

Jimmy Arias: Ranked Number 5 in the World Now Wows the World as ESPN Commentator

Jimmy Arias and I have a lot in common. We both grew up playing at the Buffalo Tennis Center in the 1970's. We both played a lot of tournaments. We're both Buffalo Bills fans with dark hair parted on the side.

Alright. Jimmy Arias and I have nothing in common. I knew of him when he was 7 years old. He'd fill-in as a substitute in my father's tennis group, and I wasn't even asked to ball boy. I won the Rotary Club's 10-and-under tournament around the time Jimmy was the best player in Buffalo, child or adult. Jimmy rose to #5 in the world while I played 5th singles on my college tennis team. Jimmy's hair is still dark where I'm adding more salt to the pepper by the month.

But now in our late 40's, Jimmy and I are both in the Sarasota area, talk on a regular basis, which includes the following interview:

T How, why and when did you first start playing tennis?

I was 5 years old when my dad started playing tennis and he wanted me to pick up balls for him. But afterwards he said "your turn"—and the story goes . . . he hit balls to me and I could keep a rally right away the first time I ever played, and my dad immediately got excited.

T Andre Agassi made no secret his father made him play more than he wanted to. Did you ever feel you were forced to play when you didn't want to?

Yes, I was forced to play but I also think I liked it. My two (younger) brothers and I were dropped off at the club all day and they played putt putt, drank coke and ate chips, and I played tennis. My father wasn't cracking the whip. He was dropping me off and giving me the opportunity to play and I took it. At some point early on I knew I wanted to be a tennis player and it became a bit of a job and I felt obligated to play every day. But I still play a lot now (at Sarasota Bath & Racquet) and I have no reason to be practicing at all now—so obviously I like this game.



T At what point did you realize you had extraordinary talent well beyond Buffalo?

I think around 9 years old. I started playing in the Eastern tournaments 12-and-unders and finished top 5 which got me to the nationals. There was no one else my age or my size winning matches, so I think at that point I realized 'Hey, I'm not bad.' I had a different game than everyone else, a little more powerful, so I already felt like I was in control when I played other kids. It was up to me, which is always a nice feeling.

T At 13 years old, your father brought you to Longboat Key to start playing under Nick Bollettieri at The Colony Tennis Resort. What was your first impression of Nick?

(Long pause . . . laugh) My first impression was a guy who was full of energy. The moment you saw or heard him, your feet started moving faster. You wanted to show this guy you could play. He was very positive, whereas my dad's attitude was (Greek accent) "I'm here to tell you what you're doing wrong, you already know what you're doing right." So I never heard "You did well." And the first day, Nick was



effusive with his praise, and I loved that, and it spurred me on to work hard, because I had never heard that before.

T Were you homesick for Buffalo early on, or did you feel like you made the right move to leave for Longboat Key?

The first year was rough. I was just 13 and I didn't really have a place to stay, there weren't other kids there yet. There were two local kids there and we didn't get along because I sort of came in and stole their thunder. The second year was better because I got ten of the top twenty kids in the 16-and-unders to come to the Colony. Paul Annacone was among them. When I went to Nationals I told them, "We go to school until noon, we can practice the rest of the day," and they all came. That was how Nick got that group.

T You rose to #5 in the world in 1983. Were you surprised? Nervous? Or did it all feel very natural to you?

When I was 10, 11, 12 I felt I would be number one in the world some day. I remember when I won the French Open Mixed Doubles when I was 15 years old, and I knew I was supposed to act excited..but I was thinking, "I'm going to win this in singles a few times so this is no big deal." So when I made it to #5, I wasn't impressed with myself.

T You never won another Grand Slam. What happened?

I got mononucleosis. I had three months where I sat back and began reading my paper clippings for the first time, and when I came back, I lost a bit of wanting to be #1. I looked at the life of being #1 and thought that was too much fame for me. I wanted to go to a movie and be anonymous. I thought "I love where I am as #5 player in the world," where you still make decent money and some people know you so you can still get an ego boost. I thought to myself "This is a perfect spot to be in." And that was a terrible thought because I played nervously and was no longer striving for #1, I no longer had that over-reaching goal that I had previously.

T Looking back, do you have any regrets about that?

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Yes, I do, but I was 18 or 19 years old. Now I'm 46. I don't think about it too often anymore. If I hadn't gotten mono, I would have kept on pushing for #1.

T Do you wish you were coming up through the pro ranks now with better equipment and more money-making possibilities?

Would I like to be 5th in the world today? Yes. Do I think I could be if I was coming up now? Probably not. The game is tougher now. Bigger players. I wouldn't want to play Rafael Nadal—the ball would bounce over

my head! I'd like to come up in the 1990's when the money started coming in. In fact, I was in Washington, DC in 1998 (five years after he retired) picking up a lock box and called the U.S. Open Series and asked if I could get a wild card in the Legg Mason Classic. I won my first round match.

T Many give you credit for revolutionizing the forehand. Is that accurate or an over-statement?

My forehand was unique coming up. Experts said it couldn't last, that my shoulder would fall off hitting the ball that hard under pressure. I'm pretty much hitting it the same way now, 40 years later.

T What's the biggest tip you'd give amateur players?

Think about the center of your body, stand upright, keep your body stable. You don't want to bend over at the waist. You want to move your feet more to get in position. If you're bent over, you're taking your hips out of the equation.

T How did you meet your wife Gina?

I was playing doubles in the Memphis Open (in the late 80's) with Kelly Jones, who was more of a doubles specialist than me. I was a little nervous and he called me over and I thought we were going to talk strategy. But he said, 'Look in the stands, pick out a girl and think about asking her out later.' So I went over after the match and met Gina. Now we've been married for 20 years and have two teenagers.

T Do either of your kids play tennis?

Spencer does. He and I play on a regular basis, and I also have him working out at IMG in Bradenton. Julia doesn't play tennis, but she does play basketball for her high school (Cardinal Mooney in Sarasota). She may wind up playing for a Division II college if she sticks with it.

T What are you doing now with your time?

Doing some commentating for ESPN and the Tennis Channel. I'm playing in some senior events. I trade stocks online. Play tennis. Golf.

T Are you a good golfer? Does a good tennis game help your golf game?

I think so. I try to imagine hitting a top-spin ball down the line when I drive the ball off the tee. I usually score in the 70's. I play with Ivan Lendl and Petr Korda. They both live in the area.

T Do you have any goals left?

(Pause.) My brother Kevin had a brain tumor at 5 and was told he wouldn't live past 15. He had an operation at 12. All that time he decided to enjoy his life and have fun. He still does. He teaches tennis in Sea Island, Georgia, plays in "futures events" in places he wants to be—like Hawaii or Australia. He's 38 now but he is still having fun. I try to emulate him. I'm trying to enjoy my life.



Ray Collins is a Sarasota-based writer and owns RayCollinsMedia.com

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