



Gabriel “Gabi” Trifu

When you first see Gabriel “Gabi” Trifu hit a tennis ball, there is a seamless fluidity and powerful smoothness that jumps off the racquet. It’s no wonder he was a pro for over ten years and is now the coach of the Romanian Davis Cup team. We recently sat down at the club he and his business partners own the “United Tennis Academy at El Conquistador” off Bayshore Gardens.

Fast Facts:

Born: Bucharest, Romania
Age: 39
Lives: Bradenton, FL
Occupation: Coach, Club Co-Owner

How did you first start playing tennis?

My father had a tennis court where his work was. I began playing at 9. I think within a year and a half I was #6 in Romania. When I was 17, I was the 18 & Under national champion. Then I went to Italy for training, and then I came to the United States to tournaments and also trained with Nick Bollettieri. (Trifu turned pro in 1994 when he was 19.)

What was your highest ranking?

120 in singles, but I got really injured (hips) and became a doubles specialist and was Top 100. I later broke cartilage in my elbow, and that was it for me. (He retired in 2005.)

Was there anything in hind-sight you would have done differently?

I wouldn’t change anything, I had a lot of good experiences and I enjoyed everything—but I wish I could have had a coach to point me in the direction. I was on my own and did whatever I wanted to do, and sometimes I didn’t make the best decisions and train the proper way. But I always knew I had talent and I’d do it (train harder) next year or next month, so that’s one thing I regret. I knew if I had had that (a coach) I’d be really really good.

Why aren’t there more American players at the top of the game?

The mentality and structure in the U.S. is wrong. There are too many coaches, techniques—even here in Bradenton there are like 20 academies. Some coaches are not very good, but they can fake the parents and make a living. I think too often parents go to the place where they hear what they want to hear instead of focusing on what is good for the kid. A lot of people (young players/parents) jump from place to place—whereas in Spain, Romania or Russia they pretty much stay with a coach through good and bad. Most players who succeeded stayed with the same coach since they were young.



Ray Collins and Gabi Trifu

What would you like to see changed in tennis?

More coaching during the matches, particularly with juniors. I can’t even tell them to drink more water during the match.

Who were your tennis idols growing up?

Obviously (fellow-Romanian) Ilie Nastase, Ivan Lendl—and later Boris Becker, who I had the pleasure to train with and play doubles with when I was 18, 19. Later on, Roger (Federer).

Have you gotten to know Roger?

Yes, we’re friends. If we see each other (at tournaments) we’ll have a little talk and a coffee. I think he has great character and he’s great for tennis—and is one of my favorites because of how he plays.

Are you also friends with Nastase now?

Oh yes, he’s really a character. Always cracking jokes left and right when we go out for dinner. I really hope to bring him here for an exhibition or event.

Let’s play word association. Andre Agassi?

I have tremendous respect for him. He was very gifted. I had the pleasure of training with him when I was at Bollettieri when I was a junior.

Jimmy Arias?

Great forehand. When we trained together I hit mostly to his backhand. (Laughs.)

Nick Bollettieri?

One of the guys who influenced tennis tremendously. He helped me a lot. He was a little bit like a father to me, so I have tremendous respect for him. I’m glad he’s in the Hall of Fame.

What do most amateurs do incorrectly?

How they hold the racquet. Too many ‘hand-shake’ grips that cause flat balls, and ‘frying pan’ grips on the serve.

You played Davis Cup for 10 years and now you’ve been the coach for five years. What’s that like?

I have a lot of fun. Some of the guys come here and train. I’m friends with them. I love it. It’s an honor for me.

Who do you think are the ‘next’ big players?

Kei Nishikori, Grigor Dimitrov, and Dominic Thiem.

What’s your family like?

My wife, Catrinel, and I met ten years ago in Romania through a mutual friend. We’ve been married eight years. We have two daughters (5, 1). But my wife is more well-known than I am back in Romania. She is in the television industry and was recently on our version of *Dancing with the Stars*.

Why do you like living in Bradenton?

I traveled a lot in my career, so I went to a lot of places, crazy places. I would never live in New York or a big city. To me it’s peaceful. I can be at the beach in two minutes. It’s perfect. So I would never change it.



The Trifu family

Ray Collins is a TV newscaster on ABC 7 and a media consultant. More details at www.RayCollinsMedia.com