



Ray Collins goes

ONE
on
ONE

with Radek Stepanek

Radek Stepanek

Radek Stepanek rose to #8 in the world, lives and trains in Bradenton and is quick to laugh. At 37 years old, he's one of the oldest players on the tour and had a short run in the Sarasota Open this year, losing in the first round to rising-American teenager Jared Donaldson of California. Radek and I spent some time together recently at United Tennis at El Conquistador where he often trains with his coach and good friend Petr Korda.

Where and how did you start playing in the Czech Republic?

It happened very easy. My mom worked in a library and my dad was teaching tennis, so I had two options where to be as a kid and it was an easy pick for me.

How old were you?

I started carrying a racquet when I was 3 years old. And I'm still on the court even when I'm 37.

Who was your favorite player growing up?

I looked up to Ivan Lendl. He was an inspiration for a lot of Czech tennis players. He changed the sport with his approach. I think he invented conditional training. I'm grateful when I spend a few hours on court with him here at United Tennis. I had a chance to be very close to my idol which is amazing.

Anybody you look up to now?

I'm looking (up) to Rafa, Roger and Novak. What they've done and their consistency is just incredible. Dividing titles between them is just incredible. It's great to have such a rivalry in our sport.

They're all nice guys, aren't they?

Yeah, they're all great. In our generation there are no McEnroes or Connors—which is a little bit missing for the fans. I think we had players with personalities—like Marat Safin, or Goren Ivanosicic. Guys, who, when you watched their matches, you knew something was going to happen.

Is Roger Federer as nice as he seems?

Yes, he is.

Who's the best player of all time?

Roger, Pete Sampras. I think I have to count Rafa and Novak as well.

What was Andre Agassi like?

I played him twice, in St. Petersburg (Russia) and Dubai. His hand-eye coordination was just amazing. He played the ball on the rise. One of the best returners in the history of the game. No matter who was serving he was standing on the baseline and cracking his returns which was just amazing. Also, he was a very interesting person. When we talk about personalities in tennis, he's definitely at the top of the ranking. He had charisma. He was himself.

You like to date the ladies on the tour, don't you? (Engaged to Martina Hingis, married to Nicole Valdisova and a relationship with Petra Kvitova)

Not anymore. I'm done with it. (Laughs.)



Ray Collins and Radek Stepanek

What's the deal with that?

I don't know what the deal is with that. It was happening. I said I'd never date a tennis player and look how it ended up: Three relationships. One marriage. So I think that's enough.

What's your relationship like with Martina Hingis now?

We're good. We're talking. Easy. Nothing bad.

When you are with someone who also plays tennis, do you talk tennis a lot?

Definitely, you can't hide from it.

How did you wind up living in Bradenton?

To be honest, I live here because of my coach Petr Korda. He lives here and when we first started, he has three (young) kids, and he wasn't going to travel as much as normal coaches do, but we found a way to manage our relationship. That's why I live 150 meters away from him and I really appreciate our relationship. I'd live in a tent in his garden if I would need to because I think he's a tremendous coach and has helped me throughout my career and I'm very happy to have the chance to work with him.

He has called you his fourth child.

(Laughs) Yes, since 2002. Thirteen years. I'm very lucky for the people I'm working with on my team. My manager is my cousin, he's worked with me for 20 years. My conditioning coach, with Petr, we're starting our 14th season. You don't see on the tour guys with relationships with their team like we do.

Do you plan to live in this area the rest of your life?

Once I'm done with tennis—which I hope is still a few years (away)—I want to keep my place here. But I'm born in the Czech Republic and I'd like to live there, but definitely this place here will be home for some amount of time each year.

Why do you like it here?

Because of the (weather) conditions here. Year round. At the later stages of my career, the weather helps my body with recovery. And they say, "Once you survive the preparation in Florida here, then you can play anywhere in the world."

Last question—is there anything about you that most people aren't aware of?

(Pause.) That I know a million jokes.

Tell me your best joke?

(Pause.) It's difficult to translate into English. And I'm too serious right now.

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