

Chapter 8: Nothing Left to Lose

Although my match clinched the tie, Sam won the final match in three sets for a 5-2 victory. As he left the court, we celebrated as if we had just won the tournament; after a miserable week filled with defeat and misfortune, this was our redeeming moment. I felt that this was especially true for me, as after only winning 12 games over 3 singles matches, I claimed 17 and the match on my fourth and final try.

Even though the tournament had concluded, in my heart, I knew my time here wasn't over, and there was still one more thing I needed to do.

I snuck away from my team and found Mika sitting on a bench alone, watching her team play. I sat down next to her, and the butterflies in my stomach still fluttered the same way they had all those years ago. We talked, and I told her the story of my comically chaotic, failure-filled week. It was the first time I made Mika laugh in what felt like forever, and it was like music to my ears. I laughed along as we recalled some of

our happiest memories together, but I couldn't help but feel a twinge of sadness. It wasn't long before we didn't have anything else to talk about, and we watched her team's final match in silence.

I wished it could've been different. Ever since I had feelings for Mika, being subjected to "just friends" was always something I dreaded, but now, it's all I ever wanted. The most difficult part of growing up was growing apart, and as much as I wanted Mika to be different, she joined the sea of strangers I used to call friends. But with these strangers, I shared the most wonderful memories; these strangers made me who I am. For that, I am forever grateful.

A friend as valuable as Mika doesn't come by often, and in the weeks after Spring Team, guilt began to set in knowing I had failed to keep her close to me simply because of how I felt.

I felt I didn't deserve Mika, but with that being said, I also felt that even I didn't deserve the way things ended. In fact, I felt that I didn't deserve a lot of the things that were coming to me. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, all tournaments were canceled, and I lost multiple chances to compete at a national championship as a top seed. After making three supernational semifinals in 2019, I always wondered what it

would be like to win a championship at one of the biggest junior stages in the nation, but the pandemic closed my best window to do so.

With USTA competition at a halt, the USTA Training Center was also forced to close down until further notice, and the players, coaches, and friends I saw almost every day now vanished from my world. More importantly, I lost a place where I could train comfortably and consistently: the foundation of a tennis player's entire lifestyle. Throughout the first half of the year, I worked with many former coaches of the USTA player development program: Erik Kortland, Adam Peterson, Kelly Jones, and Chris Tontz. However, the arrangements were only temporary, especially as most of the coaches used their expertise to look towards greener pastures besides private coaching.

I still had a lot to be grateful for. Luckily, no one close to me, myself included, was affected too harshly by the pandemic. Further, after winning three doubles matches with Quang at Spring Team, I jumped to the #5 doubles player in the nation. It was a career-high and another milestone reached, but at the end of the day, it came at a loss. With no tournaments, my dream of #1 was over.

Or so I thought. After six months of inactivity, the USTA began the first of its efforts to resume competition. Tournaments were being held again under heavy limitations, and although I wasn't allowed to play doubles under Southern California's

restrictions, other states hosted doubles events. This meant that both sectional and national ranking systems were back online, and players soon began aging out of the division and losing points because of the rolling 12-month system. In September, I moved up to #3, and on October 8th, I passed Quang to become the #1 doubles player in the nation.

After years of hard work, it felt good to be #1; great, even. However, the euphoria disappeared in a flash, and I was left feeling underwhelmed. I had been climbing towards this mountainous goal ever since I picked up a racket, and when I finally achieved it, I felt indifferent. It hurt to set a goal that I felt I would never attain: winning a gold ball, for example. But that pain was incomparable to putting in the work and sacrifice to finally get what I wanted, only to realize that the accomplishment that was once so important to me meant nothing.

From the moments after I played with Quang over three years ago, I truly never felt that I was good enough, but I thought that if I could become the best in the nation, those feelings of doubt and inadequacy would finally go away. I assumed that once I achieved the #1 ranking spot, I would finally be fulfilled, but I was left feeling just as empty as before.

As cliché as it sounds, it was never about the destination, no matter the grandeur. When you reach the top of the mountain, the only thing there is left to do is to keep climbing.

As 2020 drew to a close, Cayden and I found ourselves at the Tennis Club at Newport Beach with PTP, a group run by Filipp Pogotskin and Peter Macdonald. The two coaches moved down from Seattle, Washington in hopes of creating an academy, bringing a couple of their local players down with them. One of their top players was Calvin Wang, a player my age of a similar level. Calvin was incredibly athletic and hard-working, but the rough edges around his game made it easy to sniff out his lack of tournament experience compared to Cayden and me.

Calvin and I had never met before PTP, but we definitely had a bit of a rivalry going on from the start. Since our first practice together, it was always who could do the drills better, who would win the matches we played against each other, or who would go further in the tournaments we played. It helped that we were so close in skill, and even after we became best friends, that on-court rivalry never stopped, which really brought the best out of both of us.

I truly saw Calvin as a brother as I did Cayden, and I wished as much for his improvement and success as I did mine. I shared all of the notes and resources I had

from when I trained with the USTA, and we traded advice during practice(along with our usual dose of trash talk, of course).

With that, training at PTP truly felt like being part of a family. It was still group-oriented training, but Coaches Fil and Pete encouraged individuality, filling the varying needs of each student along with building a strong foundation. It worked wonders, especially for such a tight-knit group such as PTP; because of it, Cayden, Calvin, and I built stronger bonds not just between the coaches but between each other as well.

But before the three of us truly got to grow together, Cayden decided to stop training at PTP, the first of major changes to the group in Newport. As soon as the COVID guidelines were loosened at the beginning of 2021, PTP merged with another group, relocating to the Racquet Club of Irvine under the name Tier One Performance. Dozens of top-ranked players trained there, as Tier One also picked up stragglers from academies that fell apart during the pandemic, which only added to their already star-studded roster.

However, I was definitely not one of those top-ranked players. Following the pandemic, the USTA implemented a new ranking system that eradicated the sectional tournament system, deeming all tournaments “national” and awarding points from

levels 6-1. More importantly, the new system meant that everyone would virtually have to start their search for points from scratch. As many of Tier One's players picked up steam early, a string of bad results to start 2021 left me hundreds of ranking spots lower than I was the year prior.

My situation was made worse after suffering a chronic back injury, where I couldn't rotate out of my backhand swing without sharp pain. I heard from multiple professional opinions, but none seemed to agree on what was the cause, and no prescribed remedy relieved me of my pain. After seeing yet another athletic trainer, I was simply advised to take time off, but my ego got the best of me. I was so determined to earn the respect and ranking I thought I deserved that I kept playing, opting to slice every backhand instead.

With such a handicap, my game took a turn for the worse, adding to my very slow start to the year. In February, I missed the cutoff for the Spring Individual Championships, a tournament that replaced Spring Team, by a wide margin. After playing in the tournament as a wild card the year before, it was disheartening seeing almost every Tier One player I trained with compete except for me.

Throughout the spring and summer of 2021, I continued to put up inconsistent, but mostly poor results. The only two highlights came in May and July, where I got 3rd

in doubles in two National L2 events in Edmond, Oklahoma with Xavier Calvelo and Chattanooga, Tennessee with Nathan Tam, respectively. However, that pair of doubles results did little to distract me from the fact that my singles play was going completely awry, as I had tumbled into a losing streak that started in June.

The situation drew an eerie comparison to 2019, which only added to the despair I felt. In two years, I felt that I had grown so much not only as a player but as a person. Despite this, I found myself back in the hole I was in, and it made me question how I looked at tennis and how I looked at myself.

The woes reached their peak in mid-July when I signed up for an L5 in Azusa. I would usually play up a division for these events, but I decided to play 16s to try and get some ranking points, as after entering the year as the #23 ranked player in the 14s, my ranking had nearly dropped outside the top 400 nationally.

I felt that playing the low-level event could get the momentum going, and as the top seed, I was confident that I could win it. After all, I had some good luck in Azusa in previous years. In 2019, I won the 16's division at 13 years old, beating the top-seeded 15-year-old in the final with an inspiring comeback win.

My 1st round matchup was against Roshan Santosh, an unseeded player who was only 13 years old and barely ranked in the top 1000 nationally for 16s. I breezed through

the first set, not dropping a single game. With every one of my shots firing on all cylinders, my confidence ballooned, and I expected my opponent to roll over in the next set.

However, Roshan did quite the opposite. He scrapped for points, staying with me for the first 7 games of the set. Errors began trickling in from my side of the court, but I did just enough to keep the lead at 4-3. In the 8th game, I had multiple break points to set up a chance to serve for the match, putting an end to what I thought was an unnecessarily difficult set and match.

A few foolish mistakes squandered those chances, and frustrations began to boil over. The focus I once had was replaced by indignation; instead of viewing the challenge my opponent brought with determination, I looked on in annoyance. I didn't care if I won or lost anymore; there was nothing I wanted more than for this match to be over. Points flew by as I didn't win another game in the set. In some twisted, nightmarish recreation of my 2019 final, I would lose in a match tiebreaker in the opening round.

It was one of the most disheartening losses I've ever suffered. However, I felt I could excuse all of it if I tried my hardest to win. It wasn't just that I lost: upsets

happen all the time. It was the fact that I didn't lose because my opponent played better than me, but rather because he wanted it more.

The realization struck me right in the heart. For the first time in my life, it was like I didn't even want to win. With no one else to go to after the loss, I gave Coach Erik a call. It barely rang once before he picked up.

"Hey, is everything ok?"

Those words broke the dam, and I broke down. Coach Erik, my mentor for my months of training at the USTA, was just one of the many people who went out of their way to help me, yet their help meant nothing without my effort.

I failed Coach Erik. I failed everyone.

After I hung up, I lay on my bed and continued to cry until I couldn't breathe. Looking at the blank ceiling with my tears soaking into the sheets, I planned a life. A new one.

Where I put the racket down for good. Where I could look back at the trophies and medals I once cared so much about and say, "It was nice while it lasted." Then maybe, finally, I would be at peace.

Right?