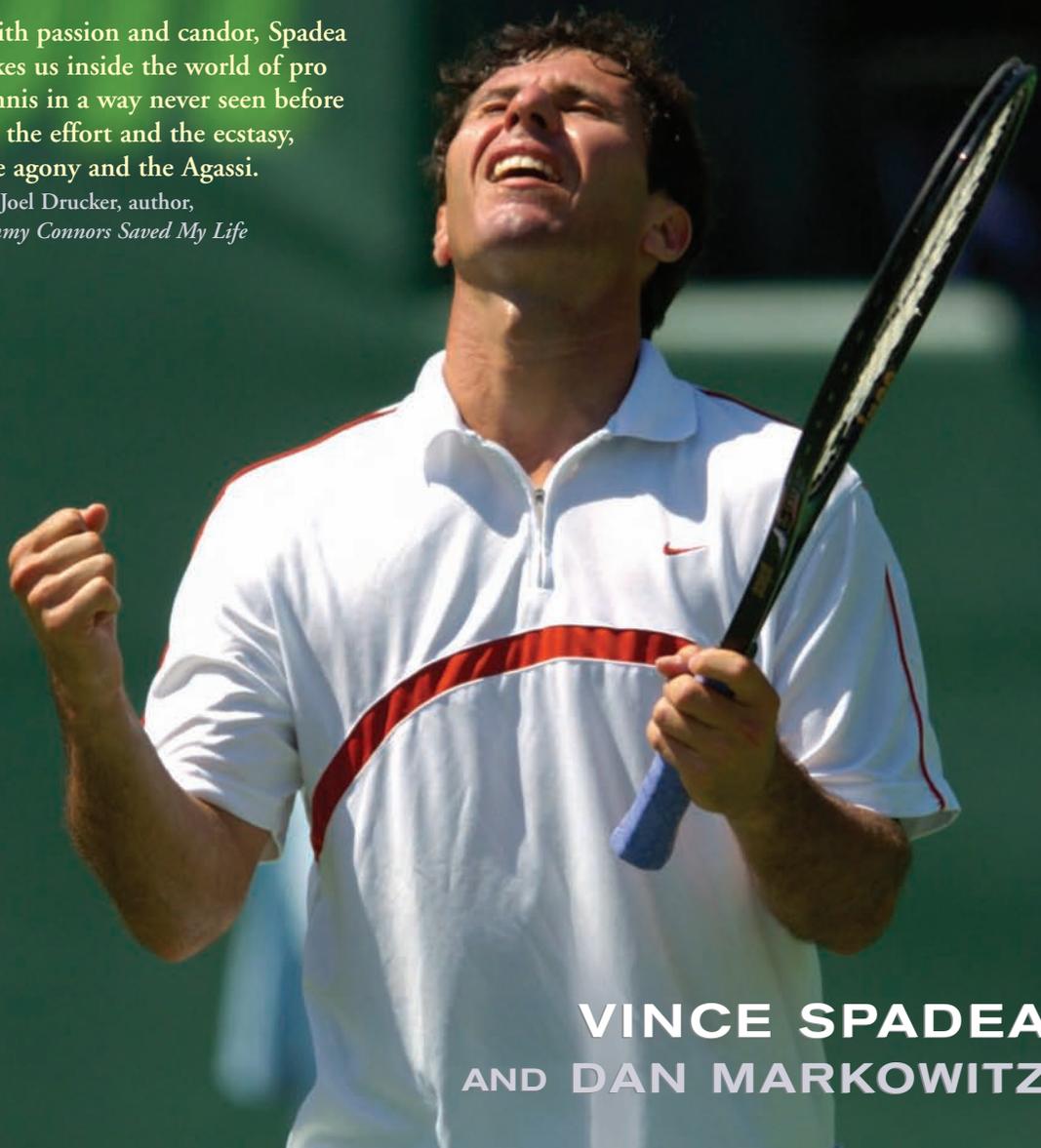


BREAK POINT

THE SECRET DIARY OF A PRO TENNIS PLAYER

With passion and candor, Spadea takes us inside the world of pro tennis in a way never seen before — the effort and the ecstasy, the agony and the Agassi.

— Joel Drucker, author,
Jimmy Connors Saved My Life



VINCE SPADEA
AND DAN MARKOWITZ

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. . . I am captured in the moment, my moment: shining lights, enthusiastic fans, a full crew of linesmen, new balls, all the water and energy drinks I can stomach, the works. Sometimes, when I'm on the practice court and sweat is dripping from my nose, and I feel sick to my stomach from the tortuous, monotonous drill, and I feel like I can't run to another ball, I ask myself why is it I do this? Where is the justice? Where is the satisfaction? Well, it's times like these, playing Andre Agassi in the third round of a sold-out event in Madrid, a good-looking blond on my side, that makes all that work I do feel worth it.

BREAK POINT

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The Secret Diary of a Pro Tennis Player

VINCE SPADEA *and* DAN MARKOWITZ

ECW PRESS

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Published by ECW PRESS
2120 Queen Street East, Suite 200, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4E 1E2

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LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Spadea, Vince
Break point : the secret diary of a pro tennis player /
Vince Spadea and Dan Markowitz.

ISBN 1-55022-729-7

1. Spadea, Vince. 2. Tennis players — United States — Biography.
I. Markowitz, Dan II. Title.

GV994.S68A3 2006 796.342092 C2006-901700-X

Editor: Kevin Connolly
Cover and Text Design: Tania Craan
Cover Photo: Rob Tringali / Sports Chrome
Production: Mary Bowness
Printing: Friesens

This book is set in Fairfield and Akzidenz Grotesk

DISTRIBUTION

CANADA: Jaguar Book Group, 100 Armstrong Ave., Georgetown, ON L7G 5S4
UNITED STATES: Independent Publishers Group, 814 North Franklin Street,
Chicago, IL 60610

PRINTED AND BOUND IN CANADA



Dedications

To my family for their unconditional love and support over the years. Your everlasting devotion to me will be infinitely felt and appreciated.

Vince Spadea

To Jeanne, with great love and gratitude.

To Robert, and my Mom and Dad, who had one of the funniest-looking, but effective, backhands I've ever seen. And to all the tennis bums, may you always find a good game.

Dan Markowitz

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I'd like to thank all of my friends in Florida, California, and all over the world, for caring and loving me for who I am. I'm not going to list names because I wouldn't want to leave someone out. You know who you are. Since my job is constant travel and always being away from you, it's meant so much to have your consistent friendship. All of you have lifted me to be a better person and tennis player, especially my Christian friends who encourage me to be an example and leader for God. I also want to thank everyone in the tennis world. We have a unique and special bond. Tennis is an amazing sport, and has given me so much fun and heartfelt times. I have shared them with you all, the tournament staff, the volunteers, the coaches, the fans, and of course the players. My imperative note to my peers: all the great battles and players I've encountered over the years, I want to say that I appreciate all of you not only as competitors, but as people. Your talent and work ethic have taught me life lessons, and you are one of the reasons I wrote this book. I wanted everyone to know more about our game. For those who enjoy this book, I thank you; for those who I talk candidly about, I wanted the world to know what pro tennis, the players, and I are really like through my eyes. What we go through, what we say and feel, because I know the voice of a pro tennis player to the world has been lacking for some time. I know we players are not all the same, but I hope you have a place for understanding that tennis is entertainment as well as a serious sport, and I wrote this material with the intent of promoting the game. Also to my acquaintances, I'd like to thank each and every person I've ever met in my travels. At airports, on subways and

side streets, from sponsors at tournaments to players to ball kids on center court, I take away a piece from all of you, and it makes me who I am today. I have learned so many things, and I'm grateful that I've been a part of your lives, hopefully making a positive impact in some way. Finally, I want to thank Jack David and ECW Press for making this project happen, for believing in this book, and Vince Spadea — and you know I ain't afraid of ya. Thanks again to everyone and God bless.

— Spadea

I'd like to thank Jack David, the publisher at ECW, for believing in this book and working with Vince and me on it. Crissy Boylan, at ECW, lent an able hand, as well. Peter Bodo of *Tennis Magazine*, did a great job in editing the excerpt of the book, "Sitting Duck," that appeared in the 2006 January/February edition. Greg Sharko, the ATP's communication director, and king of men's pro tennis facts and trivia, was a big help, as well as the ATP's Pete Holtermann. I'd like to also thank the media directors at the Masters Event in Indian Wells, the Hall of Fame Championships in Newport, Rhode Island, the Delray Beach International Tennis Championships in Florida, the U.S. Open, and the USTA Challenger at Forest Hills, New York respectively, Matt Van Tuinen, Kat Anderson, Lisa Franson, Jeanmarie Daly and Dina Ingersole, for allowing me access to the players and media. The men's pro tennis tour is played around the world, but the women and men who cover it for newspapers, magazines, television, and the internet, especially in the United States, is a relatively small, but passionate group. I have talked to a number of you through the course of this book and I'd like to thank you all for your insight. Richard Pagliaro of *Tennis Week Magazine* was particularly helpful by posting an excerpt of *Break Point* on the *Tennis Week* website.

— DM

INTRODUCTION

DECEMBER 31, 2004

Welcome to outer Spadea. I'm 30 years old and I'm having these dreams.

I dream I'm playing in the U.S. Open finals against Roger Federer, the world's No. 1 player, and I'm battling. I'm the guy no one bothered to worry about, but here I am trying to win my first Grand Slam title after 12 long years on the pro tour. No one, with the exception of the great Pete Sampras, has ever won a U.S. Open title in the open era of tennis after the age of 30.

But hey! Spadea ain't afraid of ya!

I'm playing like the warrior I am, and the crowd is jumping out of their seats. There are tons of celebrities in Arthur Ashe Stadium. Spike Lee is sitting courtside, and as I go back to towel off after a long point, he leans over and says, "Hey Vince, win this match and I've got you in my next movie."

It comes down to a fifth-set tiebreaker. At match point — my favor — I hit a running, forehand passing shot that

streaks by Federer's outstretched racket. The ball lands flush on the line. *I win the U.S. Open!* I fall to my knees in a *Rocky IV*-meets-Björn-Borg move, with real tears in my eyes as I look over at my family in the player's box. I know that every inch I ran in tennis practices and matches, every drop of sweat that came out of me, has gone into the glory of this one moment. I get up off my knees and moonwalk up to the net to shake Federer's hand. The New York crowd — all 23,000 of them — are on their feet going wild.

I dream I'm playing for the American Davis Cup Team in the 2005 Davis Cup finals against Spain. In the fifth and deciding rubber match, I beat the 19-year-old Spaniard, Rafael Nadal. I'm hoisted up onto Andy Roddick's, the Bryan Brothers', and captain Patrick McEnroe's shoulders, clutching the Davis Cup trophy in my hands.

I dream that my picture is on the cover of *Tennis Magazine*, and they do a special "Comeback of the Year" feature on me entitled, "Spadea: The Italian Gladiator." It's all about how I've become the oldest player in the history of the sport ever to win his first Grand Slam singles title and play on a Davis Cup championship team.

I dream these things. I really do. I have been a professional tennis player for 12 years — have played on six different continents in more than 500 matches — and have beaten Andre Agassi, Pete Sampras, Roddick, Federer, Safin, and 12 other players who've won Grand Slam singles titles. In 2000, including the Davis Cup finals and the Olympics, I lost 21 straight matches, the longest losing streak in the history of the sport.

My ranking dropped from a career-high No. 18 in the world, to No. 237, and for the next year and a half, I played mostly lower level pro tournaments until I made it back into the Top 100. In 2004, playing in the 223rd ATP tournament of

my career, I won my first tour title in Scottsdale, Arizona — breaking Roddick’s laser serve three times in the last set of our semifinals — and made it back into the Top 20.

My father, Vincent Sr., taught my two sisters (both college All-Americans at Duke) and me the game, even though he didn’t pick up a racket until he was in his thirties. I was an overweight kid who grew up first in Brockton, Massachusetts — Rocky Marciano’s hometown, my grandfather was his doctor — and then on the wrong side of Boca Raton, Florida. Stan Smith, the former Wimbledon and U.S. Open champ, told me I should forgo a pro career at 18 and opt for college instead. I said thanks, but no thanks, and in two years I became the youngest American ranked in the Top 100 in the world.

At 24, in my sixth year as a pro, Agassi called me “a journeyman.” I proceeded to beat him in two of the next three matches we played, the last one coming in the round of 16 at the 1999 Australian Open. Last year, even though I was the third highest ranked American behind Roddick and Agassi, Patrick McEnroe, the American Davis Cup captain, chose Roddick and Mardy Fish (Agassi didn’t want to play) as his singles players against Spain in the Davis Cup finals.

I wrote a letter to McEnroe — which I also released to the Associated Press — criticizing his decision. McEnroe, feeling some heat from the media, invited me to come to Spain as a team member, with the teaser that if I beat Fish in practice the week before the tie began, Pat might change his mind and play me in the No. 2 singles spot. But when I easily beat Fish in two practice matches, McEnroe still opted to play Fish, a guy who had won a total of three clay-court pro tour matches in his career. I, on the other hand, had reached the quarterfinals of the Italian Open, and the third round of Roland Garros, the French Open, three times on clay.

So why am I still out here traveling the world, playing on the pro tennis tour when almost all the top players I grew up playing with — guys like former No. 1 players Yevgeny Kafelnikov and Marcelo Rios — have retired? Not a single American player from my generation made it except me. So why am I still seeking to win a Grand Slam and make my “U-Turn for Glory” a smash reality? Why don’t I take a cushy teaching-pro job at a ritzy country club, or coach a younger touring pro and get to be the one who feeds the balls while the other guy runs and sweats after them?

Mostly, it’s because I’d rather be a top professional tennis player than the President of the United States; because I’ve hit more tennis balls in my life than probably anybody on this freakin’ planet. What’s a return of serve? What’s a backhand winner down the line? What’s a topspin forehand cross-court? These are strokes I’ve spent my entire life perfecting. I won’t let this sport dictate my life. I want to be the master of my own destiny, and I’m challenged by the emotional energy and hard labor required to be a top player.

I’m in love with the battle, and battling is the essential part of a long career in pro tennis. Once you lose your passion for fighting to win every point and digging deep, your days are numbered out here. This game stimulates my brain and requires every ounce of my competitive spirit, physical conditioning, and trench warfare mentality. I believe a pro tennis player has to battle more than any athlete playing any other sport out there. When Steve Nash goes out on the court, he’s got the support of his teammates and his coach, who has just given him instructions during a time-out seconds before. He has that emotional lift.

In tennis, you have no teammates, and your coach can only sit in the stands with the spectators and make facial gestures. Coaches are not allowed to sit next to their players

and give counsel during breaks. Tennis is the only sport where you truly go out and battle on your own. Even boxers have their trainers come into the ring after every round, and golfers can consult with their caddies before every shot. That's why I call tennis the ultimate one-on-one sport.

The pro tennis player must balance his personal life with the edge needed to play matches, win tiebreakers, get over jet lag and injuries, and compete for ten months of the year. That's right! The tour starts on January 3rd with Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) tournaments in three cities in three different countries — Adelaide, Australia; Doha, Qatar; and Chennai, India — and it doesn't end until Halloween in Paris. A total of 68 tournaments are squeezed in over this insane schedule, as well as 578 lower level pro tournaments. Often there is a choice of three tournaments to play in any given week and most pros play between 25 and 35 tournaments a year. At year's end, the Top 8 players in the world also qualify to play in the Masters Cup in Shanghai in November, while the two top national teams play in the Davis Cup finals in December. It's all part of the battle.

The players on tour are constantly around one another. We fly in the same planes, sleep at the same hotels, eat at the same restaurants, and dress in the same locker rooms. At a certain point, seeing so much of your competition can get into your head. Boxers fight two or three times a year, maximum. We play ten months a year, take a short break, then start practicing for the next season, when the Australian Open — one of the sport's four Grand Slam tournaments — begins play in January.

The game has many charms, but perhaps most compelling is that one great shot can turn an entire match around. That's what players and fans love about it. You can have one week where you go out and play well in every

match and win a big tournament. Like Gustavo Kuerten stunning the world by winning the French Open for the first time in 1997. Before the tournament, he was a “nobody,” ranked No. 66. Two weeks later, he was a Grand Slam champion. If you can find a way to win, you can become a hero overnight. You can get a huge paycheck and change your career in an instant.

What keeps me ticking is that tennis is an instant-celebrity sport. Even the top dogs in the game — the Sampras, Agassis and Federers — were all once frustrated, “up-match-point-and-lost” players, too. They were all once on the outside, looking in. I’ve never been the man everyone comes out to see and admire, but the great part about tennis is that tomorrow there’s always another match, another challenge.

I’m totally engrossed in the game. I’m trying to win ugly. I’m trying to win pretty. I’m trying not to lose at any cost. As a warrior and rapper, I’m going to tell you straight out what it feels like to not give up — to never be fazed by disappointment or failure, to try to find harder ways to win rather than easier ways, and most of all, to enjoy the battle.

So what follows, then — after two detour chapters that chronicle the close of my 2004 season — is not so much a book about Vince Spadea as it is about the players, coaches, fans, and women I encountered playing the 2005 season on the ATP circuit and the pursuit of greatness that has so far been elusive for me. At the beginning of the 2005 season, in addition to Agassi and Tim Henman, I’m the only player over the age of 30 to hold a Top 20 ranking. I have spent a lifetime in the game. I’m a tennis player first and second, and everything else last. And at 30 years old, I’m far from being done.

PROLOGUE

THE DR. JEKYLL and MR. HYDE
of ANDRE AGASSI

FALL, 2004
Madrid, Spain

In pro tennis, rankings determine everything: tournament seeds, appearance fees, endorsement deals, the size of your hotel suite — even, in some cases, the quality of women you meet. There's a special halo that surrounds the Top 10 players in the world. Their names as I'm writing this are Roger Federer, Andy Roddick, Lleyton Hewitt, Marat Safin, Carlos Moya, Tim Henman, Guillermo Coria, Andre Agassi, David Nalbandian, and Gaston Gaudio, and these men represent the pantheon of the game. At 30, I'm in the midst of having my finest pro season, winning a career-high 37 matches, with still three tournaments left to play. Along the way, I've beaten Safin, when he was ranked No. 2, and Roddick, when he was No. 7.

The rankings are calculated using a player's results at his 18 best tournaments during a rolling 52-week year. (Masters

events and Grand Slams are always counted among the top 18 if a player has a main-draw result.) It is called the “entry ranking” system, and it determines which players get entry right into the main draw of tournaments. Four years ago, the ATP, the governing body of men’s tennis, tried to spice up the ranking system by adding a “champions race” that charted players on their calendar-year performance, but the players, tournament directors, and fans still pay more attention to the old system.

A player earns more ranking points when he wins a match at one of the bigger Masters Series tournaments than he does at the smaller International Series events, and even more points when he wins at a Grand Slam. Winning one of the four Grand Slam tournaments — the Australian Open, French Open, Wimbledon, and the U.S. Open — is worth 1,000 points. Winning one of the nine Masters Series events is worth 500 points, and capturing an International Series is good for 175 to 300 points, depending on the amount of prize money in the tournament. I started 2004 ranked No. 29, and now, as Master Series Madrid begins, I’m No. 23, still 5,285 points behind the world’s No. 1 player, Roger Federer.

Let me just say a few more words about rankings and perception before I tell you about Madrid. When I was 18, I really thought I was going to follow in the footsteps of Sampras and Agassi and become a consistent Top 10 player. I had the hunger, but I didn’t follow through with the results. So when I turned 20 — even though I was at No. 80 and the youngest American in the Top 100 at the time — I thought, “Sampras won the U.S. Open when he was 19, a year younger than I am now. I’m pathetic.” I felt like I was under-achieving, big-time.

Then five years later, when I’d reached No. 18, I kind of took it for granted. Even after all those years of struggling,