

ATLANTA ACE

Robby Ginepri is ranked among the world's top-20 tennis players, but with three of the globe's biggest tournaments approaching, this 24-year-old wants more

BY JACQUELYNN D. POWERS PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS STANFORD

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lthough he's played against Andre Agassi four times (the most recent meeting was in the U.S. Open semifinals last year), Robby Ginepri still worships his tennis idol. "The first time I stepped onto the court with him, I was so nervous," Robby recalls. "I could barely hold onto my racket. But I get more comfortable each time I play him. He's awesome. He gives as much back to the game as anyone. He gives us tips and pointers. He's been around for so long that he knows everything."

Unfortunately for Robby, Agassi has also known how to beat him each time, too. This summer, however, the 24-year-old from Marietta hopes to step it up, with three of the world's most prestigious tournaments—the French Open, Wimbledon and the U.S. Open—taking place from late May to early September. They also take place on different court surfaces—clay, grass and hard court—meaning three styles of play. So, how does an American prepare for this grueling season of Grand Slams? For Ginepri, it means getting on a plane in the beginning of May and traveling to Europe to acclimate himself to being abroad, playing the different surfaces and focusing on elevating his game. "It's tough for me," he acknowledges. "I don't like being away from home for more than three weeks. But I have to really concentrate for this stretch."

At press time, he was ranked 17th by the Association of Tennis Professionals. Winning a Grand Slam title, which would be his first, would send his ranking sky-high and give him the credibility he has been fighting for since he turned pro in 2001. "I'm one of the spotlight Americans, but it's tough being behind Andy Roddick and James Blake," he says of his higher-ranked compatriots. Ginepri came up through the system with those players, who are both in the top 10, as well as Mardy Fish and Taylor Dent. There was even an ad campaign called "New Balls," in which Ginepri was featured, touting the next generation of tennis aces. "We're all getting older and wiser," he observes. "The window of opportunity is growing less day


by day. We don't have that much of a time span to do everything we want. I'll probably only play for six to eight more years. It's a short time, so everyone is trying to work harder and focus more on tennis. I'm enjoying my career more now than when I was starting out. I know what to expect."

And how is it battling your peers over and over again? "We are all professionals," Robby replies. "We put our friendship behind for the two or three hours we compete. After the match, we go out and buy each other a beer. There are no harsh feelings on the court."

Now represented by Octagon—the powerhouse agency behind John Elway, Mia Hamm and Michael Phelps—Robby is becoming something of a personality and heartthrob himself, especially among his local fans. The Wheeler High School grad, who has a home in suburban Atlanta, constantly receives praise and support from the community. "All of my friends and family are still here," he says. "When I get off the road, I get to see everybody. It makes coming home special." Although Robby was born in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, his family moved to Marietta when he was three. Two years later, Ginepri began playing tennis. While there was an immediate connection there, this multitalented athlete also participated in sports such as soccer, baseball, basketball and track. At the age of 12, he zeroed in on tennis and embarked upon a career that would take him all over the world. In fact, the budding player almost missed his high school's senior prom while competing in a tournament in Key Biscayne, Florida, the same week. "I had to rush back to pick up my prom date," he remembers. "She wasn't sure if I was going to make it. Lucky for her, I lost."

For Ginepri and other hard-core competitors who strive to retain their ranking, the tennis circuit means months of travel to far-flung locales. For about 24 weeks a year, he treks to tournaments all over the world, from Australia to Madrid. He even checks his racquets when he flies. "The other players always carry theirs

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On center court. Robby Ginepri has been one of the young guns of American tennis since he turned pro in 2001, but today, with his world ranking near its all-time best and three of the world's biggest tournaments coming up, the Marietta native stands on the cusp of superstardom.

ROBBY GINEPRI

Traveling man. Being one of the world's top tennis players means a lot of travel—nearly half the year in Robby Ginepri's case—and that means downtime is very important, which is why he loves spending time at his suburban-Atlanta home with friends and family.



onboard," Ginepri notes. "I don't have any superstitions. [The airlines have] never lost a racquet or cracked one."

But the constant journeys across the globe don't faze this go-getter too much: "I don't mind once I get to my destination. The roughest part is getting through all the airports and checking into the hotel. Once you're there and set up, it goes by pretty smoothly. Hopefully, the bed is extremely comfortable. I sleep 10 to 12 hours a night, so the bed is very important." While Robby estimates he's visited 80 percent of the world, China and Russia are still on his must-see list.

Back home, he resides in a bachelor pad decorated in what can only be

indulges his hobbies, which include playing golf, shooting pool and learning the guitar. He's also an avid Atlanta Falcons fan and tries to attend games when he's in town. Another avocation, cooking, could become his second career when he retires from tennis. "Hopefully, I'll have enough money put away so that I won't have to work," Ginepri says. "I wouldn't mind going to culinary school, though, and opening up my own restaurant. Cooking relaxes me." Until then, he experiments on his friends and family with dinner parties at his house.

Of course, November is a long way off. First, he has to overcome the double threat that clay and grass courts present. "It's tough to train on grass," Ginepri

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described as testosterone-chic, with flat-screen TVs, a hot tub, movie theater, Ping-Pong table, poker room and pool table. There's no tennis court, but the budding sports star owns the Olde Towne Athletic Club, which boasts indoor and outdoor courts, a two-lane swimming pool, high-tech fitness area and restaurant. Run impressively by his father, Rene, and Jerry Baskin, Ginepri's former coach, the members-only facility also runs a tennis camp for kids and wheelchair-tennis tournaments. Robby is also involved with the Atlanta Youth Tennis Foundation, which works to inspire and motivate underprivileged children.

Each November, during the only downtime of the professional tennis season, Robby takes a month off and unwinds. This annual, 30-day vacation is when he

admits. "The clay is also difficult, slower. Your shot selection has to be smarter. And there are trickier bounces. I like hard courts the best. I grew up playing on them." So, what will get this plucky athlete prepared for the challenges at Roland Garros, site of the French Open, and Wimbledon? Sticking to his prematch ritual, he says, which consists of listening to music (50 Cent, T.I. King and Outkast), loading up on carbohydrates such as pasta, and stretching. As for the hype associated with these Grand Slam tournaments, Robby is serious about his job but takes each contest for what it is: a game. "Every match is separate," he says. "It doesn't matter who you are playing or what tournament you are in. You have to focus on winning. I hate losing to anyone. When I'm on the court, it's all about kicking ass." ◉



WHERE TO SEE ROBBY THIS SUMMER:

THE FRENCH OPEN: May 28-June 11
broadcast on ESPN2 with live coverage of
men's and women's finals on NBC Sports

WIMBLEDON: June 26-July 9
broadcast on ESPN2 with live coverage of
men's and women's finals on NBC Sports

THE U.S. OPEN: August 28-Sept. 10
broadcast on USA network