

## **LIFE ON THE PRO CIRCUIT**

Some coaches sleep in five-star hotels and rely upon tournament-sponsored transportation from white-haired volunteers via Porsche or Mercedes, as their charges contest for major titles. Others view tournament life from behind torn windscreens on the cracked courts of local high schools, or while going to town on an undercooked hot dog beneath ninety degree temps as they take in the second 3<sup>rd</sup> set tiebreaker of the junior tournament day. A few, however, like me, function as mezzanine coaches, guiding players on their journey from competitive junior into the pro ranks, right up until we pass them off to an Annacone or a Lundgren or a Gilbert. We've spent our time in the trenches, hitting felt-covered orbs by the thousand in hopes of launching a pro career, and then ridden our charges up the ladder until the term rankings referred less to ITF than to ATP or WTA.

Over the next two weeks, I'm tasked with taking you, the reader, on the road with me. Today we left for Quintana Roo, a province on the Southeastern tip of Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. Think 100-degrees and 96% humidity with bed-bugs the size of small rodents and you get the idea. The tournament is entry level, 10K in prize money, with \$1800 to the winner – a sum equal to “just under” the cost of the plane tickets to get down there. At this level, profit is measured in ranking points not dollars. I'm with a 16-year old female in search of her first WTA point. If we can avoid the omnipresent drug cartels and the looming storm cloud of Montezuma's revenge, this trip will prove productive.

Here's an excerpt from today's travels...

Since 9-11, international departure from the U.S. has become vaguely proctological. Having been thoroughly de-shoed, suggestively touched (once, but I really believe it was accidental) and scanned, we've now made our way onto Aeromexico's Boeing 737 and into the severely compacted seats 17B and C. Head to foot we'd cover most of a service box's width, so if you lack imagination, here's an appropriate visual:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=P9rmPHoc5Pc&fmt=18](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=P9rmPHoc5Pc&fmt=18)

The pilot's voice (Germanic-sounding) announces that, although we are departing on time, some of our luggage may not have made the flight, and that it will arrive shortly after we do, which, frankly, has the inadvertent resonance of an Auschwitz voyage and is starting to cause me anxiety.

At altitude, dehydration is an issue, moreso since we are heading into an equatorial climate with rabid temps. Thus, the eight-ounce water bottles now resting upon our tray tables are akin to using a Brillo pad on La Tour Eiffel. The “call for assistance” bells are elevator-ish and pressing one can incite really young passengers (the seat-kicking types) to follow suit repeatedly, apparently. After an hour of nearly

continuous water requests, the airline attendant is giving us nasty looks and our tray tables resemble a collegiate dorm room, non-alcoholically.

Seat assignments on Aeromexico are about as meaningful as a love letter from Amsterdam. Thus, my player now sits on the far side of the aisle working out the Asymptotes of a Hyperbola (High school pre-calculus) as I endure the breath-mint-expired-five-minutes-ago scent of the man seated beside me. There are two types of travelers: those who enter travel with the sort of unmitigated joy that they now have a human being trapped within conversational range and therefore can deliver forth every issue they've ever wanted to discuss since the Big Bang ejected them into the universe. Telling them you are exhausted and that you intend to sleep for the duration means absolutely nothing, evidently. The other subset consists of what I refer to as Mimes, folks who communicate with sleepy hand gestures and awkward lip movements, which imply they are either experiencing a stroke or having some serious introversion issues. I have door number one next to me, and I do my best to ignore the prattler and settle in to feel the plane engines' calming vertebral hum.

New word of the day: **Unfairlines** (def) airplane companies with Hobbit-sized seats and Giant-sized fees

Outside the window, the definitive color is construction-boot tan, as though the topography hasn't had a drink for a few hundred years. Eventually, the horizon fades into blue and we land in Quintana Roo. The courts are dark and the gym is closed, so we'll start this excursion with a light run and some touch volleys in the hotel lobby.

Tomorrow: **First Impressions.**

## DAY TWO: **FIRST IMPRESSIONS**

The Grand Palladium-White Sands is an all-inclusive resort, meaning hedonism is always about six size-twelve-Nike steps away. There is kite surfing, kayak rides, archery stations (not sure why, but they draw crowds), stone massages, ornate swimming pools that dwarf the Caribbean, and food displays that make you doubt the war on hunger.

All that is required to pleasure yourself is a yellow wristband, snapped on with a professional smile by one of the cotton-clad hostesses that seduce you with azure eyes and Caribbean speak - "Enjoy yourself, Mon!" In my youth, I toyed around with fake ID's and even experimented with an altered passport, so the idea of a plastic wristband sufficing as adequate documentation cactus-needles my intellect.

This morning I am face to face with a horrifyingly hirsute eleven-year-old (based on his mother's screams since the buffet line opened, his name appears to be Ricky-Get-Your-Ass-Over-Here) who has piled his pancakes so high only his eyes appear over the stack. It is like the old Ziggy comic strip, except with more hair and syrup. I do my best to keep my eyes down, but this kid's acumen with silverware is astonishing. Two minutes later he is done.

First on-court workout brings a downpour five minutes before we get on court, and so, we head to the beach for some hot-footed volleys in front of envious and drunk tourists, whose expressions at some of our errors can only be described as "having poor digestion". One unfortunately-Speedo'd man stops a little too long to gaze and we halt practice for an air-conditioned lunch.

Second workout went well. We got a feel for the courts – more grainy than the nearby beaches, and thus, better suited to big kick serves and heavy spins - acclimating to the shifting winds, slow conditions, and the incessant chatter of avian life, not to mention the 80% humidity. In this weather, it's less sweating than leaking, as though the water is being rung out of you, and what might be beads in the States, are more like streams down here. Imagine a hot yoga class on the sun and you get the idea. Four water bottles in thirty minutes means the electrolytes are used up and we'll recover to an ice bath and some serious re-fueling *via* the Endura powder most of these players carry in their travel bags. Few things wreck the ol' grey matter like Playa del Carmen heat stroke!

A note about the competition here. Along with the 64 women, there are 64 guys, making the overheated tennis tent look a like a stripper-ish sixth grade dance. 0% of the men wear shirts and the total amount of body fat on these athletes is well south of double digits. Conversely, some of the women look like they just rolled out of the ocean, which sounds cynical, but really is just an observation. These ladies are not in shape for these conditions, and it's likely several of them will go down to heat exhaustion.

Tournament check-in begins at four. By 3:50, there is a cytoplasmic mass around the tournament desk and, with all of the foreign names, one gets the feeling this was what Ellis Island was like at the turn of the century – minus the white feet. The schedule will come out in a few hours and we'll know whom she plays in the morning.

New word of the day: **Gatheringlet** (def) the sweat-stained floor after exhausted athletes meet up

Until then, off to a pasta dinner beneath a Technicolor sky.

Tomorrow: **Let the Games Begin**

## **Life on the Pro Circuit: Let the Games Begin**

*Ladder* is one of those universal terms in the tennis club world. It signifies how players stack up against each other - the top of the ladder representing those whose competitive prowess is lionlike and the bottom denoting those whose swings resemble unfolding lawn chairs. For the aspiring professional, the bottom of the ladder is the \$10,000 qualifying. It's filled with has-beens, also-rans, down-and-outers, and the infrequent high-flier on her way to an endorsement contract and some serious Simoleans. Round one of \$10,000 qualifying commences today.

The opponent is Mexican, spawned on clay courts beneath a sweltering sun. She is 5'3 with close-cropped hair and legs like rodeo barrels. I apologize to the reader for lacking an accurate description, but it's fairly close to the top half of a monkey and the bottom half of an elephant. My player is 5'11 with a bright smile and natural power. As tennis aficionados know, all of this means nothing as far as winning is concerned. We've reviewed the game plan - the Mexican likes to be eight feet behind the baseline and prefers to play with her backhand crosscourt, come in behind a few kick serves on the ad side, keep your feet moving forward when she slices because the courts are slower than Marion Bartoli's trip through the buffet line, etc., but one never knows what a sixteen year-olds brain will do when confronted with a new experience. I drop into a plastic chair and set my phone for vibrate. On the ground beside me, a nineteen year-old male has just finished a third set tiebreaker and is undergoing a series of full body cramps that suggests either epilepsy or drug addiction. People around him get upset if you laugh.

The kid serves well to open and wins the first game.

When tourists pass the courts, their jaws drop off to the left to form a sort of misshapen "O" and, when accompanied by the primal "oof," hints at someone getting punched in the stomach. They generally stand for a few minutes, awestruck by the force of the game. But too, at least for the older men, ogling these half-clad teenage girls whose groaning and screaming can get, let's face it, pretty uncomfortable. They gaze with city bus-ish vacuity and you just know inappropriate thoughts are going through their heads.

The first set comes easily, along with more confidence.

With so many countries represented, we get a mix of styles. Driven by their conditioning and willingness to play long points, the macho clay courtiers who grind their opponents into submission and get athletic hard-ons when an adversary makes an unforced error. Also, the American hardcourtiers who blast serves and forehands in hopes of ending points before any sense of rhythm is established. Plus, the little Asian ball machines who scamper back and forth, hitting half-paced crosscourt balls with technical perfection but have about as much power as Joe Biden. And lest we forget the Euros, who spend several Speedo'd hours sunbathing and then don tennis gear and display all sorts of artistic flair with what seems like

an absolute lack of concern for winning or losing (except the Germans and the Czechs!).

Forty-five minutes later, it is over. The girl has executed well and we go off to celebrate her first professional victory – this means twenty minutes of on-court practice followed by another twenty in the gym. Dinner tonite comes from a steakhouse, and based on the scarcity of small rodents around town, I'm pretty firm on settling for the pasta.

On the resort front, things seem to be regressing. Everyone within sandal-wearing-viewing range is wearing sandals. There are young men who should not take their white t-shirts off, and others who have taken their white t-shirts off and look like they still have them on, and there are old men who have the same sagging breasts as old women and old women who have more hair on their chests than their husbands have on their heads. There are fierce-faced children jumping onto fake flamingos and shrieking for ungodly reasons, while parents suck straws dipped into equatorial fruit juices overrun with Two-Buck-Chuck-value liquor. Loads of dead-looking but not-dead bodies are all over the place. Too, there are raccoons that will give you high fives to keep you from noticing their friends stealing your taco - bandit bastards. Man-made waterfalls are ubiquitous enough that you have a constant and almost unnerving desire to hit the urinal. Since several local men in cotton pants and long sleeve button downs sport enviably dry (not wet) skin, I'm also pretty certain I'm the resort's endocrine mutant, constantly perspiring worse than Marat Safin trying to write a love letter.

New word of the day: **Suspendocrine** (def) the desire to stop sweating

Tomorrow: **Another Step on the Ladder?**

## Life on the Pro Circuit: Another Step On the Ladder

After four days of bright blue waves and tropical temps, some things stand out. Each morning, a team of oompa-loompah-ish gentleman scrape the beach for excess kelp which might attack the ankles of some high-paying tourist and cause unforeseen angst. There are women wielding palm fronds to dust sand from lounge chairs that make sucking sounds when people get up. Other loompahs scatter across the resort and lift tossed lime wedges into trashcans or mop marble floors with sanitizing enthusiasm. Thankfully, they allow fallen coconuts to remain, giving me an appropriately tropical coconut eclipse of the morning sunrise. Having completed my morning run, I'm off to wake the tennis player (my charge for this two week journey) now rebelling against the snooze button in Room 1203.

Match time is 9:00 a.m. today, so we're hitting breakfast early to fuel up. Every morning, the exceptionally friendly hostess, *Idriana*, greets me with a professional smile and hand sanitizer. I confess to having some serious anxiety about whether this is a mealtime ritual or some response to *Idriana's* ideas about my nighttime escapades. We engage in our morning Haiku:

"How are you today?"

"Quite well, thank you kindly, dear."

"It's my pleasure sir."

I glance back to see her place the hand sanitizer back in her purse and spend the rest of breakfast trying to figure out where we're going to eat tomorrow.

Two hundred size-twelve Nike's from the courts, the sounds of professional tennis ring out: the *thwack* of well-struck tennis balls and screams of athletic ecstasy. Yesterday, as predicted, several players went down to heat stroke and we now come upon three players propped up in the trainer's tent. Few images inspire proper hydration like seeing needles stuck into the oversized limb of a pro tennis player.

Before the match, we speak for a few moments. I can see the twitch in her upper lip, the river-ish sweat, the excess adrenalin coming forth ten minutes before game time. We have not spoken about the meaning of this match - qualifying in her first event - but I can see she senses opportunity. On the plane ride over, I took a funny photo of her sleeping. I show it to her now and she breaks out in laughter. Nerves dissipate and the umpire calls her to the court.

The warm-up is contentious, my kid starting to feel the pressure of qualifying for her first event: a determined scream, plenty of post-miss repetition, and one big forehand into the back fence. Youth, though unpolluted by experience, still has its dirty moments. At some point, the nerves settle and she falls into a rhythm. Her opponent is a 5'6 Mexican girl who plays college ball in the States and uses phrases like "Y'all" and "Y'ant'sum'n'?" with the sort of accented comfort that suggests she's seen plenty of collard greens.

The first set goes quickly, my kid making a go of following some returns to the net and faking a serve and volley enough times to rattle the opponent. At 9:00 a.m., the heat here is enough to fry eggs, which would sound cliché were it not for the small Filipino man doing exactly that on the curb. Post-cooking, he fed it to a local iguana, which subsequently assaulted the protein-based meal and promptly attacked a compatriot. For those who've never witnessed an iguana fight, it's slightly less exciting than the women's \$10,000 qualifying I'm currently sitting through. The kid wins the second set and has now qualified for the main draw. We're headed off to have a chat about some of the nuances of today's match – passive tennis, improper patterns, and a strange reluctance to put ice around her neck on changeovers. Alas, youthful naiveté is so wasted upon the young.

New word of the day: **Qualifrying** (def) when the weather is officially hot enough to fry an egg

At six, we hit again, tuning up strokes and preparing tomorrow's game plan. As evening descends, one can feel the Caribbean quell. Nocturnal weasels and raccoons replace iguanas and blackbirds. Poolside calypso fades into reggae's darkness. Sunburned tourists stagger back to their rooms, hoping to delay the day's hangover long enough to grab a lobster dinner. After the last stroke, we collect the tennis balls and return, soaked and salty, to our rooms.

Tomorrow: **A Day Off**

## Life on the Pro Circuit: A Day Off

This is the fifth article in a series by Craig Cignarelli, who is traveling with a sixteen-year old girl for her first pro tournament.

*Knowing* tournament directors generally give qualifiers the Monday off. These kids have grinded (ground?) their way through high heat and brutal battles to earn their way into the main draw, and thus, positing them against some fresh participant who already has a ranking advantage, just wouldn't seem gentlemanly. So today we have the day off, which, for professional tennis players is a bit like December 23<sup>rd</sup>. for Santa Claus. Consequently, we are hitting in the morning and the evening with a light gym session in between.

Many of the main draw players compete today and the level has picked up since qualifying. One no longer hears the crack of ball-on-frame, and the danger from a stray ball flying over the fence has lessened by several degrees. Too, the athletes are no longer one meal from affecting the tides, and some are more likely to solicit sponsorship from Nike than Krispy Kreme.

Truth is, these players simply work a little harder than the qualifiers. What was an empty gym this weekend, now hosts an odd array of limbs: balancing, jumping, and stretching. It looks like a drunken version of the Village People's YMCA song,



Lunchtime finds me re-acquainted with Ricky-Get-Your-Ass-Over-Here, the motherly named, hairy child I witnessed taking down a stack of pancakes on day one. This time, the kid, who undoubtedly has a tapeworm, is tossing down a four-

egg omelet with half a loaf of French toast. As he passes by, I'm fairly sure he glances at my plate and it's more than a little disturbing to be Alpha-Dogged by an eleven year old.

With gluttonous tourists and re-fueling athletes, the buffet looks like those dancing inflatables that wave around outside car lots, and I'm starting to think there may be a synergistic relationship between buffet dining and gym stretching.

The main difference between athletes and tourists is tableware speed. Tennis players load up on pasta and chicken and eat like they have to get back to practice in three minutes - it's like hand to mouth combat. For tourists, they engage, filling plates with every variety of cuisine and more desserts than one might expect from a Kardashian – then they savor, sucking and slurping such that it sounds like some alien soundtrack – disgusting. When athletes leave the lunchroom, they saunter, heels up with a little bounce. Tourists, however, lead with the gut, the upper torso leaning back as though leveraging their full bellies, weight well-back on the heels, accompanied by the gastronomically grotesque and throaty “uuuaaghh” Imagine a cheese grater getting stuck in a jet engine and you'll get the gist.

I mention all of this because we've just finished a solid 90- minute workout and now have to navigate the whole eating experience. The sixteen year old ogles desserts the way sharks look at raw meat. As Ricky GYAOH drops in on his chocolate mousse, I fill her plate with the right stuff and we head back to the courts for a second practice.

As I'm writing about this adventure, I realize it might be beneficial to meet the girl I'm coaching here. I've asked her to speak frankly, **without fear of judgment**, writing something that might illuminate who she is as a competitor and a person. And so you know what I'm dealing with, what follows is her response:

I'm a sixteen-year-old in Mexico by herself. Any “normal” family would think that this is absolutely insane, but I guess I'm not exactly normal. I'm a tennis player who is trying to become the next face of American tennis. I know I can be. Don't worry, I don't have this overwhelming confidence in myself for no good reason; I work hard and play big with a fierce attitude on the court. Coaches, players and parents have seen it, so, ever since I began playing competitive tennis, I've been told I have “this thing.” One coach gave it a name, “The X Factor.” I used to not understand what this meant, or why people saw me the way they do, but as I became more and more aware of the players around me, I started to get it.

The X Factor is an incredible hunger to get better and win; the desire to put in the work that is required to be the best of the best; and the need and ability to achieve the seemingly impossible. Being likeable and fun to watch probably helps a little too.

So what am I doing with this X Factor and why am I in Mexico instead of France? Well, you can't just waltz into Roland Garros and say, “Hi, I know you don't know

who I am, but I'm pretty fucking good, so could you add me to the draw?" No, you have to start at the bottom. And the bottom is in Mexico at a 10k.

So here I am at my first pro event trying to establish a reputation as a girl with a big game and an even bigger future. We had two practice court times on the first day. Our early practice got rained out so we improvised by hitting volleys on the beach. Fat, old, rich men and their young, skinny, golden girlfriends walked by us with looks of confusion and amusement. I giggled at them while working on getting more feel on my forehand volley.

I still get nervous before tournaments, and especially tournaments at a new level. So you can imagine when I walked up to the courts for our second practice, and noticed all of the girls on court, I was preparing to accept that I don't belong here yet. I started to watch and after about a minute, my nerves dissipated. Eight out of the ten were out of shape and inconsistent. The other two had some stuff going on but not much.

When I began to hit, I knew I was making an impression on everyone there. I was hitting well and having a great time. After practice, Coach confirmed that I was turning heads, which just made me feel better and better. By the time I was finished, I could see questions buzzing from the people watching me walk to check in. Who is this girl? How old is she? Where is she from?

I was the only girl at the check in when I got there. However, there were a ton of boys. Most of them were shirtless, and sweaty. I definitely wasn't complaining. Since we missed our connection in Mexico City and they wouldn't let me bring my racquets on the plane to Cancun, checking in for the tournament was the first quick and simple task of the trip so far. Finally the first day was over.

My first round match was scheduled at *Not Before 12:00 Followed by*. Which means I would start any time between 12:00 and 5:00, depending on how quickly the matches went by. I was surprisingly calm. I played a little Mexican girl. When I say little, I mean little. I'm 5'11" so I am used to people being shorter than me, but I don't even think this girl came up to my waist. When we would walk by each other on changeovers, I would be reminded of how much smaller she was than me. Every time we passed, she seemed to get smaller and smaller. Maybe this was because she was getting more and more discouraged. I breezed through the match 0, 1.

When I walked off the court, Coach gave me a high five and said, "That was some good sh\*t, kid." I could feel the eyes on me. I could feel people wondering who I was and what I'm about. I liked it. I liked the attention I was getting because I knew it was good attention. I knew they could tell I could make an impact at this tournament.

Today I played my last round of qualifying. I didn't start feeling the nerves until the match began, and it began ugly. The tennis was uncomfortable. Every player knows

that feeling. You just can't feel what's going on. You tell yourself to change something and your body doesn't listen. Passersby could definitely tell I was not happy. I'll claim I can't remember if I threw out an F-bomb. Despite that, after the match Coach told me to take it easy on the language. I won 2, 2, but was still annoyed.

I worried that this would affect my new reputation as an up and coming threat. I don't want to be stereotyped into the "Big Girl" category - a girl over 5'10" who hits hard, is streaky, and can't move. Coach reassured me after my match that not too many people saw, so I would be fine. This didn't instill too much confidence.

I was lucky that I played in the morning before all of the main draw players had arrived. And I was also lucky that I was able to get on the practice court a few hours after my match, when the main draw players were hitting. We hit on a court with two other girls. They were pretty good. It made me want to be better, so I was. I dialed in on the ball. I tried to hit it perfectly every time. It went great, and now I'm ready for my next match.

Tomorrow I have the day off. I'll probably hit twice, get some schoolwork done, and people-watch by the pool. Maybe I'll watch some of the men's matches. I'll try and stay away from the women and let Coach do the scouting. Then, it's time to battle!

New word of the day: **Youngstar** (def) when an adolescent begins to rise

Tomorrow: **The Four Seed**

## Life on the Pro Circuit: The Four Seed

The sky is the color of old nickels today and one can actually smell the impending storm. But rain doesn't **impend** down here. I've heard tales of monsoons, of water appearing quickly from the sky, and of *cats and dogs*. At the moment, however, heaven has unleashed - from four drops to four gallons, in three seconds flat.



This is not rain, so much as the ocean falling from the sky. Picture your swimming pool dumped into your closet and you'll get a feel for it – not to mention thunder that you feel in your private parts and lightning strikes strong enough to make me wonder whether North Korea might be involved.

New word of the day: **Thundervolt** (def) the hyper-charged cloud-level explosion that knocks out power and shakes a hotel to its bowels

At tournaments, rain creates an athletic waterhole. Players from all nations gather around lunchroom tables to play cards, to teach each other profanity in their native language, and to explore each other, culturally. This is perspective at its finest, allowing young, ambitious competitors a few free moments to bond and to empathize with adversaries - *so often we limit ourselves to the prism of our own experience*. Few things hold more reason for cause celebre than listening to adolescents come away from cultural interaction with a new understanding of humanity. *Alas, excuse my pedagogical rant, but these moments just tickle my inner Elmo.*

Eventually, Jurassic birdcalls echo in a return of the sun and the players finish their bananas and drop to the floor for stretches. Moments later, the clouds, like wet wool, roll in. All day, the weather pattern continues while professional athletes

nibble down coaster-sized meals and perform mental preparation exercises in ways that make the whole pre-match player lounge feel like a Nepalese monastery. At 6:00 p.m., the director cancels play for the day and there's a mad rush for the gym. These players are addicted to the endorphin rush, and even one afternoon without stimulating the adrenals can cause a "my-feet-aren't-moving" hangover. Legs leap, arms curl, chests puff, and backs bend. There is much flirting.

Not much to report today so here's a description of the hotel room:

From end to end, the bed is 150% of a grown man's height with strangely inconsistent thread counts that lie somewhere between 3 and 3,000, and tease one with the possibility of a good night's sleep. On the plus side, the toilet seat here causes narcolepsy. Caribbean waves are small and the shower's water pressure matches the sea's force. It's a bit like someone dipping fingers into a glass of water and flicking it at you. Were it not for the deluge outside, between the tennis and sweating, we'd probably be thrown out of here on account of malodor. Ensuring they maintain their bite-to-death-ratio lead, at least three mosquitoes sleep with me each night – current score Mosquitoes-23 Me-2! Finally, there is a refrigerator with several sugary drinks and five water bottles, which, when emptied and left on the floor, apparently enrages the chambermaid, who has made it a point to leave them on my nightstand with an arrow pointing toward the trashcan saying "*Basura!*" To this end, I'm convinced my towels haven't seen a washer yet this week.

## Life on the Pro Circuit: Tennis and Other Things

This is the seventh article in a series by Craig Cignarelli, who is traveling with a sixteen-year old girl for her first pro tournament.

The kid went down today 7-6, 7-5 lost to a former ITF top-tenner who now has sixty-two professional bouts under her belt. Her opponent employed just enough craftiness on the big points to win, and frankly, displayed experience not usually seen at the 10k level. Pretty impressive chess-playing for someone without big tools.

The kid, however, stayed aggressive throughout, competed extremely well, and maintained her professionalism. Proud of her effort and intensity. Some days, wins and losses are almost indistinguishable.

My note-taking almost broke my iphone, but then, that's why we watch these matches – to get information. We'll spend the next two days working out some of today's kinks and she'll attempt to qualify for the next tournament beginning Saturday. Tomorrow's first workout is at 7:00 a.m., when the rest of the field is sleeping and the only sounds are those of the crashing Caribbean and a few drunken tourists staggering out of the bushes to find their way home.

On another note, the competition here illuminates the state of the game. 19-24 year-old men compete next to 15-21 year old women and the difference in play is almost laughable. On one side of the gender spectrum, we witnessed a full-body dive, an expletive-filled rant directed at one meek umpire, and balls traveling upwards of 90 mph that actually *buzz* when they pass you. On the other side, there are tears, arms thrown up in submission, effortlessness, and balls that appear to be filled with helium. Men's and women's tennis are simply different sports.

Regarding the resort we are staying in:

*Hotel rule: Towels left on the floor will be washed and replaced, while towels hanging up will only be folded and remain in the room. Please consider the environment when determining where to place your towel after your shower.*

When you've lived your life being pathologically accommodating, this cipher presents considerable pressure. Lupita - she's left an introductory "Hello my name is" nametag on my nightstand, which means we're now on a first name basis and I'm burdened with obligation – has this really unaccommodating ritual of making up my room whenever the hell she feels like it. And so, when I take a shower, this decision whether or not to leave my towel hung or floored comes with the kind of responsibility I don't want on this here Caribbean excursion. As coach to a professional athlete, I work out a lot, (in exceedingly hot and humid temps) morning run, on-court drilling, in the gym, all of which implies I'll be hitting the showers at least a half-dozen times per day. Thus, when I'm done showering, I now have this uncomfortable habit of standing passively in the bathroom, holding my towel in

hand, with an I'm-a-puppy-who's-just-been-spoken-to tilted head, plagued with indecisiveness. I can hang the towel, in which case Lupita might come by and, according to the code, assume I don't want it washed and I'll be stuck showering with the same towel eight more times – this actually happened the first few days, and by day three the damn linen had developed its own personality – before I see her again. Or, worse yet, I can place the towel on the floor and hope Lupita shows up to replace it before I shower again and have to pick up a dirty towel from the floor to dry off, which is sort of disgusting when you consider this is the Caribbean and what's probably gone on in this room. Plus, between the dirty towels and what I presume Lupita thinks is an obsessive-compulsive showering habit, I'm a little worried she thinks I'm some grotesque creature and that's why she never shows up when I'm around. And don't even get me started on the environmental considerations. I'm pretty much a train wreck over the whole thing,

New word of the day: **Bairdry** (def) standing naked and wet, in your hotel room, waiting to dry

## Life on the Pro Circuit: A Day of Practice

This is the eighth article in a series by Craig Cignarelli, who is traveling with a sixteen-year old girl for her first pro tournament.

I'm spending much of my off-court time in the Caribbean. The water is Bomb-Pop blue, with morgue-ish sand underneath. In the evenings, fish appear at the water's edge, as though evolution is happening right in front of the two hundred drunk and slack-jawed tourists reclining on plastic lounge chairs and slurring words about the sunset's beauty. Saying things like "it looks like someone vomited on the horizon" will generate spiteful glares.

This morning, however, I am on-court, standing twenty feet behind my protégé, wondering why her forehand is missing by two yards as she contends against a male player whose hitting partner apparently couldn't overcome last night's drinking binge. A moment later I watch as her racket sails into the side fence, followed by a primal scream, immediately followed by a Jurassic response from something avian in the nearby jungle. Last time I saw eyes spring that wide was during Tiananmen. Some of the players mentioned a problem with the stringer – professional events have a racket stringer on site, and more often than not, the machines at one place are very different from another, meaning the players have to have one racket strung and then calibrate against the norm. It's a bit like leaning back in a chair trying to find the point where it's about to fall, often with the same painful consequences. At this event, the string tensions run about 15 lbs. lower than usual. Imagine shooting a spit-wad at people and then shooting a bazooka at them from 400 yards, and you'll get the variance. The point is, we need to go get a new string job and then hit the courts again later this afternoon.

Earlier in the week, I suggested the level of tennis here is weak. Now, as the quarterfinals beckons, I'm seeing glimpses of talent. Serves now have better aim than the men's room participants, and no one is threatening low-flying birds with their forehands. Technique has gone from printing to cursive, and somewhere in the midst of all that prior three-legged-pregnant-yak-movement, athletes have found a will to run. Then again, those left in the tournament are probably destined for the next level. After all, the life span of an unsuccessful Futures player rivals the fruit fly (40-50 days so skip the Google search you were about to do). After a quick trip to Tulum tomorrow, I'll probably return to catch some of the action.

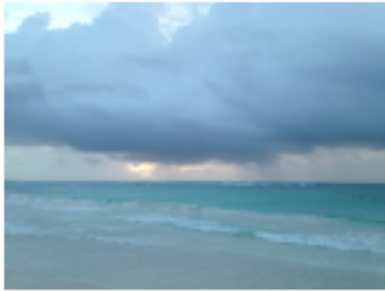
On a lighter note, Lupita knocked on my door this morning – she's the chambermaid who I'm certain has been avoiding me due to my insecurities about the hotel towel code (*See yesterday's blog if you want the story*). We had a frank and productive discussion about the "hung versus floor" cipher and Lupita kindly agreed that she'd provide me with a few more linens this evening. I feel like a very important bridge has been crossed.

I'm not really sure whether something was lost in the translation or if Lupita has a little crush on me, but when I returned to my hotel room, there was a cot, five pillows, three extra bed-sheets, and a stack of washcloths high enough to remove excess ceiling dirt. I know Lupita did her best and I'll relay that to management on the tourist's survey card tucked neatly beneath the pillows on my new cot. However, it would have been nice to get some fucking towels.

New word of the day: **Morejito** (def) what you order when chambermaids wreck your confidence in humanity

## Life on the Pro Circuit: Orange Lakes in Elephant Skies

Sunrise was beautiful today – orange lakes in elephant-colored skies.



It reminds me of tennis matches - inside the amassing clouds of indistinguishable greyness, the radiant glow of tactical brilliance shimmers. At the pro level, a few pivotal points determine the victor.

Thirty-three person draws are awkward, as only two people have a match today, while everyone else sits around and practices beneath a more-than-tepid sun. Tomorrow, round two of qualifying starts for the second tournament. The kid will play another American girl, and if she wins, a Russian who spends most of her time ten feet behind the baseline retrieving shots. Already I've seen improvement in her game, the increased second serve speed, the ability to attack with more efficient movement, and the belief that she can win these events soon. Like a sunrise, growth comes slowly and ends in illumination. These next few days will tell if she is on the right path to proper development. If she attempts to play the right way and loses, it may be better than playing the wrong way and winning. If she wins playing the right way, confidence in her own game grows and she'll continue working toward proper goals. So much depends on maintaining a proper balance between competitive will and player development. Alas, tomorrow we'll see if this week's work has elicited any positive changes.

As to my continuing resort issues:

With all due respect to Dining Service Representatives, I've reached my breaking point. An overview of "the system":

*You (hotel guest) enter the buffet area and are directed to an appropriate seat, where a DSA will offer you water and place your napkin on your lap, after which, you will rise and make your way to gustatory exuberance. You'll return to your table and eat, return to the buffet for food, and then sit again. The DSA's will then clean your table and that'll be the end of it. Sometimes, however, extraneous factors intrude.*

To wit: Today I procured a healthy set of pancakes for breakfast –golden brown, fluffy, the kind you wouldn't mind sleeping on. Upon returning to my table, I realized I had forgotten the syrup. So I got up to retrieve it. When I returned, my pancakes were gone, the table had been cleared and a new folded napkin rested

where my plate had once been. I called a DSA over and he apologized and said "I just doing my job, Sir." Leaving the syrup on the table, I made my way back to the buffet for more pancakes, noting the mosquito-like DSR's hovering just outside of slapping range. When I returned, now salivating at what was sure to be a gastronomic windfall, my syrup was gone and there was another new napkin, folded and mocking. Once again, I called the little annoying fella over and explained my process for acquiring breakfast, and, leaving my plate on the table, asked the DSR to keep his bloodsucking fingers off my food. I trudged back for the syrup. When I returned, my plate was gone, AGAIN! I reached for the neck of the nearest DSR. He pointed accusingly toward another little ferret of a man who promptly ducked behind a serving cart. We shared some tears – him for the rant I laid upon him, and me because I really just wanted to eat my damn pancakes and now the buffet pancake tray was empty.

I think there's a moral here for both athletes and buffet frequenters. In critical moments, focus on the details and don't rely on others to help you. You may go hungry, but you're more likely to shine like those orange lakes I thought this blog was going to be about.

New word of the day: **Bluffet** (def) when you think you're going to get food and you end up with nuthin'!

## **Life on the Pro Circuit: Polluted and Pristine**

This is the tenth article in a series by Craig Cignarelli, who is traveling with a sixteen-year old girl for her first pro tournament.

Every morning at 5:00 a.m., before my player rises, I go down to the beach for a run. Sugary white sand clings to my toes so it looks like I'm running on a bunch of mini-churros. Hued like faded-denim, at 82 degrees the Caribbean licks the shore the way puppy's kiss.

But in the midst of all this beauty, there is clutter – the exo-skeletal remains of a beach chair, shredded soda cans, a weather-worn pair of sandals, an eco-unfriendly diaper, a working lighter.

When I was younger, I believed a stranded man would die of scurvy or exposure or boredom. I assumed the only connection to civilization would come from opening a corked bottle to read the note within. I thought foreign beaches only housed things like coconuts and pirate treasure. Today though, pollution has corrupted the clarity of the waters and sands.

I think there's a certain symbolism here, one that gets to the heart of competition.

As youths, our palettes are clean, untainted by the distresses of defeat and the thrills of triumph. We view each match through the prism of pleasure and indulgence. But like the beaches, garbage invades our shores and our minds become cluttered with expectations and potentials and hopes. What was once pristine, is now a landscape littered with mental pollution.

When I was running today, I picked up a few bottles and placed them back in the water. Some might say I've done nothing to improve the circumstance, however, I disagree. For a moment, I've removed the garbage from my view and sent it into purgatory, trapped between freedom and forsaken. It may return, but perhaps the beach will develop a sand dune or bay to protect itself. Or maybe it will embrace the foreign object and bury it beneath its weight, never to be seen again. Whatever happens, it is no longer my burden.

It's kind of like my morning run, cleansing, purifying, returning me back to my pristine palette so I can live divested of worry.

For those who've been following my rather troubling Caribbean resort sagas, today I tried the following: I took a room towel and put it on my table in the buffet dining room, and hid behind the buffet table to watch. With joy, I saw the busboy stop at my table and stare at the towel, uncertain. He called a friend over, and then another. I imagine the internal conversation was something like:

*"When the patron gets up, we're supposed to clear the table, but then, any towel not placed on the floor is to remain where it is."*

I think I've found the vortex of hotel regulations and brought these little bastards to their altruistic knees. For two minutes, I hovered just outside their purview. And then they called the supervisor over, who promptly folded the towel and placed it on my chair. I sulked out of the dining room and spent the afternoon a beaten man.

New word of the day: **Poutclassed** (def) when the level of service brings you to tears

## Life on the Pro Circuit: An Unreal Story

I'll start with the funny.

Like it has for the past three, it rained today - hard, buckets, to the point where I saw a group of tourists contemplating plans for an Ark. The Caribbean's thatched roofs offer about the same protection as a thong. People walk around with this awkward shoulder shrug and when you ask them questions you're unsure whether they are indicating they don't know or just trying to keep from getting water down their neck.

Then the power went out, which means, after an hour, folks in the buffet lines carry these fist-like faces of concerned diners who worry Montezuma's Revenge is only a forkful away, followed by the panicked expression of "Oh my God is that a stomach cramp or am I going to crap my pants in front of a hundred strangers." It's not pretty.

Now add in the slip factor. Whoever was the genius who decided marble floors would be appropriate for tropical climates, should be removed from the gene pool for lack of adequate intelligence. People are slipping and sliding like penguins at play. There is a Bambi-like splaying of old people and young children and, as they go down, their hands open up to release knives and forks, which *zoom* and *spin* such that it looks like some appalling magic act gone haywire. Glasses and plates shatter with a regularity that the day's diarrhea victims would empathize with. Frequently, a shout will ring out with words like "Look out" or "Whooooa" or "Hiiiiyaa" and always followed by "sorry", as they attempt to lift themselves from the wet floor. Aside from one glass shard that nicked my leg, I emerge from breakfast unscathed.

Now, the not funny.

Back in my room, I'm five minutes from giving my player an 8:00 a.m. wake up call when the phone rings.

"Craig, this is Doctor Ramirez. We have your student here and she has fainted several times and we'd like you to come immediately."

Quickly, I review last night's dinner and wonder whether Montezuma took revenge upon the poor girl to the point of de-hydration. On a full sprint, beneath a virtual monsoon falling upon ridiculously slippery floors, I make my way to the medical office to find my charge laid out on stretcher, in a full neck brace, shaking and crying. Compared to our usual morning greeting of witty banter and grand smiles, this sucks.

She'd slipped on the marble floor, landed on the back of her head and fell unconscious. Then, holding on to the wall to get up, she fell again, this time face first, onto the cement, and blacked out again. One of the players staying in the hotel said they heard a scream like someone was being murdered and called security. My girl though, is tough. When she awoke, she had no idea where she was, but found a

way to crawl and stagger through the lobby to the front desk clerk who immediately took her into the medical facility.



It is now 6:20 p.m. and it's been a day of cervical X-rays, Cat-Scans, IV drips with painkillers and anti-inflammatories. They will keep her here overnight for observation and I'll be crashing on the plush chaise lounge built for hobbits. Her opponent tomorrow is going to have a short vacation as I try to pull this one from the depths of hell into something more promising. Alas, this is tour life. Wanna join us?

## Life on the Pro Circuit: Final Thoughts

*This is the eleventh article in a series by Craig Cignarelli, who is traveling with a sixteen-year old girl for her first pro tournament.*

My coaching duties are over, and tomorrow we head back to Los Angeles. I'm ready to return to my home courts, which stare out over the Pacific and play host to Hollywood's stars and a few aspiring athletes who see the horizon as something attainable. We've left something of ourselves on these Caribbean courts—curiosity, effort, sweat, along with the bumps and bruises of an unfortunate accident. However, like the infamous pirates once here before us, we've pillaged some things too, from this place by the sea.

The kid qualified for her first pro event and had set points against a solid veteran and former top 10 ITF'er. She now understands her current competitive level, the varieties of playing styles this tennis world offers, the consistency and pace required to surpass the 10K events, the fragility of women's game, and she witnessed professionalism in a new light.

During post-match gym workouts, she watched heavy-legged girls snail-crawl on stationary bikes while muscle-bound men performed flat-out sprints on electric treadmills. She saw poorly-performed dynamic stretches and *physios* who controlled their layer's every move. We had many discussions about dietary habits when confronted with never-ending buffets and tourists who seemed more focused on breaking caloric records than satiating hunger. She learned how five days of intermittent deluges can interrupt adrenal preparation like a policeman knocking on a car window at make-out point. After practicing with some of the men, she is more aware of the difference between the men's and women's ball, because here, men don't hit to workout, but rather, to work. She saw strokes that flowed and others that looked like second grade cursive, and how some players floated gracefully above the court while others appeared more statuesque. At moments, she witnessed dives, slides, grimaces, screams, tears, and elation – these are the articulations of professional athletes, ones which inspire her to continue on.

In readying herself for the second week, she slipped on a wet marble floor and banged her head into unconsciousness. She now understands what a neck brace and a stretcher feel like when pinned to her spine, and how she'll react to adversity, and more importantly, the level of fear she can withstand when faced with a hospital bed in a foreign country and an unfamiliar language. She knows the terms CT Scan and X-ray and IV drip in ways that sixteen-year old girls shouldn't know. She knows what an absence of memory feels like and innocently wonders why some people would choose it. I asked her to write her thoughts about these two weeks and she consented. So, in closing this series, here are the uncontaminated words of a young woman's first experience trying to tackle the world stage:

*So I'm going home tomorrow. So many things have happened to me during this trip. I have learned so much, and I also have experienced some pretty crazy stuff. From travel issues to playing new people to hospital visits.*

*The only difference between the girls here and the top juniors is slightly more competitiveness, more consistency and maybe some better movement, but little else. Along with learning about the tennis, I have learned some other valuable life lessons.*

*I slipped and fell on my head during this trip. I passed out twice and the doctor diagnosed a severe concussion, forcing me to stay in a hospital overnight. Whoever thought it was a good idea to put marble floor in a tropical climate is probably about 2 IQ points from being a baby ape. One thing I really learned from this was a sense of responsibility for myself. I had to stay calm during a time of much fear and confusion. I could hardly remember my address and I had to keep my head on because I am just here with my coach. Overcoming anxieties in future tournaments will seem easy after this situation!*

*Traveling can be scary for a sixteen-year old, and with all the added bad stuff, it was tough. Instead of succumbing to the fear and craziness of life on tour, I will rise to the challenge. I will rise to the challenge because that is who I am, and that is what will be the driving force behind my success.*

*-The kid*

Although the hospital bill may live longer than the wounds, the lessons will far outlast them both, and for that, this first journey into professional tennis was well worth the investment. I hope it was informative for anyone who took the time to read it, and for those who did, thank you!

## Life on the Pro Circuit: A Follow Up

*This is the eleventh article in a series by Craig Cignarelli, who is traveling with a sixteen-year old girl for her first pro tournament.*

My last article placed a roadblock in the hero's journey and I left the protagonist injured, a journalistic faux pas akin to unbuttoning someone's trousers and then walking away. Apologies to the reader for my irresponsibility.

The kid has been diagnosed with a severe concussion and, four days later, is still have some trouble remembering dates – *no it's not 2008* - and distinguishing colors. Last night, after a few uneventful wheelchair journeys through crowded airports, we arrived back in the City of Angels with its ever-burgeoning traffic and unyielding pretension. This morning she had an appointment with her *physio*, who put her through a series of balance tests and determined she might be better off visiting a Betty Ford clinic. *Sorry, levity is my defense mechanism for countering crushing depression.*

Assuming she heals properly, it will be at least a week before she can start hitting again, and, frankly, I'm looking forward to getting her back on the court. The medical reports said everything was clean and she'd be 100% soon enough. Seeing a student laid out on a stretcher with a neck brace around her throat, however, can quell a coach and I confess to being a little anxious about all of this. We're talking about the future of a pretty talented sixteen-year old who's put a lot of time and dedication into a rather unforgiving sport. Universities and scholarships sit on the porch outside her front door, as though it were a hospital waiting room. When we start chasing the dragon again, I'll be tempted to mess up the scores just to poke a little fun, but I'm counting on my empathetic nature to win that battle.

I guess not all journeys end with some intense climactic moment. Sometimes the hero just decides to hit the ice bath and get back in the gym for a while. But then, isn't that what we want from our heroes – to know that they can fail, and heal, and get back up so they can cross the bridge into the sunset.



