

THE KESSLER TENNIS FAMILY: AN AMERICAN SUCCESS STORY

By Ed Krass

Being a former college tennis coach and running tennis camps for high school aged tournament players has led me to attend all NCAA Division 1 Tennis Championships on the East Coast since 1984. This year, I attended the Men's and Women's NCAAs at Wake Forest University. One of the funniest and strangest things happened to me on the second day of the Team Tournament -- I ran into Carl Kessler, one of the players I coached on my first college team at University of Central Florida back in 1983.

Carl could not believe that he was talking to me, as I was wearing a silly looking Tampa Bay Buccaneer hat, with red clown threads, and I was acting pretty rowdy! Carl, who played between #6 to #8 on that UCF team, literally fell back ten feet when I told him my name! It had been 35 years since we last saw each other and worked together at UCF! I was a 23-year-old head coach and Carl was playing his second season of college tennis at UCF.

I then asked Carl, quizzically, "What are you doing here at the NCAAs?" He told me that BOTH his son, McClain Kessler, and his daughter, McCartney Kessler, played for the Florida Gators. He also said that they were both ranked as high as top 10 in the nation in their age brackets before entering college. I was absolutely floored and amazed to hear this unique story of AMERICAN TENNIS FAMILY success!! Hooray for American tennis, I said to myself! I also was curious, how did this all happen? What was the Kessler's approach?

Carl told me that he married a girl named Julie Driggers, who also played at UCF when I was coaching the UCF Men's Team. Carl invited me to have dinner that night and meet his family. When I arrived to meet the Kesslers, there was Carl, Julie, McClain and McCartney all eating Mexican Food with other members of the Gator team. The Men's Team had just lost a 4-3 heartbreaker, in the team Quarterfinal Championships, to Texas A & M. Julie, Carl's wife and mother of McClain and McCartney, explained to me that I was responsible for recruiting her and her playing for UCF!! I said to myself, which the Kesslers later confirmed, that I was indirectly involved in their family's fantastic and unique success story. Now, I needed to delve into their stories of how their two kids became so darn good -- to both get a scholarship to play for the Florida Gators. I had to learn more!

McClain Kessler was a 2015 High School Graduate; He was a Blue-Chip, ranked as high as #1 in Georgia, #1 in the South and #3 in the U.S. on <http://www.tennisrecruiting.net>. McCartney Kessler was a December of 2017 High School Graduate; She was also a Blue-Chip, ranked as high as #1 in Georgia, #1 in the South and #10 in the U.S. on <http://www.tennisrecruiting.net>

I wanted to know how, as parents, were they able to help their son and daughter develop into some of America's finest tennis players and exactly who was their coach and what did they do to enable all this success?

As I dug further, I learned that the Kesslers worked with a well-known, Atlanta-area junior coach named Stephen Diaz during their formative junior years.

Here below is an excerpt below of my interview, with questions and answers, for both Carl Kessler, the Dad, and with Stephen Diaz, the coach:

INTERVIEW with Dad, Carl Kessler:

(Q) When did both kids want to start playing and what was their initial program like?

(A) They started playing around 7 years old and started tournaments around 8 years old. They learned from watching us and we taught them some basic strokes.

(Q) What obstacles did they both have to overcome?

(A) They both went to regular school and there was no one to hit with in Calhoun. We knew if they continued to love the sport that they would have to travel to Atlanta to improve which is 55 miles from our home -- which was a challenge on its own because we both worked in Calhoun. Also, being 3 years apart, and McClain being the older one, it wasn't beneficial to hit with each other initially.

(Q) What was your philosophy about raising 2 top level tournament players?

(A) We really just played tennis as a family and the kids attended our adult league matches that we played, so I think they decided they would rather play than just sit and watch us. Remember also that we had to travel just to play adult matches. Once they started playing competitively we told them to be prepared and control the things that they could control and try their hardest with each match. We always wanted them to respect their opponents and never, ever give up. As long as they held up their end of the deal, we would keep doing whatever it took to get them to tournaments which was very difficult to do.

(Q) How much did you sacrifice financially to help with their process of becoming great?

(A) We had no outside support and it's really impossible to know how much we spent for training, rackets, strings, shoes, clothes, travel, hotels, entry fees, etc., etc., and not to mention being away from work. We only traveled outside of the U.S. twice and that was just last year with McCartney. Whatever the total amount was, it was worth it to have had the time with them and see them enjoy the sport of tennis.

(Q) How much did love, respect, discipline, sleep, diet and passion play in each kid?

(A) Love and passion for the sport carried them to this point. That in turn led them to understand that they had to be smart with their sleep, diet and preparedness in order to keep improving.

(Q) What was each kid's recipe for success?

(A) They never said that they didn't want to practice. They were and still are excited to practice and play to get better. It was never a chore.

(Q) What role did you both have as parents? Are there any details that could help other parents?

(A) We have failed many times and have learned from our mistakes. However, we just were there to support them through good and bad times. We are their biggest cheerleaders but also were there to keep them humble and kind without robbing them of their confidence. That was and will always be a challenge to maintain that proper balance.

(Q) How many coaches were involved and when did they work with the players?

(A) They started once a week with one of our good friends, Anthony Hunt, who is a great coach but doesn't teach full time. A tennis coach was hired at our recreation department by the name of Brent Molyneux who played at Mercer College. They went to Brent about 2 times per week for drills/lessons after he moved to Rome, GA., which is about 30 minutes away. He was great with the fundamentals of the game and stroke development but by the time McClain was 15 and McCartney 12, we had to look in Atlanta to find players to play with at or above their level and that ultimately led us to the Stephen Diaz Academy. Stephen was awesome because he loves the kids and the sport, and he is amazing with point construction and strategy against particular opponents. We are thankful for all the coaches they have worked with.

(Q) How valuable is finding the right coach?

(A) It's critical to find someone who is honest, loves tennis and cares for your kids. Most importantly, someone who doesn't just tell you what you want to hear because they are afraid they will lose your business. It has to be an honest relationship. We found that with all of the coaches the kids worked with. One last thing, we only took the kids to the Stephen Diaz Academy 2-3 times per week because it was over an hour drive there and 1 ½ hour drive home because of Atlanta rush hour. They didn't train 6 days a week like their peers. And there are no indoor

courts. So when it rained they couldn't play and they had to fight through the freezing temperatures of north Georgia.

(Q) What are the players' goals now?

(A) Of course, as with any of the kids, they would love to play professionally. Realistically that takes a lot of money and a little luck along the way. They both have backup plans, but they will always love tennis.

INTERVIEW with the Kesslers' primary Coach, STEPHEN DIAZ:

(Q) When did you begin to work with the Kesslers?

(A) I don't remember the exact year but probably 2010-11 when McClain was about 13 or 14, McCartney had to be 10 or 11. I have met them at a tournament through a parent of another player I had at the time. At that time I had some of the best juniors in the southern section and a few very highly nationally ranked. I was coaching Hunter Reese who eventually became 1 in the south and top 10 USA and also won an NCAA doubles title at Tennessee. Also I had a young kid by the name of Elliott Orkin who won a national junior singles title and ended at Florida also and played #2 singles for them. The Kesslers lived in Calhoun, GA., which is about 1 hour away from my program in Marietta. To me they seem very nice and down to earth people and the kids were very respectful.

(Q) What struck you as different about the Kesslers?

(A) When I met them I watched McClain play one of my other students and I was impressed with McClain's self-motivation, tenacity, fighting spirit on court. He was very small, ran every ball down he possibly could and kept many balls in play. At the time he would get out-powered by the bigger players and he definitely made them work for it. Back then, he wasn't even top 50 in the South but I saw a great kid with a killer instinct for the sport of tennis.

(Q) What was the McClain Kessler's training program at your Academy? How quickly did he develop into top nationally ranked player?

(A) They began coming about 3 times a week so McClain could start working with the others and sharper up his game. He certainly had some weaknesses but he defended them well with his gritty play and tactical knowledge. Everyone that played McClain needed to be ready for a very long match no matter the outcome so many didn't want to deal with him. As we got to know each other well, I started working with him once per week on a private lesson and focus on improving his weaknesses while enhancing his strengths. I also started driving up to Calhoun once a week and worked with him, McCartney, and their neighbors, Jake and Carly Briggs, who were also good young

players at the time. He eventually grew a little but not much and we were able to have a better understanding of what he needed to do on court to keep improving performance in competition. By the time he reached the 18's he finally got to #1 in the South and became many opponents nightmare as he simply got tougher to beat. Everyone admired McClain but didn't want to play against him. He was beating all those bigger, stronger talented kids with his rock solid baseline game, tenacity, strategy and understanding how to use his mental toughness to manage all obstacles. We traveled to many tourneys and he simply kept improving in all aspects. It was definitely a lot of fun to be his coach and help him get to the top in the South and to the top 20 nationally. He obviously fulfilled his dream of playing for the Gators so we both accomplished our mission.

(Q) What was the McCartney Kessler's training program like at your Academy and how quickly did she develop?

(A) His sister McCartney was very young when I first started working with her, so in her case we were trying to improve her fundamentals of technique. She was very talented and had good hand-eye coordination but certainly weaker physically. Her personality was very different than McClain but still easy to work with. She tended to allow her emotions get the best of her at times but her talent and abilities help her succeed in the process. We also spend lots of time improving her weaknesses but in a different way than McClain, she also had that tenacity on court. She was not as vocal as McClain when competing but her opponents still had a tough time beating her. With McCartney I say we probably worked about 7 years total and as soon as McClain was gone to college I told her I will do whatever I could to take her to the top. McCartney ended up having great success in the 16's and 18's getting to number 1 the South and had phenomenal wins at the national level. She continues to improve in college and has grown tremendously as a player and as a person.

(Q) What were the Kesslers like to work with, and what did you work on?

(A) When they both came to my practices, they work hard and listen well. All my workouts are predominantly tactical in all different game situations in order to give all kids a better understanding of the game. Some practices were more physical than others but overall we accomplished what we wanted. They both came out learning plenty, become better competitors and also better people. I grew up without any training at all and barely practicing so while they did have that with me, I wanted them to understand the importance of maximizing the little tie they had with me.

(Q) Any Closing Comments about your time coaching the Kesslers?

(A) Overall the Kesslers were fun to work with as they understood the game of tennis very well. All they asked from their kids was for them to work hard, enjoy the game they love, be respectful to others, be a team player and do the best they can. They

were very realistic about their goals and supported them to the fullest. They understood the tournament system well so they were in charge of their scheduling; I was definitely in charge of the coaching side of it. Throughout the entire process I say both Carl and Julie were easy to work with and we had some good laughs here and there. We all sacrificed plenty throughout the journey and goals were achieved. Now even after the kids are gone we talk frequently and keep a good solid relationship as we all should. I personally kept my eye on the prize which is obviously that both McClain & McCartney become great players and even better people.

Interview with McClain's college coach, University of Florida's Bryan Shelton:

(Q) What were the reasons as to why you wanted to recruit and have McClain on your team at FLORIDA?

(A) McClain is someone that reached out to me because his grandfather went to Florida, and he grew up loving the Gators from an early age. It was his dream to play in Gainesville. I had heard that he was a good player and super high energy. I also heard that he was the ultimate competitor and an unbelievable team guy. Once I saw him play and compete, I knew that he was a Gator. Also his coach was Stephen Diaz who also coached Elliott Orkin. Elliott was already on the team, and he told me we had to recruit McClain.

(Q) What does McClain add to your team and what is your vision of how good he can become as a college and possible pro player?

(A) McClain is one of the best recruits I've ever coached. McClain has this passion for tennis and everyone feeds off of his energy and competitive spirit. He has always played his best tennis late in the season as the stakes get higher. It's fun to see how much he has improved his all court game. McClain wasn't even in our doubles line-up last year and this year he is an All-American in doubles. No limits to what he can accomplish. Not many possess all the intangibles that you need at the next level, but McClain has them in abundance. Don't bet against him!!!

Interview with McCartney's college coach, University of Florida's Roland Thornquist:

(Q) What were the reasons as to why you wanted to recruit McCartney and what is your vision of her future?

(A) McCartney is a world-class athlete. She's a tough, physical player with a Gator mentality -- one who never gives up. She can run, she can defend. She exceeded my expectations this year as a freshman. In her one semester she proved she will be one of the greats when she graduates this program. She will help the Gators put more up more trophies. She is strong both physically and mentally and will be an asset to this

program. I look forward to developing her offense even more. She will be a powerhouse.

Interview with McClain Kessler:

(Q) What motivated you to become the player you are today?

(A) I just really wanted to become a great tennis player because I loved the game so much!

(Q) What was it about playing tennis that satisfied your eagerness to play sports and compete?

(A) The part that I love most about tennis is that I can always learn something new every day.

(Q) What were the reasons why you achieved as much as you did already in tennis?

(A) The Main reason as to why I accomplished so much is because of my Mom and Dad and my real love for the game of Tennis!

Interview with McCartney Kessler:

(Q) Did you ever have a vision to become a top junior player or college player?

(A) I never really envisioned being a top junior. I always just knew I loved to play and followed my brother.

(Q) At what point did you decide to commit to playing tennis and specializing in just tennis?

(A) I decided to fully commit to tennis in 7th grade when my brother and I had both reached a point where we had no choice but to homeschool and increase our training. College tennis came into my mind when my brother started going on visits to schools. I was able to see how exciting it is to be a college player and start to develop goals to reach.

(Q) How much credit do you give your parents and coaches in being instrumental in your tennis success?

(A) All of the credit goes to my parent and coaches. Without my parents I wouldn't have been able to drive an hour to practice and without my coaches I wouldn't have learned the game as well as I was able to.

In summary, when tennis parents, players and coaches work as one team, great success stories can happen! There are more Kessler Tennis families out there waiting to learn the process of raising tennis champions. Could it be factors such as love, honesty, respect, humility, hard work and passion getting the best results from today's junior tennis players? Are there any shortcuts to this type of success? McClain and McCartney Kessler are a true American Tennis Family Success Story. It's the dream team of parents, coaches and players working together to make playing college tennis -- at the highest level -- a reality to achieve.

#

Ed Krass is the former Harvard Women's Tennis Coach from 1986-1990 and he is Founder/Director of the 30th Annual College Tennis Exposure Camp, taught exclusively by all head college coaches. Ed played for UCF from 1978-1982. He coached the UCF Men's Team to a #6 National Team ranking in 1983. Ed was the Asst. Men's Coach at Clemson from 1984-86, when the team won two ACC team titles and were ranked as high as #2 in the US. Ed coached the Harvard Women's team to four consecutive Ivy League Titles.