

**The Boy Who Fell To Earth**  
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Middleton Albert Parker the second is 32 years old and an investment banker at JPMorgan H&Q in Atlanta who absolutely loves golf and will not play tennis. But once upon a time he was pretty good at our game. In 1981, during his second year in the 12-and unders, he won the singles and doubles at all four national tournaments. A double grand slam. He is the only person in the history of American junior tennis to do that. People said he was the future of American tennis, the successor to McEnroe and Connors. As he grew older the talk grew louder. Despite competition from what may be the greatest generation of American juniors of all time, including kids named Pete Sampras, Andre Agassi, Jim Courier, Michael Chang, Mallval Washington, David Wheaton, Todd Martin, Chris Garner, Stephen Enochs, Jonathan Stark, and Jeff Tarango, this kid from Claxton, Georgia was ranked number one in all four age divisions. He is the only person in the history of American junior tennis to do that. Of course he was going to be a great pro. In 1987, his last year in the 18s, he won his 25th national title and set the record for cumulative national titles that stands today. His bedroom at his parent's home is filled with more than 100 pieces of championship hardware in every form tournament directors have ever conceived—plates, trophies, bowls, cups, medals, rings, watches, and the tiny balls the USTA awards at nationals. Among the 25 gold balls for winning there are 13 silver balls for finishing second. Al Parker, Jr. is unquestionably the greatest junior player of all time. After four years at the University of Georgia, and being voted an All-American four times, Parker ventured on to the pro tour. Boys he'd spanked a few years earlier were winning grand slams. He'd arrived to join them. And I was rooting for him.

I don't usually root for Gollaths, but I'd watched Parker, the tall blonde who always won, grow from a cherub with a delicate Prince Valiant haircut to a lanky stud with the long scruffy mane of a disaffected rock star. The same way we come to feel a deep familiarity with the long-term famous, to believe that certain movie stars and hometown athletes are our people, I'd seen Parker so many times over so many years that I'd come to feel he was a friend. As well, Parker was the ultimate representative of the junior tennis circuit. For him to win at the professional level would mean that the junior circuit worked as a training ground, that all of us who had, like him, driven and flown across state lines to play tournaments at age 12 and 13 had at least been on the right track. I didn't know much about him and I'd never seen him play, but I wanted him to win. But he never showed up on television. I scoured the box scores of tournaments like a lawyer poring over fine print, but I never saw him listed. The gorilla had somehow hid behind the pole. My man Al Parker had just disappeared.

One day I checked the internet and found he'd played on the tour a short time and never cracked 250. What? Did he have a game built only for the juniors and couldn't make it translate to the pros? Was he pushed too hard by his parents as a kid and couldn't take it when he got older? I wanted to know what life was like at the absolute top, to be the guy who was always seeded first and almost always won. But more than that, I had to find out what happened in the pros. How is it that the can't-miss kid missed?

By luck I found someone who knew Parker. He was in Atlanta, they told me. But they said, he didn't play anymore. I couldn't imagine what life without tennis was like for someone to whom the game had been so kind. I had to know what'd happened to my friend. It turns out that Al Parker's life, with and without, tennis, was not at all what I'd imagined and the reasons why he quit were complicated.

The history of sport is littered with tales of meteoric prodigies who flamed out before proving themselves on the highest level and landed in a virtual gutter. This is, and is not, one of those stories. You see, Al Parker, Jr., never became the best player in the world, but he did become the happiest ex-player in the world.

Claxton, Georgia is a town of 2,500 that's 40 minutes west of Savannah by car. There's a

giant water tower there with the words "The Fruitcake Capital of the World" printed on it. In 1945 a man named Albert Parker bought a local fruitcake business for \$10,000. Unlike most fruitcake, the Claxton Fruitcake Company's product was extremely high in fruit and nut content and in the 50s Parker and his children, including one Mid Parker, began building the business into multi-million dollar operation. Today the company moves six million pounds of fruitcake a year. "We used to sell a lot more cake," Mid said with a touch of bitterness. "Then Johnny Carson started tellin fruitcake jokes. That really hurt our business."

Parker grew up with his eye on a blonde four years his junior named Sally Edwards. "When I was in the seventh grade," Sally said, "my mother would come home and she would say I saw that Mid Parker downtown today. As usual he made me stop and roll down my window and he said Miss Ginny, when are you gonna let me go out with Sally? Well, I said the same thing I always say. Never you wild Indian! You're too fast for my daughter!" Miss Ginny liked Mid—Claxton is so small everyone knows everyone well—she just thought him too old for her daughter then. When Sally reached the ninth grade Miss Ginny finally let him take her out. He was a football and baseball star. She was class valedictorian. They were married in 1964. Their first child, Al, was born three days before Christmas in 1968.

During a family trip to Hilton Head, South Carolina Sally put six year-old Al into a child's tennis clinic so she and Mid could have time for some laugh-and-swing mixed doubles with friends. The pro told her he'd never seen a child so gifted. Sally decided to get him lessons, but waited two years. "A child only gets to be a child once," she said. "I had a feeling that once it ever started it would be non-stop."

Mid and Sally remember young Al as a serious and extremely disciplined child—"he was more disciplined than we were," Sally said. He was a perfectionist and a neatnick who made his bed as soon as he was tall enough to reach it. He overstudied for his tests, overprepared his school projects, and got A's in every single class he ever took. When he began playing tennis he became obsessed with hitting every ball perfectly and supplemented his lessons by hitting against a wall outside his home every day for hours. "He could stand there and never miss a dang shot," Mid said. "He got to where he could hit that thing 1,000 times without missing." Because the fruitcake business operates largely between September and December, Mid had plenty of time the rest of the year to drive Al to lessons in Savannah. When Al began entering local tournaments he was big for his age, extremely steady from the baseline, and more mentally mature than his peers. "I was able to focus better and stay in the match a little bit better than the other kids," he said, reclining in the living room of his cozy home in the suburbs of Atlanta on a warm Saturday afternoon. He was wearing shorts and Birkenstocks. "I don't know why I had that ability." He also hated to lose. "I don't care if it's tennis, croquet, or whatever," Sally said, "he will get after you with 200% of his being and make you think you cannot win." At nine he won club tournaments, at ten he won Georgia state tournaments, and at eleven he won a 12 and under national in Houston. After that, the board outside the Claxton town church said: Al's Humility Makes The Boy A Double Winner.

Parker's second year in the 12 and unders he won his legendary double grand slam and the singles title at the Orange Bowl. "I had some bad days, but not so bad that I lost," he said. "I don't know how to explain it. There's some luck in there, some fate in there, and some good work on my part. It all just came together." (Chris Garner is also a reason for the double grand slam. Garner, Al's partner in the doubles at the National Hard Court Championships in San Diego, recalled a semi-final against David Wheaton and Maliva Washington in which he and Parker were down match point. "One of those guys hit a drop volley to Al and Al didn't run for it," Garner said. "I ran it down, put it back, and one of those guys missed an easy shot. They choked. We wound up winning 9-7 in the third. And I always gave him crap that he would've never had his double grand slam if I didn't run for that ball.")

It's incomprehensible that this kid won 63 consecutive matches under high pressure in national and international competition. In one tournament, before match point in a third-set tiebreaker in front of a giant crowd, Sally overheard a man say, "If I were that kid I know that there

would be no way that I could even draw the racket back. I'd be so scared."

Everyone prefers winning, but Parker won so much it became what he now sees was a curse. "Once I started having the big success I was expected to win and if I didn't win then I'd not succeeded and that was when it became more of a job and a pursuit of a goal as opposed to loving the sport." The pressure grew immense and though he liked competing enough to continue winning, his love of the game began to seep away. It would never stop. "This unbelievable double grand slam," Sally said, "catapulted him into junior stardom and put tremendous pressure on him from that day forward because where do you go from there but down?" There was a crush of press (he was named Tennis Magazine's Junior Player of the Year), an appearance on the TV "To Tell The Truth," letters from colleges, agents, and Georgia senators, and impossible expectations. Few could see the potential long-term effects. "I had a tennis mother friend," Sally said, "who told me, you know, I honestly think that one of the worst things that can happen to a kid in junior tennis is to be unbeatable in the 12s because he's always the one the pressure's gonna be on. And, you know, the pressure of the pressure on him was immense on us. That's still your baby out there that's been thrown to the wolves and it's such a naked sport. Have you ever thought about that? Tennis is such a naked sport. I mean, you're out there on your own. And for him it went on for so long. It felt like it took him away from being a child. It felt like he had a man's job from age 12." But stopping was impossible. "It was too far gone," Sally said. "He didn't wanna stop. We never pushed Al. We would never have insisted he go on."

One day someone mentioned that the record for national junior titles won was 24 by Scott Davis. Parker already had nine. "Once I realized there was a shot that was something I was focused on," he said. "The only reason I kept playin juniors was to try to break that record." In the 14 and unders he won six more titles with a baseline game that was changing but not by his own accord. "I didn't really have weaknesses," he said. "My backhand was a pretty good weapon when I was younger but people tried to stay away from that, hitting to my forehand and as I got older my forehand became more of the weapon." In two or three years he would add a crushing serve, but his edge was truly mental. "I seemed to get up more for the bigger matches and my game would be the same as if I was playing in practice, as opposed to some kids who get lost in the moment and lose the focus. I don't know how you get that except experience over time, but I think I had a little bit from the start. Maybe I was just born with something." By then he had such presence and such a reputation that he won a lot of matches before he even walked on the court. "He was a larger than life figure," Jim Courier said. "When you were gonna play Al you just booked your flight. Okay, it's off to the next tournament now. It's over." He also began winning sportsmanship awards, which he'd continue to do throughout college. "He gave points back if he wasn't 100% sure of a call," said Murphy Jensen, a fellow junior. "Such a sweet dude. He was extremely serious about being fair and about class and doin the right thing." Andre Agassi once told a reporter, "Al was always a polite kid. He was never as obnoxious as myself. He is a good guy and was never really conceited."

When he won his celebration was minimal. "He always wanted to win real bad," Mid said, "but when he won he looked like he was embarrassed." Sally said, "People would always come to me with the question, is Al upset about anything? Is he not happy that he won? Because he was very subdued. But it wasn't in him ever to gloat." Al said, "The biggest thing for me was to never rub it in anybody's face."

Gery Groslimond, his coach throughout the juniors, said, "He might be the most normal national champion of all time. He never acted like a prima donna. He was very humble, very gentlemanly, treated everyone with respect. That made it difficult to beat him. Everyone liked the kid. He wasn't a jerk who you wanted to beat. He let his racket do the talking. He reminded me a lot of Rod Laver in terms of character. Laver would hit a winner and he wouldn't go crazy like Connors. He would say, isn't that what I'm supposed to do?"

Mid and Sally did everything they could to make the tournament circuit fun for Al. They

bought a big van and drove to tournaments in the South, bringing his younger sister Ginny and sometimes Sally's mother. Mid's father was a little mystified by the whole situation. He once told Mid, "I don't understand why in the world y'all fly all over the country, San Diego one week, Michigan the next week, and I see in the paper where he beats the same boys every week. Why don't y'all get together in a place in the middle there, play about ten times and get it over with?" After matches the Parkers' van was the place to be. "That family was just so loving," Murphy Jensen said. "What I love about their character is not only when they were kickin' everyone's butt they were great, cuz it's easy to be super friendly when you're winning, but when guys started getting their wins over him, they were just as great a tennis family."

Sally said, "We loved all the kids. They called Mid the plaid piper because everyone wanted to get in Mid's van and go get hamburgers." Some of those kids eating hamburgers would grow up to be legends, giving Mid and Sally a front row seat for history. "I always knew Agassi was special," Mid said. "His hand-eye coordination was phenomenal even as a little kid. Courier was a bulldog. Chang surprised me. Now when they changed Sampras from a two-handed backhand to a one-handed backhand I said that's the dumbest thing I've ever in my life seen. The kid's got the best backhand in the world! They're destroyin' his tennis career!" But Parker's love for the game continued draining out of him. "It wasn't as much fun as it was in the early stage," he said. "I didn't hate it. I just don't think I had that unabashed love for the game anymore. My enjoyment came from trying to prove that I could still do it with all the pressure on me, not from hitting the ball." He could no longer practice by drilling. "For me to practice I needed to play matches," he said. "Very rarely would I—and it probably hurt me—be okay with losing practice sets cuz I was working on a one handed backhand slice." Though he kept getting better, his development slowed.

At fifteen he shot up six inches to six-foot-three in a handful of months and lost his coordination. He served entire matches underhand. And there were more mental problems. "I definitely felt like I was tired mentally," he said. "It had been intense since I was 12 and over time that takes a toll. Potentially some of my success early on, I think, was a curse." His first year in the 16s he was ranked fifth in the nation. The next year he won just a single title, but because no one had a great year, he finished number one. Going into the 18s he had only 16 national titles. Scott Davis's record seemed out of reach. But in his first year he went on a tear and won eight titles tying the record. His last year in the 18s he traveled with the Junior Davis Cup team to pro tournaments and broke into the top 200, but in pursuit of the record he played the National Indoor Championships in Dallas. In the semis of the singles he lost to Courier, but he and Jensen won the doubles. "We won reasonably handily," Parker said, "but I remember continuing to bear down until that last point. There wasn't a lot of laughin' and smilin' going on." After the final match he felt a tremendous release. "I felt such a sense of relief that for the rest of that year I'd have a little less pressure because in the pros I got to be the underdog and do to people what they had been doin' to me for years." He played just one more junior tournament after that, the Championships at Kalamazoo, and only because the winner received a wild card into the US Open. He lost in the semis to Michael Chang. You could barely dream of having a junior career as successful as Parker's, but the reality was far from fun and now, at 18, it had come time to pay the bill. Years of slowed development was the result of a decreased love of the game and that was a result of the pressure of always being the hunted one. If years at the top are difficult for an adult, imagine the impact on a child. Perhaps that's why most of those who are giants in the juniors don't make it in the pros and most who make it big in the pros don't have spectacular careers in the juniors. Parker said, "They [Agassi, Sampras, Chang, and Courier] didn't have the real early success in the juniors that may have led them to, well, I don't wanna say I burned out, but I definitely felt like I was tired by the time I was 16, 17. Tired mentally. And some of that translates to physical. I was tired before I got to the part where I was gonna be makin' money playing. I mean, who has had tremendous junior success and gone on to be a top player in the world?"

Parker was slowly trending downward, away from the top players, but at 18 there was a fork in the road: should he move on to college or the tour? At that point it was still uncommon for

Americans to skip college completely. McEnroe and Connors had spent a year or two and when Agassi jumped people like Stan Smith and Arthur Ashe were public about their dismay. But Bolletieri and others were urging their top players to jump to the pros. Aaron Krickstein and Jimmy Arias had proven it could be done, and Agassi was quickly successful on the tour. Parker couldn't see that his tennis future hinged on his decision, but of that great generation, only those who skipped college—Agassi, Sampras, Courier, Chang—would become top pros. Some who went for a year or two—Mal Washington, David Wheaton, Todd Martin—would have strong careers on the tour. Most who spent three or four years in collegewould not. Many people told Parker he should skip college but he didn't consider it. "I was pretty focused on doin college and doin it at Georgia," he said. "I didn't look at college as something that would hold me back from successful tennis. I looked at it as another step up in the competition. It was a chance to go get great quality coaching from one of the top programs in the country and to also provide myself with the other options education would afford me if tennis didn't work out." Even with a ranking in the top 200 and a past that seemed to promise a glorious pro career, he still had it in mind that he might not succeed as a pro. "I've never really looked at myself as invincible," he said. "I was always bearing down in the event that something wouldn't work out. I don't know if that's an insecurity problem or what, but I've never knew that things would work out."

He declared a finance major and earned a 4.0. "He would stay up so late I used to cuss him out," said Dan Magill, his coach freshman year. "I said you gon lose a match for Georgia for you stayin up all night studyin." He also joined a fraternity and had a rich social life. "Girls loved the guy," Jim Childs said. "We would trail Al around town. Let him be the lead guy, we would be his wing men." He continued, of course, to be unbelievably meticulous. "In college your apartment's supposed to be a wreck," said friend and fellow player Wade McQuire, "but in his room everything would be perfect. You go into his closet, everything was perfectly lined up. You open his desk drawer and the tacks would all be in order."

He won his first two collegiate tournaments. But in his third, the SEC indoors at the University of Alabama, when he stretched for his semi-final match he felt a strange tweak in his back. As the match went on it turned into serious pain. He lost in three sets. Back at Georgia the orthopedists discovered he had Spondylolisthesis, a condition that causes discs in the lower spine to push on one another and cause tremendous pain. In Parker's case, one of his discs was cracked.

Parker thinks that if he'd been on the tour, focused simply on tennis and taking care of his body, that maybe the condition wouldn't have hit him then. "Maybe in college I was spread too thin," he said, "tryin to do schoolwork and social life and tennis all at the same time who knows if that would've happened if I was playin on the tour instead of Georgia. I had enough doctors look at it, and I assume what they're saying is right, but it just seems weird to me that all of a sudden my freshman year in college it's gonna decide to hit me after having played 18 years. But I was still able to perform at a high level even with the back problems."

His last three years at Georgia Parker won two big tournaments and got straight A's. "That 4.0 was of the utmost importance to him," said Manuel Diaz, Georgia's head coach Parker's last three years. His junior year the NCAA named him the Academic All-American of the year for all spring sports. His senior year he graduated Summa Cum Laude and was named the Academic All-American for all sports. Meanwhile, out on the tour, the boys he used to beat were leaving him behind. "Al had a blast in college and was the big man on campus," Courier said, "but while he was havin fun we were breakin through."

In the summer of 1991 Parker hit the pro tour. His back was aggravated by long flights to places like Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, and Dubai. He won four satellite tournaments but in Challenger and ATP events he usually lost in the first or second round, often to players of lesser ability. "It's hard to play after flying 20 hours in coach." Then the rotator cuff in his serving shoulder tore, then he suffered stress fractures in his foot, and shin splints, and a torn stomach muscle. "I was just continuously injured," he said. "It was incredibly frustrating. It felt like I was goin backwards."

His body was falling apart as if every part of him was screaming no mas, as if the curse of early success was exacting its final revenge. You have to wonder what part his mind played in all that, if the injuries weren't psychologically induced, if he wasn't collapsing under the stress of ten years of what his own mother had called a man's job: ten years of burning the candle from all sides. "Al got a lot of attention from day one," Jim Childs said. "Look at Todd Martin. He operated behind the scenes until collage and then he burst onto the scene. Todd got to work on his tennis game and be a guy until he was 18 or 19, whereas Al was out in the public eye from a very young age."

Parker might've kept trying to break through, but he's a very social creature and the tour is an extremely lonely experience. His enjoyment level, dropping steadily since the double grand slam, was reaching zero. There'd been a community in the Juniors, with all the players he saw at every tournament and their parents and siblings. At Georgia he had his teammates and coaches. In the pros he had no one. The reasons why he wanted to win escaped him. "I don't know that my desire was fully there," he said. "I don't know if I ever really wanted it bad enough on the tour. In the Juniors and college I wanted to win bad. I was into the competition. And I was into it for reasons other than just internally wanting to win. In the Juniors I was playing for these records and goals. In college you're playing for your team and for the school and there's 5,000 people watching. I loved playin in college. I loved the college team environment and having more on the line than individual accomplishments. Once I got to the pros and it was all about me and it was all about the job I didn't enjoy it at all. One day I was in Bangladesh, no, it was Bangalore [India], and the poverty, man, it's one of those places where either you're really wealthy or really poor. You got three people watching and nobody cares and this guy's serve hits a rock on the court and rockets out of the stadium and I'm saying to myself, what am I doin here?" He was miserable and he knew he could do something else with his life. One blistering hot day in Texas, with Mid in the crowd, Al lost to a lesser player. He walked off and said, "Dad, this is not working out. I think I'm gonna quit."

Mid told him, "Buddy, I concur with ya 100%."  
"We all breathed a collective sigh of relief," Sally said.

He'd quit the tour after just two and a half years. He now faced one of the biggest challenges of his life. Many players find it hard to adjust to life without the thrill of competition, life as a civilian. His parents feared he would feel he'd been a failure and would lose the self-confidence he'd gained in tennis. Parker was almost 25 years old with no headway on a career, three years behind his peers in the work force. And he had no idea what to do with his life. He called John Ross, a friend who'd played on the tour and now worked in investment banking. In a series of conversations Ross suggested Parker think about investment banking, a career that would satiate his need for intensity and competition. "You work such inhuman hours," Parker said, "and you pack so much experience into a couple of years. Two years as an analyst is almost like working four years since you rarely sleep and that would help me make up lost time spent on the tour."

Parker moved quickly. Within a few months he got engaged to his college sweetheart Christy Falcon (they married in 1994) and he applied to only one business school: Harvard. Like most business schools, HBS favors applicants with at least two years of experience in the business world, so Parker wrote that his time on the pro tour should be looked at as running a business. "It's not traditional business, but it's a business career in its own right," he said. "You're self-employed in an entrepreneurial type venture and you're managing your own schedule, you're arranging your own travel, you're coordinating expenses, budgeting, sponsorships, and equipment. I knew it was a stretch, but I figured I'd give it a shot anyway."  
"He thought he could talk Harvard into thinking that a couple of years on the tennis tour was conducting a business," Sally said, giggling. "I'm sorry, it's just kind of comical. In a way, he did have a point. It is a business, you are trying to earn money, but it's not corporate experience."

Parker was turned down, but Ross helped him get a job as a financial analyst at his own

firm, Bowles, Halliwell, Connor, and Company, in Charlotte, North Carolina, a firm helmed by then White House Chief of Staff Erskine Bowles. After two years he was accepted to HBS. After graduating in 1998 he returned to Atlanta. The next year, a week before Halloween, his wife gave birth to Middleton Albert Parker, the third.

By all accounts Parker moved away from tennis with grace. "He never seemed to be the least bit depressed," Sally said. "Now, I've heard him say it's kinda hard to watch these guys out there doin' so great and he wonders why didn't it work out for him, but he doesn't brood about it. He's busy with what he's doin' now. And I'm so thankful that all of this did not take a negative toll on him because I think it could've destroyed somebody. I really do think it had that potential." Gary Groslmond said, "There's a lot of guys who were number one in the world and they're not really nice people or they're empty people. He's well-rounded. He's very happy today and I don't know if a lot of players who are number one in the world can say that after their playing days are over. Or even while they're number one."

Parker said he has no regrets. "Certainly I think about what it might've been like if I was a top player in the world, but I've moved on from it. It does not bother me. I don't ever look back at my tennis career with any sort of bad feelings because I couldn't be happier with what I'm doing today. I enjoy my career, I enjoy my family, I enjoy the fact that I'm not still out there trying to grind through injury problems on the tour. I love my life and I'm incredibly happy and happy for those guys."

Those guys, said Parker's Junior Davis Cup coach Greg Patton, became who they are in part because of Parker. "The stars all gotta be right for a generation like that to happen," Patton said. "If Al hadn't been there I don't think they would've been that good. He was the rabbit the greyhounds were chasing, the standard for great tennis in that generation. I think Sampras, Agassi, Courier—they all owe something to Al." In the scheme of life, it doesn't matter that the greyhounds overtook him because Parker made something of his life. The game's great gift to him—unimaginable early success—became a curse, but the measure of character is not the peaks you reach, it's the valleys from which you escape. The boy who was strong enough to get to the mountaintop was an even stronger man when he was thrown from it and that has made all the difference. "I wouldn't say his life is incomplete because he didn't make it on the tour," Courier said. "I shudder to think that you throw all your eggs of happiness in the basket of tennis."

Nowadays he can't serve two games without tremendous pain, he doesn't watch tennis on television because he'd rather play with his son or hit the links, and he almost never discusses his past. "Occasionally I'll have a meeting with a client who'll recognize my name or something and everyone else from my firm will be like, you used to play tennis?"

His son Middleton, almost two, is already showing a little athletic ability. Will he play tennis? "I don't have a feeling either way," Parker said. "I think it would be hard for him to play tennis and to try to live up to some of what I've done. Then again, by the time he's playing hardly anybody will remember what I did."