

Channeling my inner Roger Federer ... sort of



LUKAS EGGEN
Commentary

As I stepped onto the tennis court, staring down my arch enemy, I paused and took a deep breath before I hit my first serve.

My opponent didn't know what was about to hit him. I tossed the ball into the air

and time seemed to slow to a crawl. I began my serving motion, made contact with the ball, and watched with anticipation to see my sure-fire ace.

I heard the ball bounce once, then twice.

Mission accomplished.

Except there was one small detail standing in my way. My serve didn't exactly make it in the serve area. Or in our court at all.

My opponent, really my friend who had the lack of foresight to agree to my

pleas for a tennis match, shook his head and started to jog to retrieve the ball.

When I was 10 or 11 years old, I took tennis lessons. I was the star pupil (at least in my head I was). Clearly those lessons haven't stuck with me through the years.

Instead, I'm stuck with a forehand that is semi-dependable, a backhand where half the time it goes in the general direction I want it to, and half the time it appears as though I've closed my eyes and just swung

wildly at the ball and just hoped it would land somewhere on the court.

In my defense, my friend wasn't a whole lot better than I was.

The good news, we were a good match for each other.

The bad news? There wasn't a ton of actual tennis being played. It was more: hit the ball once or twice, watch it sail out of bounds, pause, retrieve said balls, and repeat.

Riveting, I know. There were whiffs, balls

sailing over the fence, balls being hit into the net and balls hit all over the court. The only place that proved difficult to make the balls land was in our own court. Not the most promising development, especially with the Monmouth-Independence Fourth of July tennis tournament looming.

But I have a trump card — one that I expect to give me an edge to tournament glory (or at least not hit any innocent bystander with a wayward shot).

Dallas hosts an open court Wednesday evenings. Among the people there will be Thomas Gniadecki, Dallas High's foreign exchange student who placed third at the 5A boys state tennis championships.

Will he be able to pass along his knowledge, skill and athleticism to me in time to triumph on July 2 and 3? No. But, I do intend to pick his brain, learn a few tips and maybe, just maybe, go from a terrible tennis player to a slightly less terrible one.

Nichols: Plans to train with Kevin Boss

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That dream was dashed when he was kicked off the team.

"I was crying in the gym every night because I didn't have a team," Nichols said.

Prior to the 2013-14 season, Chaffey Community College offered Nichols a chance to play.

He jumped on the opportunity and averaged 8.6 points, 5.5 assists, 4.6 rebounds and 2.3 steals per game. He began to get interest from several Division I schools, including Washington State and Santa Clara, but things unraveled quickly.

"The recruiter at Washington State, I don't know what happened but something fell through," Nichols said. "Santa Clara went with someone else. That's the business aspect of this sport. I was heartbroken."

With just a few weeks left in the signing period, Nichols went from being a sought-after player to one without a clear sense of where he could go to play.

Western Oregon entered the picture, and in two seasons with the Wolves, he helped lead WOU to historic success. He still remembers those days spent crying in the gym and knows those experiences will help him for the ups and downs of chasing a professional basketball career.

"A lot of my fire comes from not having an opportunity," Nichols said. "When I do have that chance, I will do everything I can to fulfill it to its max potential."

Since the 2015-16 season ended, Nichols has plotted out



Julian Nichols, right, played a major role in Western Oregon's run to the NCAA Division II Final Four.

LUKAS EGGEN/Itemizer-Observer file

his course. He traveled to Bend on Monday to train with former professional football player and WOU alumni Kevin Boss and his staff.

"There are very few people who genuinely care about helping the next person," Nichols said. "He's one of those people. He asked me what I want to focus on. I told him I need to put on weight and

work on my strength and athleticism. I feel like if I do that, everything else will take care of itself. I know it will be hard work, but hard work is, like, my middle name."

Keeping his basketball skills sharp is easy.

Finding a chance to show what he can do is the challenge.

"That's more of the business aspect that I'm really unsure

about," Nichols said. "I can only control what I can control and that's my ability to play."

Signing with an agent could be the key to finding tryouts with teams, either in the United States or overseas, but finding the right agent isn't easy.

"I'm looking for someone who is up front and honest," Nichols said. "I want someone who has my best interest. I'm family ori-

ented, so whoever is coming from the outside in, they need to know how I am and how my parents are. It's a relationship you hope you can build on as you go."

But he knows in the world of professional basketball, sometimes it's about who you know that can get you a chance, and Nichols isn't about to rush a decision as big as this.

"It's a real business," Nichols said. "A lot of people don't see that. It goes back to finding the right person, and you don't have to pay as much attention to that side of it because they have your best interest."

Not having an agent means finding those chances to show what he can do are few and far between.

"The most difficult part is the waiting process," Nichols said. "The past two years, we've had a season, then all our offseason programs. Now, you have to make sure you're ready on call. You get fuzzy vision, and start to think, am I doing this right?"

Those doubts are fleeting. Instead, he's focused on being ready whenever that chance may be.

"When given the opportunity, whether it's a tryout or a showcase or whatever, I'll be ready to go out there and perform like I've been performing these last two years," Nichols said. "The most exciting part is I feel like how I did the August before I first reported at Western. I'm excited to get to work, show what I can do and prove myself. I'm ready for this."

Tennis: Tourney enters 43rd year this summer

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Brackets are available for singles, doubles and mixed doubles play. There are also different categories based on skill level, so no matter if you fancy yourself the next Novak Djokovic or have barely picked up a racket for the first time, the tournament offers a chance to hit the court.

"It would be great to have new players out," Youngren said. "Tennis is leveled into different flights, so a new player isn't trying to strike a hundred mile an hour serve."

Organizers hope to see a reverse in a recent trend, which has seen fewer players turn out.

"Tennis has seen a drop in competitive play in the last several years," Youngren said. "People shift in how they spend their time. I'm hoping the high school kids get out and practice tournament play. It's fun to see them competing and mixing together offseason. One couple who has played together from Corvallis for several years calls the tournament their little secret. Hopefully, we'll have enough turn out to make it enjoyable."

Sign-ups for the tournament are due by noon on June 29. And come Fourth of July weekend, be ready for two days full of tennis, regardless of the weather.

"We have learned that we should be flexible with the draws, the weather, etc.,"

Youngren said. "We have learned that people like to play in two events, but don't like to play in three or more rounds. We hope to limit play to two matches in any given day, unless opponents agree to a different set up."

All participants must bring a can of balls. Cost is \$15 for singles and \$25 for doubles. All proceeds from the tournament will go to the promotion of community tennis and Central High's boys and girls tennis teams.

For many of the participants, the mix of supporting the community and getting a chance to take part in a

shared love of tennis has helped make the Monmouth-Independence Fourth of July tennis tournament one tradition worth coming back to again and again.

"Tennis is a wholesome way to get to know your neighbors," Youngren said. "Tennis is something the whole family can do. It's a fun experience because of the community of tennis players. Many players have played in this tournament for a number of years. It's great to get together. It's also a great time for newcomers because it is low-keyed."



LUKAS EGGEN/Itemizer-Observer file

Monmouth-Independence's Fourth of July tennis tournament offers singles, doubles and mixed doubles play.

Williams: Teammates noticing improvement

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Others saw the difference during the Chargers' spring organized team activities.

Perhaps the most encouraging was from starting quarterback Philip Rivers, who told the Chargers.com's managing editor Ricky Henne that Williams impressed Rivers with his work ethic and drive.

"(Tyrell) is one of those guys that you saw flashes of (last year that) this guy could be something," Rivers said. "You all saw those flashes. ... Gosh, he played at a small school, but if he could come along, he could have a chance. And I think he would even tell you that he's still coming along, but it does look like he's going to have a chance to make

the team and help us. We'll see as he continues to progress, but he's come a long way since last year. ... He's hungry. He takes every little thing you give him, and I have seen him get steadily get better every single game. ... His arrow and game are ascending quickly."

Williams, who practiced with both the first and second team offenses, knows he's still a work-in-progress, but his approach has changed drastically from a year ago.

"Last year, my main thing was to do what I need to do to make the team," Williams said. "I was always kind of nervous and tried not to mess up. For me personally this year, I'm trying to make an impact on the field and

be out there every down. I want to make sure I'm ready to go for games. My mentality isn't just making the team anymore, it's making a difference on the field."

Williams hopes that drive allows him to not only land a spot on the Chargers 53-man active roster, but a chance to continue living out his dream and becoming one of San Diego's go-to passing options.

"Every day I come out on the field and I can't believe I'm there," Williams said. "I always make sure I know and appreciate what I have. It's crazy to me to be given the opportunity to play. I want to go out there every single practice and make as many plays as I can."

Solution on Page 11A

		6					5
				5		3	
4		3		1			
8	6		5	3			
2		7					5
3	4		7		8		9
	8		6				
			1				
9			3		2	8	6

Sudoku

Difficulty: ★★☆☆☆

Row →	4	3	2	8	1	6	7	5	9
	5	6	9	3	7	4	8	1	2
	1	7	8	9	5	2	4	6	3
Three-by-three square →	3	4	7	2	8	5	6	9	1
	2	1	6	7	4	9	3	8	5
	9	8	5	1	6	3	2	7	4
	7	9	1	4	3	8	5	2	6
	8	5	3	6	2	1	9	4	7
	6	2	4	5	9	7	1	3	8

How to do Sudoku

Fill in the grid so the numbers 1 through 9 appear just once in every column, row, and three-by-three square. See example above.