

# ATLANTA



Tommy Haas

When the elevator door opened, **John Isner** was leaning against the back wall and he still looked taller than me, and I'm 6'2".

"I was glad to see you beat **James Blake** last night, it looked like he was starting to pass you each time you came to net," I began. "Naw, I had on my lucky shirt," the boyish 6'10" rising star in American tennis replied.

Such was the week I had behind the scenes at the Atlanta Tennis Championships this summer. I was fortunate to stay in the same hotel as the players, and thanks to my media pass, I saw quite a bit outside the lines:

- **Ryan Harrison** looks like the college kid you'd like your daughter to date.

- **Blake** is said to have a hard time having fun. His head is usually buried in his smart phone. Texting is what pro athletes seem to do second best.

- **Lleyton Hewitt**, his wife and three kids looked like a typical suburban family going out for a walk in the park as they left the hotel one morning.

- Another Australian, **Matthew Ebden**, may be the nicest player you've never heard of. He and his partner, **Alex Bogomolov Jr.**, won the doubles.

- There's a player on the tour whose serve and forehand are so similar to Pete

Sampras, his opponents have nicknamed **Rajeev Ram**, "**Rampras**." There's a side-by-side comparison on YouTube that's striking.

- Many around the tournament weren't disappointed that one of the best American players didn't return this summer. Even though this player is a huge draw, he's also a huge drag to be around. Apparently he nearly ruined the courtesy car he was given last year and his demeanor was less than charming.

- I was disappointed to see a doubles coach brush off an inquisitive fan who simply asked his players' names. There's no need for that arrogance.

- I saw another coach at breakfast each morning in the hotel who looked familiar. Turns out it was **Peter McNamara**, a Top Ten player from Australia who peaked in the early 1980's. He's now teaching a polite 20-year-old from Bulgaria named **Grigor Dimitrov**.

- I witnessed one of the strangest incidents on-court in years: Temperamental upstart **Donald Young** was so frustrated at dropping the first set 6-0 to journeyman **Michael Russell**, that he punched his own racket strings as he walked back on the court. No one else may have known why Young then took an injury time-out or why his knuckles were bleeding. The delay worked: He won the next couple of games, but Russell went on to win in straight sets.

Having been around the players morning, noon and night—both at the courts, and in the hotel—I've concluded the life of a tennis pro isn't glamorous. Keep in mind, only the top 50 are making some money. I'm not saying working in a cubicle 9-5 is any better, but these athletes are living out of their suitcases, many times not sure where they're going next or whether they can afford it. It's a lonely existence for many.

- It was strange to see Frenchman **Nicolas Mahut** in the same dining room as John Isner. The two will be linked forever after Isner's 70-68 5th set win over Mahut in last year's Wimbledon match.

**Mardy Fish** was the highest ranked player in Atlanta, number 9 at press time. He may be the most unassuming and low-key American to break in the Top Ten in years. He dropped 35 pounds and his career has since taken off. He won the tournament for the second year in a row, this time fending off Isner's two match points.

I guess Isner wasn't wearing his lucky shirt in the finals.



Ray Collins is a former TV newscaster and country club tennis pro. He now owns a Sarasota-based media company. Details at [www.RayCollinsMedia.com](http://www.RayCollinsMedia.com).



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