

Classroom Extends to Court

By ADAM HIMMELSBACH

COLLEGE PARK, Md. — Two 15-year-old tennis players are blasting forehands at each other on a crisp and clear weekday morning, when most other 15-year-olds are in high school classrooms.

The players, Denis Kudla and Junior Ore, were ranked first and second in the nation in the 14-and-under age group last year by the United States Tennis Association. On Monday, they will play an exhibition match at Madison Square Garden before Roger Federer and Pete Sampras do the same.

But on this day, they are hitting in front of an audience of three. As the session ends, Ore slaps a blistering shot that Kudla cannot reach. The players leave the court, firing quick insults as they walk.

“One of us is always going to be mad because we lost,” Ore said. “Today, he’s mad.”

But the rivalry softens 30 minutes later, when Ore and Kudla are sitting in a small classroom watching their teacher complete a virtual dissection of a frog at the Junior Tennis Champions Center, where they are full-time students.

Kudla smiled and complained that his mother would not let him pierce his ears. Ore chuckled and said he regretted devouring a burrito bowl during lunch.

They are with 10 other full-time students, ages 12 to 15, who sometimes address one another by their most recent tennis rankings rather than by their first names.

“Sometimes it’s easy to forget that they’re just kids,” said the tennis center’s director, Martin Blackman. “But they’re kids with endless potential.”

The Junior Tennis Champions Center’s high-performance program is unlike many of the academies that dot Florida and Southern California.

There is no ocean nearby, but there is a Metro stop across the street. There are no dormitories, but six students live with coaches. There is no dining hall, but a staff member accepts lunch orders for Chipotle.

And sometimes it snows here.

“But look at all the kids who grew up in Moscow that are just phenomenal on the pro tour,” said Ken Brody, who founded this not-for-profit tennis academy nine years ago. “Moscow’s a lot colder than Washington.”

In addition to the 12 full-time students, 80 players ages 4-18 participate in the after-school program. Blackman said the cost for the six full-time students who live with coaches was about \$30,000 a year.

About \$250,000 in financial aid will be awarded this year.

“If we were for-profit, we’d be losing money hand over fist,” said Blackman, a former tennis professional who as a teenager roomed with Andre Agassi at the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy. “We’re a program that will find city kids with potential and give them the opportunity of a lifetime.”





The center holds free tennis festivals twice a year for children ages 4-8. The festival typically draws from 100 to 200 people and often leads to something more permanent. Kudla and Ore attended one of the festivals seven years ago, and they have been with the program since.

Kudla and Ore live with their families in suburban Washington. Their days at the center start at 8 a.m. with two hours of classes. The classroom is a long and narrow space on the second floor of the center's two-story building. Much of the curriculum comes from the Laurel Springs School, an accredited online distance-learning program based in California.

“Sometimes I wonder why I started this, and really wish I went to a regular school,” Kudla said. “But then I realize a bunch of kids wish they were in my spot. And a regular school wouldn't let me travel like this.”

Kudla has played in tournaments in Peru, Ecuador, Mexico and Costa Rica.

In the classroom, there are maps of the United States and the world attached to one wall. There is a diagram of the solar system, and a large dry-erase board used for Spanish lessons. On this day, the board shows the conjugation of the verb jugar, meaning “to play.”

In the end, that is why the students “11 boys and a girl” are here. And that is why there is another dry-erase board in the back with each of their names on it. Whenever they misbehave, they earn a strike, and three strikes keeps them off the tennis court that day.

“It's almost impossible for them to focus,” said Mark Santangelo, who teaches English, history and health. “It's a daily challenge to make them realize they have a small amount of time to do an extraordinary amount of work.”

After their two-hour classroom session, the students receive tennis instruction for about two hours. The facility has 12 indoor and 15 outdoor courts, including two made of red clay shipped each spring from France.

After lunch, the students have 90 minutes more of classroom time and 90 minutes more of tennis.

Blackman said the goal was for each of the students to earn college scholarships. He said Kudla and Ore were among the few with a chance to succeed professionally.

Ore said: “It's a lot of work. But I'd really like to reach the point where people see me and say, “Oh, yeah, I know that kid.” And also I think it will help me with the girls.”



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