

Matt plans a pro tennis career

Edinburgh's Matt Rankin, 20, is a former British junior No 1 and the 2022 Scottish junior player of the year who is currently on a tennis scholarship at university in Kentucky, USA.

During his junior days Matt played grand slam events in Melbourne, New York and Wimbledon and we caught up with him to learn that his target is to enter the pro. ranks when studies finish in much the same way as his close friend, Jacob Fearnley, who is making such inroads at the top end of the men's game including gaining direct entry to the highly prestigious Indian Wells tournament next week, has done.

Matt speaks thoughtfully in a question-and-answer format about how much inspiration he takes from Jacob, a Texas Christian University graduate, while also giving his unique insight into what a sports scholarship to a USA College really means.

1/ HOW MUCH DO YOU THINK THE MOVE TO KENTUCKY (IN 2023) HAS BENEFITTED YOUR TENNIS SO FAR?

"Being at Kentucky has benefitted my tennis hugely. It's a huge sports school so a lot of emphasis is on the sports programs and every sport is also greatly supported by the public. The coaches are excellent, training programme is tough but first class and having access to great facilities makes practising easier and more accessible in between classes.

There is time to work on the small details of the sport which can make the difference."

2/ WHAT SORT OF LEVEL ARE YOU PLAYING AT COMPARED TO IT YOU'D STAYED AT HOME AND GONE TO UNIVERSITY HERE?

"There are many levels of tennis in the US College system. It varies greatly from team to team and conference to conference. Being at Kentucky we play in the SEC Conference which is one of the toughest and strongest Conferences in the US. The level of every team in the SEC is exceptional. Most players who play in SEC teams have professional experience, some are very highly ATP ranked so EVERY match is hard. There is also a great university tennis program in the UK. Stirling University have an excellent tennis team, programme and facilities. The schedule is maybe not as long and vigorous but excellent. Unfortunately they don't have the budgets the schools

have in the US which I would say is the biggest difference."

3/ WHAT IS THE BACK UP LIKE IN TERMS OF COACHING, FITNESS ETC LIKE?

"We have three great coaches at Kentucky who are there for you whenever you ask. If I need to work on my serve with Matt Gordon he is always there to help or if I wish to work on my forehand with Cedric Kauffmann he is also always there for you. I like to hit a lot every day so coach Carey Rubin is a fantastic coach to hit with. Each coach offers something different which is extremely useful. We have a great support team around us like our fitness coach James who drives us hard in the gym and travels with us on the road. The physio team are amazing. I access treatment every day whether it's a just a massage or more intense treatment. There's also a team of doctors on hand if you are ill or require any advice. All of the bigger teams in the US have similar set ups."

4/ WORD HAS IT MATCHES CAN BE CONDUCTED IN A VERY BOISTERIOUS ATMOSPHERE. HAS THAT BEEN YOUR EXPERIENCE?

"Yes, matches can be extremely loud and hostile, particularly away games to rival schools. You have to be very focussed and not let the environment throw you off your game as opposing fans will try anything to upset you. There is no atmosphere like it!"

5/ARE YOU PLANNING A PRO CAREER AFTER LEAVING COLLEGE?

"Yes, my plan is to go Pro after College. I've two years left at school after this one and hope to start immediately playing ITF Futures in singles and doubles. I've already been fortunate to have gained experience playing a number of Futures already, gaining ATP points in singles and doubles and enjoyed reaching the Doubles final of a Futures in Michigan last year with my good friend Alafia Ayeni."

6/ ANY PLANS TO COME BACK TO THE UK AND PLAY TOURNAMENTS THIS SUMMER?

"I haven't had a chance to plan my schedule for the summer yet as we are in the middle of our tennis season here in Kentucky and school work is also full on at the moment. Very soon I will sit down with my coaches and plan the schedule for the summer. I will certainly be home in the UK at some point in the summer, so will hopefully play a tournament in the UK."

7/ HOW MUCH OF AN INSPIRATION HAS IT BEEN TO SEE JACOB EMERGE FROM THE US COLLEGE SYSTEM AND IMMEDIATELY MAKE HIS MARK?

"Jake has always been an inspiration to me. We've known each other a long time from days in Buckstone Primary and Merchiston Castle School and more recently training together in Edinburgh and Stirling. I've always felt he would reach the top in our sport and it's great to see him achieve this going through the College system."

8/ FROM WHAT YOU KNOW OF HIM – AND FEW SCOTS WILL KNOW HIM BETTER, TENNIS-WISE – HOW HOW AN JACOB FEARNLEY, CURRENTLY WORLD NO 82, CLIMB?

"Jake can reach the very top. He has the complete game to do this. He's a great athlete, physically in great shape, technically solid and very strong mentally, so the complete package. The challenge in tennis is to stay injury free as the physicality of the game gets a lot tougher the higher the level you play. I wouldn't be surprised to see Jake get into the top 50 very soon. We keep in touch regularly and it's great to see him reaching the top of our sport."

9/ WHAT IS IT YOU FIND BEST IN THE AMERICAN SYSTEM? AND WHAT DO YOU MISS MOST ABOUT HOME?

"There is a good balance between the tennis and academics in the US. For aspiring tennis players it allows time and the support to improve. The facilities tend to be excellent in the US schools. The greater budgets allow players to access proper training, treatment and equipment. I enjoy the format of the College matches.

Doubles is always frantic as its only 1 set we play, so anyone can win.

I miss the food back home in the UK, especially my mum's home cooking. It can be challenging to always find healthy options in the US. I'm extremely careful about my diet and try to eat as healthily as possible. I also miss the culture in Scotland and Edinburgh as a city. The culture and people in Kentucky are amazing and I've thoroughly enjoyed experiencing living here the last couple of years although I've yet to sample the Bourbon Kentucky is famous for as I'm not 21 yet!"

10/ HAVE YOU NOW HAD TO FOCUS ON A PARTICULAR ACADEMIC LINE OF STUDY AS WELL AS PLAYING TENNIS?

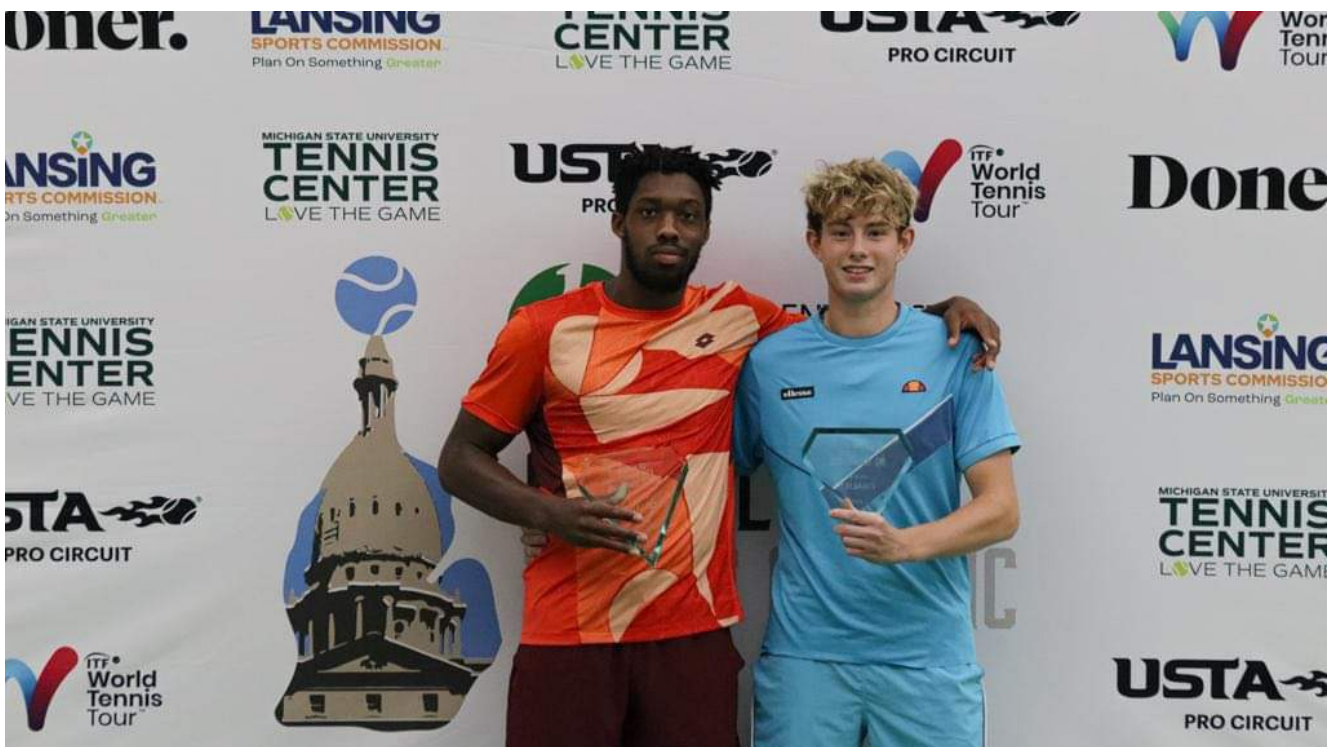
"The academia in the US is very different to the UK. For the first 2 years of study we have to complete mandatory subjects before we specialise on our chosen Major which is Economics for me. I've had to do courses in Music, Spanish, Maths, English and other interesting topics. We also have to achieve

90% or above throughout the

semester to be given an A, which can be extremely challenging keeping a high GPA. This semester I've been studying accounting and marketing which are tough subjects. If we don't do well in classes we can be dropped from training and playing in matches so it's important to stay on top of your school work."

11/ ARE YOU COMMITTED TO PLAYING (BRITISH) INTER-COUNTY WEEK IN 2025?

"My intention is to be home to play County Week. I'm hoping I can fit County Cup into my summer schedule. I always love playing in this event especially when we're on the grass in Eastbourne. The East of Scotland have an excellent team and it's always great to be part of this week. We just need to try and convince Jake to join us this summer!"



Matt Rankin