

DISPATCH

The lonely torture of Wimbledon dreams

At the lower echelons of the pro-tennis hierarchy, every defeat threatens both rankings and financial survival.

By Johnny Kauffman

PHOTOGRAPHY by NYDIA BLAS

Raul Garcia was scrambling to survive. He chased a ball across the baseline of the court as it flew into the far corner. The 24-year-old righty gripped a black and neon-green tennis racket and lashed a forehand.

Energy rippled through his slim frame. Garcia's torso wrenched and his feet lifted a few centimetres off the ground, and he was, for a moment, floating. To punctuate the shot, his arm coiled around his head with the force of his follow-through.

Loaded with topspin, the ball looped across the net towards Tyler Stice, a quick, stocky 25-year-old. Garcia watched closely as it landed on the black surface, which was surrounded by two levels of metal scaffolding. The temporary arena vibrated with throbbing electronic music meant to entertain some 500 standing spectators who yelled from above.

Garcia preferred the quiet anxiety of matches on the professional tour. His career-high ranking was 1,248th. As his own accountant and manager, he knew he needed money. Garcia had no corporate sponsor, wealthy benefactors or rich parents. He wasn't making enough in prize money to cover his most basic expenses: flights, hotel rooms and food. It was why he'd signed up for the second season of this flashy upstart tennis league staged at a cavernous film studio in Atlanta, Georgia. If he played well enough tonight, he could make \$1,500.

Garcia tried to clear all this from his mind. He watched as Stice extended an arm to reach the ball, slicing it with underspin. Garcia hoped to hit a forehand in reply. He'd need to get around the ball coming towards him. Hastily, he pushed off with his right foot, then his left, lurching backwards. He judged precisely how the ball's underspin would affect its bounce. Swinging low to high, he lifted another shot across the net, deep into a corner. Stice over-ran it and hit a backhand out. Garcia's point.

Stice stepped to the baseline and spun in a serve that jumped off the court. Garcia anticipated a backhand. He gripped his racket, left hand above right. When his arms stiffened, they revealed



a flaw that threatened to haunt him until his death. When Garcia struck the ball, most of the power he generated came from his shoulders. His relatively brittle backhand was weak compared with the torque of the wrist flick that infused his forehand. But even this fact won't smother Garcia's dreams of playing in one of tennis's four Grand Slams.

Stice attacked Garcia's shot, whacking it again towards his backhand. Garcia lunged, but barely got a racket on the ball. The \$1,500 would go to Stice. Garcia knew it was cash that could have funded a flight to a Futures tournament where a few wins would deliver the ranking points he needed to reach 600th in the world by 2028. That would be just a first step towards a spot in the main draw of a Grand Slam, where most players are ranked in the top 100.

But this unconventional league, financed by venture capital and thirstily named Intennse, gave Garcia another way to fund his quest. It guaranteed him \$34,000 if he played all of June and July. There were no ranking points available, but it was a rare opportunity to save some money. Meanwhile, he could tend to his skill and, in the relative calm of the summer, dwell on his dreams of playing one day in the tournaments that, to his great disappointment, he still watched from afar. "I think this is the toughest sport ever," Garcia told me. "It is brutal."

GARCIA WAS SIX YEARS OLD WHEN HIS BROTHER woke him up early one February morning to watch the 2009 Australian Open final between Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer. Nadal won the five-set epic, delaying Federer's quest to equal Pete Sampras's record of 14 career Grand Slam titles. As Garcia watched Federer weep after the match, he realised the overwhelming magnitude of the sport's major tournaments. Federer's suffering inspired Garcia. If I'm going to play tennis, he thought, I want to play at a Grand Slam.

Garcia's grandmother was his first coach. He spent hours behind her house in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia's largest city, sliding around on a patch of uneven dirt, hitting against a grey cement wall. "The balls would just go everywhere, and my grandma was getting mad at me," he said. From a chair nearby, she hollered advice to Garcia that his late grandfather might have once offered at the tennis academy he led. "You need to move your feet," she said.

Four years later, aged 10, Garcia won his first tournament, and "everyone started looking at me". His parents quickly encountered the limits of the training and competition available in Bolivia to help their son sharpen his raw talent. He'd cruise through the early rounds of junior tournaments, and encounter the same few players again and again in the semis and finals. Bolivia has many beautiful clay courts, Garcia told me, but "we just don't have the knowledge. We're not a country that develops players."

At 14, he was selected for a months-long training programme in China. "I was a baby," Garcia said, "I went through a lot of shit being so young." He was the sole Spanish-speaker selected for the programme. Garcia begged his mother to fly him home early, but she refused. His preparations for the lonely professional tour had begun.

When he returned home, Garcia earned the top spot in Bolivia's under-16 and under-18 rankings. He made plans to travel to Argentina, a sanctuary for tennis in South America, where he would train and eventually join the professional tour, but the Covid-19 pandemic kept him at home. Garcia's older brother advised him to reply to the many scholarship offers he'd received from coaches at top universities in the US. Garcia's poor results on English exams weren't a problem for the coach at Kennesaw State University and so in 2020 Garcia moved, alone, to the suburbs of Atlanta. He won more singles matches than any player in the university's history, and by the time he graduated in 2024 he was anxious to test himself on the professional tour.

THIS SUMMER, GARCIA INVITED ME TO WATCH him practise at a park with a few of the 80 or so tennis nomads from around the world enticed by Intennse to settle in Atlanta for June and July. Neon racket bags and coolers sat haphazardly along one end of the chain-link fence surrounding four hard courts. A red-shouldered hawk flew above. Hip-hop music pumped from a cylindrical Bluetooth speaker near a net post.

Garcia smiled as he sprang around the court, dark brown hair stuck to his forehead in sweaty strands. He practised his "serve-plus-one" across from a smooth-moving lefty. The purpose of the drill was for Garcia to hit a serve powerful enough that the return could be easily slapped away for a winner, probably with his forehand. If he mastered this tactic, it could relieve some of the pressure on his weaker backhand.

When I'd spoken to Garcia days earlier, he seemed quiet; a listener more than a talker. I interpreted as confidence his willingness to share with me the details of his journeys on the professional tour. At practice, though, he was transformed. He was himself here. When he won a point he'd turn away from his opponent and pump a fist, something I didn't notice other players doing. It was as if he was reminding himself he was already excellent at tennis and had made himself slightly better. He could be goofy too. After one doubles point, he quickly took a knee and tapped his leg, offering his partner a place to rest her shoe while he mimed shining it, an imitation of a popular football celebration.

During a water break, I greeted Garcia with a fist bump and told the others gathered that I hoped to speak to as many of the league's players as I could. There was a YouTube star with nearly 200,000 subscribers and a woman who left the professional tour for eight years to raise her kids and divorced her husband when he baulked at her dream of a comeback. There was a powerful server who told me she suffered from borderline personality disorder and occasionally wanted to harm herself after double faults and an Australian with a dart-like backhand whose Patreon had six contributors. These were just some of the eclectic troupe of hustlers, wanderers and misfits. Also among them was a 33-year-old from Portland, Oregon, with an elegant one-handed backhand.

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The story of Elmar Ejupovic's career held warnings for younger dreamers like Garcia. Ejupovic won his first match at a professional tournament in 2011 when he was just 18. He's imposing on court, 193cm tall, with a thick brown beard and rich baritone voice. Looking over his many years of results on the tour, I saw names most tennis fans would recognise. In 2015, Ejupovic defeated Casper Ruud in three sets. In 2019, he lost to Jannik Sinner in two. By 2023, Ejupovic had reached a career-high ranking of 273rd. It wouldn't be easy, but if he could make the quarterfinals of four Challenger tournaments, a level above Futures, it might be enough to secure entry at a Grand Slam. Like Garcia, that was Ejupovic's dream, and it was beginning to seem material.

But Ejupovic's quest stalled when he and his girlfriend of 12 years broke up. The emotions followed him on to court, he told me, and his level dropped. "The results were not there," he said. Three years later, Ejupovic is 33 with a new baby at home and a ranking of 742nd. He's not sure how much longer he'll keep trying to make a Grand Slam. "I'm grinding on Court 30 with nobody watching against one guy that is like a dog chasing a bone," he said.

As I watched Garcia bound around the practice courts, I imagined him as one of Ejupovic's opponents on the tour, happy, hungry and obsessed.

Garcia told me he considered himself "kinda crazy". Maybe mental instability is to be expected in a sport that ranks players from first to 2,271st. I asked him what sacrifices he'd made in pursuit of a Grand Slam, and he couldn't name one. Every choice was meant to help him reach his goal. Any other approach would be a sacrifice, even going back to Bolivia. "I'd love to be with my family, for sure, but that's just the way it is,"

Garcia said. "I see them when I have to see them. I wouldn't consider that a sacrifice."

When practice was over, I invited Garcia out for smoothies. Inside a chilly, air-conditioned café, he explained how he survived on the professional tour.

It started on the website of the International Tennis Federation. Garcia paid the organisation's \$80 registration fee and browsed upcoming tournaments. After graduating from university, the first event he entered was in Kingston, Jamaica. Flying there in January 2025 would be relatively cheap, he figured, and a friend on the tour agreed to share a hotel room. At stake was \$15,000 in total prize money and as many as 15 ranking points, enough to launch Garcia to about 1,000th in the world. (Ejupovic told me that, depending on the season, players in the top 300 can usually secure entry into Challengers. The main draw of a Grand Slam takes a ranking of about 100th.)

When Garcia landed in Jamaica, a country he'd never visited, he walked alone through the airport, hauling his racket bag. He struggled to track down a ride. Garcia's hotel was hosting the tournament. He arrived to learn that the friend he planned to stay with was injured and already travelling home. Garcia had no choice but to pay the full price of the room.

After he woke the next morning, Garcia awkwardly approached other players and asked



FROM LEFT: ELMAR EJUPOVIC, RAUL GARCIA AND MALKIA NGOUNOUE. NGOUNOUE, RANKED 1,103RD IN THE WORLD, IS AN ADVOCATE FOR THE MANY PLAYERS ON TOUR WHO STRUGGLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AS SHE HAS DONE DURING HER QUEST TO TAKE HER POWER GAME TO A GRAND SLAM

them if they might share a room. Oren Vasser, an American, agreed. Garcia was relieved, but he'd soon learn that Vasser was his next opponent. In Futures qualifying, there are no ball kids or line judges. Vasser and Garcia would have to do it all themselves. Garcia won in a final-set tiebreaker. He was anxious as he returned to the hotel room. "He's not my friend," Garcia thought. "It's gonna be awkward."

He walked in and saw Vasser lying on a bed, looking at his phone. Garcia quickly scooted into the bathroom for a shower, and to his relief, when he came out, Vasser spoke to him. Garcia could relax. "Tennis is a really selfish sport," Garcia said. "Yes, you have friends, but they're not really your friends, 'cause at the end of the day they wanna beat you."

Garcia won two more matches in Jamaica, both of them close, and eventually lost in the quarterfinals. He gained two ranking points and made \$438. The trip cost him \$2,800. "I had a good week," he said, "and I still lost money." The success he'd had, even if it didn't pay, motivated Garcia because his dream of reaching a Grand Slam felt closer. He knew he had other ways to make money. He gave lessons to kids and worked as a hitting partner for Taylor Townsend, the number 2 doubles player on the women's tour. He'd use what he made, and the salary from the league this summer, to fund his journey.

Of the 132 players who reach a Grand Slam main draw, 131 leave as losers. Garcia finds comfort in that

GARCIA AND EJUPOVIC TOOK A BREAK FROM training one afternoon to watch tennis. I'd invited them to a conference room at the film studio hosting Intense. Protein-enhanced granola bars and seaweed snacks tempted in a basket on the table. A television took up most of one wall. Daniil Medvedev and Marin Čilić ran across it. They'd played in a combined 332 Grand Slam singles matches. Today, they were at a tournament in 's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands, a lead-up to the grass-court season's finale a few weeks later, at Wimbledon.

I'd sometimes wondered if the pros in Atlanta were really skilled enough to make it on the tour. As they studied the screen, Garcia and Ejupovic told me that less separated them from Medvedev and Čilić than I might think. "They're hitting the ball deep, they're taking the ball early, but they're not hitting faster," Ejupovic said. "I'm hitting faster than most of the guys on the tour." Garcia's forehand, Ejupovic added admiringly, would rush the stars.

The big difference was psychological, Garcia said. The men playing on TV knew precisely how hard they could hit the ball while still keeping it in the court. "These guys play week after week," Garcia said. "At one point, you know yourself." Medvedev and Čilić accept the limits of their power. They know they can only do so much to prevent their opponent from chasing down their shots.

Garcia and Ejupovic tried to think in the same way about their quests for Grand Slams. "You have

to be fine with accepting that you might fail in this whole thing," Ejupovic said. "Once I understood that, I started winning more matches." Four weeks after his daughter was born last year, Ejupovic had to leave the country to resolve a visa issue. He travelled to a Futures tournament in Guadalajara, Mexico, and cruised through the draw without dropping a set. "Sometimes when you're extremely relaxed, things happen," he said. Ejupovic will try to decide this autumn whether he's willing to go back on tour, away from his wife and daughter.

Garcia pointed out that of the 128 players who reach the main draw of a Grand Slam, 127 lose before the tournament's end. "You're going to lose a lot," he said, "and you have to be OK with it if you want to make it to the top." Ejupovic offered the example of Jan-Lennard Struff, a German ranked 77th in the world. By the middle of 2026 he had played in two Grand Slams and won nearly half a million dollars in prize money, an astoundingly successful season. He'd lost 11 matches, and won only six.

I asked Garcia and Ejupovic if, when they are at home, they watch much of this cruel sport on TV. "I do," Garcia said, "I'm obsessed." Ejupovic does not. When he is in the middle of a competitive match, he told me, "you feel like a gladiator fighting for your life". Medvedev and Čilić, they weren't struggling to survive. "There's no hustle, there's no fighting," Ejupovic said. "These players are boring." **FT**

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