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TENNIS

The Tennis Phenom Who Chose to Be Terrible

Before he started winning with a one-handed backhand, Dominic Thiem had to lose—a lot



Dominic Thiem prepares to hit a backhand. PHOTO: CLIVE BRUNSKILL/GETTY IMAGES

By Tom Perrotta

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Wimbledon, England

Dominic Thiem is a 22-year-old Austrian tennis pro with No. 1 potential. But his rise to No. 8 in the world also highlights an essential lesson for young tennis players and their parents: It's OK—and often necessary—to be a terrible junior tennis player for a while.

Thiem had a decorated junior career, rising to No. 2 in the rankings and winning several prestigious tournaments. But before he was good, he needed to be awful. Thiem, fast and wiry, played defensive tennis as a kid, until his coach, Gunter Bresnik, had seen enough. When Thiem was 11 years old, Bresnik made a drastic decision: He told Thiem to dump his two-handed backhand and start hitting it one-handed.

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“His attitude in general, his personality, is very defensive,” Bresnik said. “The double-handed backhand would have

led him nowhere. He would have become an average player.”

Thiem is far from that now. At the French Open, he reached his first major semifinal, where he lost to world No. 1 Novak Djokovic, the eventual champion. He won his first grass-court title earlier this month in Stuttgart, Germany, beating Roger Federer along the way, and also reached the semifinals on grass in Halle, Germany. Thiem won his first-round match at Wimbledon on Wednesday, 7-5, 6-4, 6-4 against Florian Mayer,

after rain delays the last two days. His backhand, once a liability, is a thunderous shot that he can hit for a winner from almost any position, even when the ball bounces high above his shoulder.

“He has very strong hands,” said Bresnik, who has coached numerous pros, including Boris Becker and Patrick McEnroe. He has worked with Thiem since Thiem was a child.

Thiem was one of the best players in his age group in Austria when he changed his backhand. His confidence, and his ranking, plummeted, from top three in Austria—which is hardly a tennis powerhouse—to the 20s. He lost to players he used to beat.



Dominic Thiem hits a backhand during his first-round match against Florian Mayer at Wimbledon. PHOTO: CLIVE BRUNSKILL/GETTY IMAGES

“I think I didn’t win a match for one, one-and-a-half years,” Thiem said. “But Gunter already back then was thinking about me as a man, at the pro level.”

Bresnik remembers well how other coaches and parents reacted. “Everybody called me an idiot and his parents stupid,” Bresnik said. Both of Thiem’s parents are tennis instructors.

Other famous pros have switched from two-handed to one-handed backhands, including Pete Sampras. But Bresnik said Thiem’s problem went beyond the stroke itself. He was too timid. So Bresnik told him to hit balls as hard as he could, on serves and forehands too.

“I told his father, ‘If you go to a tournament and the people stop by and say who is this idiot who hits every ball as hard as possible?’ then we succeeded,” Bresnik said. “To make him hit the ball in the court is just a question of time. We needed to break down this barrier that he tries to put the ball in play instead of hitting the ball right.”

For many young players, especially those who are good athletes, defense and steadiness win more consistently than creating openings and hitting winners. Changes to technique or tactics, or both, invariably bring defeats—and then distrust.

“One of the biggest problems that you have is 99 out of 100 times, the student will go down and the parents are going to be on your can,” said Nick Bollettieri, who has worked with 10 No. 1 players in his career. “And the student will begin to wonder, ‘Did I do the right thing?’”

Martin Blackman, the general manager of the U.S. Tennis Association’s player development program, said juniors and parents need to disregard the short-term temptation to win every match.



Dominic Thiem celebrates victory at Wimbledon on Wednesday. PHOTO: CLIVE BRUNSKILL/GETTY IMAGES

“You’re trying to create a complete player,” Blackman said. “If a player is one dimensional in their

game when they’re a junior, at some point it’s going to limit them in their progression.”

Thiem keeps a busy schedule. So far this year, he has played 60 matches and won 48, more than anyone on the men’s tour. Bresnik isn’t worried about the workload.

“What else should you do? If you don’t play, you practice, and if Dominic goes and practices one day at the academy, it’s a lot harder than a five-set match,” Bresnik said. “If it mentally affects you, you’re getting tired from playing so much, it’s a different issue.”

Just as he did as an 11-year-old, Thiem plans to follow Bresnik’s lead.

“I can trust him 100%,” Thiem said. “He knows me perfectly.”

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