult decisions. Should I go pro? Should I go to college? And he's a perfect example that you don't have to do some of the things that people say you have to do to get to the next level. He's been real good at showing you don't have to go with the mainstream, so to speak."

Isner doesn't mind one bit if young players are inspired to follow his lead. In fact, he hopes that's the case. "A lot of really good juniors, they're kind of brainwashed into thinking that if you go to college, you're not going to be successful," Isner said. "I think just the opposite of that. If I can open people's eyes to the fact that college is more the way to go, no matter how good you are coming out of high school, then that's huge."

Isner showed promise from an early age. His mother, Karen, recalls that when he was 7 years old, he won the first tournament he ever played in, a 10-under novice tournament in Mount Airy. "It was literally played on a court in someone's backyard," she said. "Seriously."

That whetted his appetite for more, and spawned a great relationship with Blacutt. That's when the countless hours practicing at Spencer Love started, and throughout his early years the successes mounted. But Isner had other interests as well, particu-



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So far in 2011, Isner won his third career doubles title with Sam Querrey at Rome in May, then won his second career singles title at Newport in July.



TOOK LOCAL ROUTE TO WIN

larly basketball. So there was never much thought given to sending him off to one of the Florida academies.

"John just never wanted to," Karen Isner said. "We looked into sending him down to the Van der Meers in Hilton Head once, found out what it was about and offered it to him as an option. The places in Florida were never an option. I had heard so many disastrous stories about what happens to kids when they go there and how totally unsupervised they are. But he didn't want to go anywhere. It was his choice, and he chose to stay home."

The four years at Georgia were when he developed his game to the point where eventually turning pro became an option. He added 40 pounds of muscle to his 6'9" frame over that span, and added more than 20 miles an hour to his serve, getting it into the 130s. His fastest serve since joining the ATP World Tour has been 144 mph.

He was a four-time All-American at Georgia, became the school's all-time victories leader in singles and doubles, and was a member of the Bulldogs' 2007 national championship team. He was also the NCAA individual runner-up in 2007, losing to Somdev Devvarman in the finals. Isner has joked that if he would have had another year of eligibility at Georgia, he would have stayed around a fifth year.

"Going to college was very important to me, and it also helped my tennis," Isner said. "I improved not only as a player but as a person, and I made lifelong friends. If I didn't go to college, I don't think I'd be the person and player I am today."

For sure, he was prepared when he did turn pro. He had a magical summer in 2007. Six weeks after turning professional, he reached the finals at Washington, and the way he did it was even more shocking. He beat Tim Henman, Benjamin Becker, Wayne Odesnik, Tommy Haas and Gael Monfils on consecutive days, all in third-set tie-breakers. He lost to Andy Roddick in the finals. Then he made it to the third round of the US Open before losing to Roger Federer.

There have been ups and downs in the time since. He slipped a bit in 2008 but came back to win the ATP World Tour's "Most Improved Player" award in 2009. The highlight came at the Open, where he beat Roddick and advanced to the fourth round. In 2010, he led the ATP World Tour in aces, got his victory by winning at Auckland, and continued to climb the rankings all the way to No. 18 that July.

And, of course, he made Wimbledon history with his 6-4, 3-6, 6-7, 7-6, 70-68 epic win against Nicolas Mahut over a three-day span. That set eight different Wimbledon records, including most aces in one match, 113.

Now, in 2011, he is on the climb again. He won his third career doubles title with Sam Querrey at Rome in May, then won his second career singles title at Newport in July. So he entered the Olympus US Open series and the hardcourt season on a roll. This week, he comes home again, where it all started, where he decided to take the local instead of the express train.

"You know, I think he's always had a very good insight into himself," his mother said. "Not every decision in his life has been exemplary, but in general he makes good decisions, so I'm proud of that. It shows really good judgment. Obviously I'm glad he didn't want to leave Greensboro. I'm glad he enjoyed being at home, and I think he realized what it meant to be grounded and well-rounded and a whole person. So it has all worked out well."



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Isner's formula for success was to live at home, play high school tennis, go through the USTA system, attend college for four years, then turn pro.