

At 14, Nishikori began path to the U.S. Open final

By Howard Fendrich

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Kei Nishikori's journey to the U.S. Open final began a decade ago, when he was spotted as a teen at a tryout in Japan and invited to move to Florida to attend a tennis academy.

Nishikori was among the first beneficiaries of a project to improve Japanese tennis funded by former Sony executive Masaaki Morita.

"Kei was just 14, and he didn't speak a word of English," said Nick Bollettieri, a member of the International Tennis Hall of Fame who coached players such as Andre Agassi, Boris Becker, Jim Courier, and Monica Seles. "He was gifted. Great speed. Great eyes."

As Nishikori worked his way up the world rankings after turning professional in 2007, he became so well-known back home that it seemed less distracting to stay in Florida. On the rare occasions he plays in Japan, tournaments sell out within hours.

Now that he's the first man from Asia to make it to the final of a Grand Slam singles tournament, his profile — and that of his sport — figures to grow exponentially in his home country. Even though he hasn't lived there for years, the nation was watching as he headed into the final against Marin Cilic.

"Even from 17, 18, from when he won his first title, it's been sometimes even a bit over-the-top, maybe all a bit too early," said Nishikori's agent, Olivier Van Lindonk.

"They are so intrigued by their heroes that they want to know everything," Van Lindonk said. "I've heard so many questions about: When did he eat? When did he go to bed?"

Nishikori's surprising 6-4, 1-6, 7-6 (4), 6-3 victory over No. 1-ranked and seven-time major champion Novak Djokovic in the U.S. Open semifinals began at about 1:00am on a Sunday in Japan, but people across the country stayed awake to keep track.

When the match ended, Nishikori told the crowd in Arthur Ashe Stadium during an on-court interview: "I hope it's big news



AP Photo/Mike Groll



AP Photo/Koji Sasahara

in Japan. ... I feel the support from Japan. ... It's 4 o'clock in the morning, but I hope a lot of people watched it."

They did. As soon as he checked his phone, Nishikori found 20 messages from folks in Japan, despite the hour. Hundreds of fans celebrated after following along on television at a hotel in Nishikori's hometown of Matsue, a sleepy town with a population of less than 200,000.

It was the lead story on Sunday morning television news programs, and the mass circulation *Asahi Shimbun* issued a special online edition touting Nishikori's success.

"This is easily the biggest news in the history of Japanese tennis," said Jun Kamiwazumi, a former member of Japan's Davis Cup team that reached the third round at the 1973 U.S. Open. "This will

HISTORY ON THE HARD COURT. Kei Nishikori (top photo) of Japan returns a shot against Marin Cilic of Croatia during the championship match at the 2014 U.S. Open tennis tournament in New York. Cilic won the championship, beating Nishikori 6-3, 6-3, 6-3. Kei's journey to the U.S. Open final began a decade ago, when he was spotted as a teen at a tryout in Japan and invited to move to Florida to attend a tennis academy. Pictured below are workers of Japan's leading instant noodle producer, Nissin Food Products Co., a sponsor of Nishikori, watching the live broadcast of the championship game.

have a huge impact on the sport here, and I expect many young children will be inspired to emulate him."

Others such as Bollettieri and Djokovic echoed that opinion.

"This is definitely huge for Japan. It's a big country, over 100 million people. This can definitely be a great encouragement for tennis in that country," said Djokovic, who is from Serbia. "He's been around for the last couple of years. He's been making a lot of success. But playing [in the] finals of a Grand Slam ... [that] is definitely something different."

It also will make Nishikori even more money than the \$10 million in endorsements he reportedly already earns from sponsors such as clothing company Uniqlo, food company Nissin, and sports equipment company Wilson.

Nishikori, the first man from Japan to be ranked in the ATP's top 10, has existing contracts that include escalator clauses providing extra money for certain accomplishments, such as reaching a Grand Slam final.

It adds up to a far bigger take than his on-court prize money, which was less than \$2 million this season entering the U.S. Open.

But what matters more to the 24-year-old Nishikori, by the sound of it, is the impact he can have in his native country.

"I hope more kids start playing tennis," he said. "U.S. has a lot of respect for the sports, but not as much in Japan. I hope I can make a little bit difference."

"He's a hero there. He's been a hero there for a while. Ever since he hit the top 20, it's been crazy. But we're getting to another level now," said Van Lindonk, the agent. "You become very popular when you win."

Associated Press writer Jim Armstrong in Tokyo contributed to this report.

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