

The Natural Marietta's Robby Ginepri Makes It To The Bigs

Robby Ginepri has his near shoulder length hair pulled back under his now familiar Nike baseball cap. Wearing a pair of faded jeans and sporting a goatee, this soft spoken twenty-one year old hardly makes you feel like you're in the presence of one of the most recognizable tennis players on the planet. The tennis world has used such words as riveting, electric, energetic, ambitious and fearless to describe him. Some even call him a rock star. He easily draws comparisons to a young Jim Courier, the American whose determination and work ethic took him all the way to number one.

Just days away from representing the United States in singles for the first time in a Davis Cup tie, Robby has returned to his childhood. He's sitting on a knee-high brick wall which lines one of the many baseball fields at East Cobb Baseball Complex. The ballpark is one of the most beautiful and utilized little league parks in the country. Its manicured fields are framed by tall bleachers and paved walkways, a place where many a youth dream of hitting homeruns and one day making it to the big leagues.

Robby grew up just a few miles from here and played little league baseball at a nearby location, Sewell Mill Park. As a child, Ginepri excelled at every sport he tried, from basketball and swimming to track and soccer, he even juggled baseball with tennis in the spring and summer months, when tennis tournaments were plenty. This is where, at the age of 12, Robby made the decision to focus full time on his tennis. "I had to make a decision with tennis and baseball because I was missing too many tournaments," he says. Sitting comfortably on the brick wall, he admits, "I really wanted to play football, but I was too little. I was good at tennis."

"East Cobb baseball is a big thing and Robby was good at baseball," notes Robby's mom, Nancy. "But it seems like during the summer, (Robby) always liked tennis a little better than baseball, especially when it was time to gear up for the tournaments." "At the age of twelve," Mrs. Ginepri admits, "Robby said he'd be a professional tennis player. I said 'Go for it.' Never expecting this in my wildest dreams."

Robby's mom recalls noticing his talents even at the age of 15 months old. "I do remember I was supposed to join him in the back yard. I just happened to look out the kitchen window and he had a wiffle ball bat and ball, he was throwing the ball up in the air and hitting it. I called to my husband 'you're not going to believe this.' He was born with it."



The Natural

Ginepri's hard work and talent produced great achievements for him all through his junior career, including singles and doubles titles at Kalamazoo and the 2000 U.S. Open junior finals where he lost to Andy Roddick. But all through his juniors, Robby's parents always kept a watchful eye on their son and his tennis, making sure he lived the life of a normal teenager. "We didn't let him go to every tournament under the sun, like in Europe," says Mrs. Ginepri. "We wanted him to go to a regular school with regular kids, never wanted him to go to an academy. There were plenty of great coaches here in Atlanta."



His success as a junior also brought along one of the toughest decisions he'd ever faced, which was bypassing college for a shot at the pro tour. "A rough decision to make, all through junior tennis all I wanted to do was get a college scholarship and that's what I was aiming for," he explains. "I thought about it for a few months and took a few recruiting trips. I looked at UGA, really wanted to play at Tech for Kenny (Thorne)." Ginepri's decision became easier with the success of another young American player, his friend Andy Roddick. "Andy was already pro at the time I played him in the finals at the U.S. Open and I lost to him. He was doing pretty well and I took that into consideration. I wanted to give it a shot." Robby smiles and readily admits, "I wasn't that much into school anyway."

As always with the Ginepri family, the college versus turning pro decision drew a great deal of support from his parents and sister. "I never wanted him to look back and think "what if" and we encouraged him to make his choice. My recommended plan was 'try for three years, if you're not where you want to be, you can go back to college at the ripe ole' age of 20.' He had nothing to lose by trying. Timing is important," Mrs. Ginepri says.

Robby adds, "My parents didn't put any pressure on me and were going to stand by me with whatever decision I made, which meant a lot to me."

ON TOUR



An old saying in baseball states that if you work hard at it, the results will come. The same holds true for the sport of tennis. And have they ever for Ginepri. In just three years since turning pro, Robby won his first tournament as a professional in Newport, Rhode Island in 2003. Last year, he also made it to the quarterfinals of four Masters Series events, including Indian Wells and Miami. His ranking soared from 106 in 2002 to a year-end high of 30 in 2003.

Robby prepares to slam one home at the Australian Open
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“At first, I really didn’t know what to expect going out on the tour,” admits Robby. “But after the first full year, I felt pretty good. Each year I’ve increased gradually and taken baby steps improving here and there, last year was so great that I did well in so many events.”

“There are tons of challenges,” Ginepri continues. “I think every match is a challenge. Traveling to different places and playing different people in places you really don’t want to be in at times. Probably my biggest challenge is being away from home and all my friends and family.” This may be why Robby has decided to continue calling Atlanta his home, rather than relocate to California or Florida as so many other professional tennis players tend to do.

Steve DeVries, Robby’s coach, began working with him right out of high school. “I think the two things I first noticed about Robby were his foot speed and his ball striking ability. He’s also extremely strong,” explained DeVries. “The combination of these abilities allows him to compare favorably to other young players on the tour.” DeVries adds, “On the court with Robby, I try to let him use his natural abilities while showing him areas where they can get him into trouble. He often believes that he can hit a great shot from anywhere, but if you’re patient, you will quite often get an easier chance to hit the shot you want.”

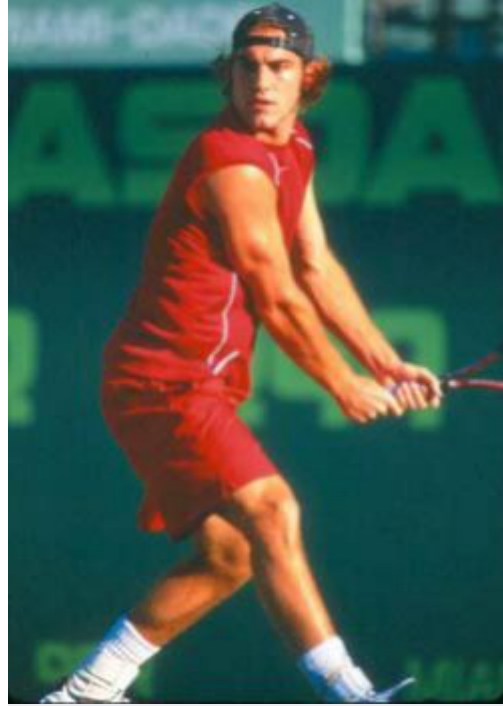
To help Robby adjust to playing on tour, DeVries immersed his player with a taste of life on the tour. “When Robby was first starting, I was able to get him practice time with Pete, Andre, Michael Chang and Todd Martin,” explained DeVries. “They were able to get practice time on the big courts and I think this helped Robby feel more comfortable when it came time to play in tournaments.”

Robby recalls how important his relationship with Todd Martin was during those first months on the tour. “Starting off (Martin) was my mentor and I used to train at his house. I actually got hurt practicing there when I dislocated my thumb on one of his serves.” What was it like playing his former mentor at the U.S. Open last year? “It was tough...I felt like we had a good match and I should have pulled it out even though he was more experienced...I wasn’t really nervous.”

When asked about playing on the show courts, especially at the Grand Slams, Robby explains, "The atmosphere and playing in front of a big crowd only gets easier." His first experience on a big court came against Lleyton Hewitt in 2002 at the Masters Series tournament in Cincinnati where he lost 6-0,6-0. Robby remembers the match well, "It wasn't because he was that much better of a player than I am, it's because I was so nervous and couldn't play my game." "You worry about being on TV and what everybody is thinking of you." His comfort on the show courts turned around during his match on opening night against Andre Agassi at the U.S. Open two years ago. "I was fairly nervous before that match. But once I stepped out on the court, I kind of forgot about everything and just concentrated on the match. And last year when I played Todd, I really didn't think about it at all."

THE IMAGE

Robby Ginepri is one of those rare players that comes along and in a relatively short period of time is able to put his stamp on the men's professional tour. Over the last three years, he's developed a strong group of loyal fans, mostly of the female variety, and even more impressive is that Ginepri has created an image for himself that gets him noticed on and off the court: the sleeveless shirts, the backwards cap, the facial hair and, of course, that talent and strong intensity. It's a welcome addition to any tennis tournament.



In action in Miami

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"I'm kind of relaxed out there, want to chill and stay focused the whole time in an effort to win every point. I want to send a message to the other guy that I'm pretty much not going to give up and not let any free points get away and show I'm going to do everything I can to win the match," explains Ginepri. Asked about how the on-court "look" came about, Ginepri explains, "Sometimes when I'm practicing I like to do it without a shirt, the sleeves get in the way, so when Nike came out with the cut out shirt, I liked the way it looked. I think it's good for the crowd and the game as well. The collar look has been around forever...a bit of variety is good for the game."

GRAND SLAM

As a 12-year-old boy, Robby Ginepri dreamed of playing in Grand Slams in place of hitting them. His early success on the tour leads many to wonder just what he'll be able to achieve in his tennis career. Coach DeVries sees an extremely bright future for Robby. "I think he can go further into Grand Slams and compete for titles at the smaller tournaments. I am very optimistic about his future."

When asked about how far her son has already come, Robby's mom tries to control her excitement, "I have to pinch myself. It's all him, he's worked very hard."

As for Robby himself, his sights are set on what he'd like to see happen. "I'd like to do like Andy and win the U.S. Open. In front of the U.S. fans and home crowd." With the determination and hard work Robby pours into his tennis each day, it's easy to believe he can accomplish anything he wants.