



# A life-changing education

The US college tennis pathway tread by many successful pro players is increasingly accessible to Australian juniors – and it provides a solid foundation that can reap lasting rewards beyond the game. By **RYAN HENRY**

**P**ursuing tennis at an elite level can be one of the most exciting and rewarding journeys a person can take. The buzz of competing against the best can be immense, but even more important are the human qualities that the sport can provide to players through their experiences both on and off the court.

Players who strive to reach world-class levels of the game often develop an incredibly strong work ethic, and the personal characteristics needed to be successful in any area of life.

Perhaps the biggest life-enhancing opportunity that elite players have is the ability to gain a higher education via US college tennis scholarships, which can be worth up to \$500,000 at some of the world's best universities.

Top professional players who competed in college tennis include John McEnroe, James Blake, John Isner, Kevin Anderson, Mike and Bob Bryan and more recently, surprise Australian Open 2019 semifinalist Danielle Collins.

Bob Bryan, a winner of 23 Grand Slam titles and a member

of the victorious US Davis Cup team in 2007, describes his time at Stanford as the best two years of his life.

A US college education can either be used a launchpad for the professional tours or to propel an individual into a successful career in tennis or beyond.

Over many years Australian juniors have travelled to the US, benefitted from scholarships and enjoyed a life-changing experience. Astra Sharma, who has cracked the world's top 100 in a breakthrough 2019 season, John Peers and John-Patrick Smith are among many who've flourished through the US college system.

## A RICH OPPORTUNITY

From a nationally-ranked junior growing up in Sydney, Jeremy Bourgeois earned acceptance into Brigham Young University in Utah. BYU has one of America's top-10 finance programs, which also provided a strong foundation for a successful career beyond tennis.

**SMART MOVES:** Astra Sharma and John-Patrick Smith (above), plus major finalist Kevin Anderson all took the US college route.

After graduating with a major in economics and a minor in business management, Bourgeois moved back to Sydney to start developing his career. He immediately landed a job at Macquarie Bank, one of Australia's largest financial institutions, and believes his successful US college career set him apart from more than 100 other applicants.

"Most of the other applicants that I was up against graduated from Australian



universities and all looked very similar to my employer on paper," explains Bourgeois. "My student athlete experiences in the United States was very different to anybody else and contributed enormously to me landing the job with Macquarie.

"As a result, I now have an incredible opportunity to move my way up one of Australia's biggest and most successful financial institutions."

## STEPS TO US COLLEGE SUCCESS

The pathway to a US college education is achievable for many Australian juniors - but it's a goal that requires, purpose and achieving the right balance of tennis and academics is critical. There are three key requirements that a player needs to satisfy:

### Tennis requirements

The first aspect college coaches assess when deciding who to recruit into their team is a player's Universal Tennis Rating (UTR). The UTR is worldwide and is currently the most accurate measuring tool to assess a player's ability to perform in competitive matches. As a

**EDUCATIVE STEPS:** World-ranked junior Ethan Lye is targeting the US college pathway as a launchpad for a pro career.



general rule, the higher a player's UTR, the more scholarship opportunities will be available.

Athletic scholarships are available to male players with a UTR range of 9.5 to 13.5+ across several divisions and to female players with a UTR range of 6.5 to 10.5+ (myutr.com)

The best way for a player to increase their UTR is to work hard on developing a stronger game in tournament conditions. Players should aim to achieve their highest UTR in February or March after high school, which is around the deadline for US college coaches to recruit players for the upcoming season.

### Academic requirements

US colleges have three key academic requirements alongside tennis achievements:

1. Students need to sit a one-off SAT exam - generally during or after Year 12. Most division one and two schools seek an SAT score of 1000 or higher.
2. A student requires a sufficient Grade Point Average, averaging at least B's and C's in all of their core courses in Australia to be eligible for most division one and division two programs. This equates to an Australian grade point average of 3.5+ (converts to a 2.5 US GPA).
3. Students will need to undertake and pass 16 core courses from Year 9 onwards, including subjects such as English, Maths, Science, Social Science, plus four additional courses.

Balancing sufficient hours on the court and in the classroom is a key challenge for many

juniors. Choosing a high school that balances academics and tennis is critical - this age (12-18) is one of the most challenging periods for an elite player as the training, competition and academic demands all increase in a subsequent time period. For over six years, we have executed an academic and elite training model at The McDonald College.

### Character requirements

College coaches want to recruit great people into their team and will look for character references from their school and credible coaches. Any charitable work, leadership roles or past activities that may show a good character can help.

### A REWARDING PATH

The complex considerations in pursuing this rewarding path are well worth the effort. The opportunity to play tennis and study at a US college is an incredible experience that can set a student up for life - regardless of the career path that the player eventually chooses. [ATM](#)

**More information on the US college pathway can be found at [voyagertennis.com](http://voyagertennis.com)**

**Ryan Henry** is a former professional tennis player and co-founder of Voyager Tennis Academy which specialises in the development of elite junior players. He is also the co-author of the book 'Winning on and off the court' which is a newly-released parents guide to creating world-class players and people.



# Springboard for success

A number of notable names have transitioned from standout US college competitors to successful professional players.

### JOHN ISNER

While setting school win records as a four-year All-American at the University of Georgia between 2004 and 2007, the top-10 star also earned a major in speech communication.

### KEVIN ANDERSON

Anderson's path to 2017 US Open and 2018 Wimbledon finals earlier included three seasons at the University of Illinois, where he earned All-American honours each year from 2005 to 2007.

### STEVE JOHNSON

The former world No.21 is the most-decorated US college tennis player ever, after twice winning NCAA men's singles titles (2011 and 2012) and featuring in four consecutive NCAA Championship team titles for the University of Southern California.

### DANIELLE COLLINS

The Australian Open 2019 semifinalist thrived at the University of Virginia, winning two NCAA titles in a three-year period. Rising to become the top-ranked collegiate female player in 2016, Collins (pictured below) also gained a degree in media studies.



### NICOLE GIBBS

A winner of four NCAA titles [two singles, one doubles and one team title] for Stanford University, Gibbs was recognised with the Honda Sports Award for tennis in 2012. Four years on, she peaked at No.68 in the WTA rankings.

### ASTRA SHARMA

Sharma, who cracked the world's top 100 soon after reaching a first WTA final at Bogota in April, honed her tennis skills at Vanderbilt University. Time spent in the US college system also enabled the multi-talented Sharma to work towards a medical degree.



### JOHN PEERS

The Australian Open 2017 men's doubles champion [with Finland's Henri Kontinen] gained a solid tennis education through the US college system. Peers (above) attended Middle Tennessee State University from 2008 to 2010, and Baylor University in 2011.

### JOHN-PATRICK SMITH

Smith, runner-up in the Australian Open 2019 mixed doubles with Sharma, became one of the University of Tennessee's most prolific athletes in the four years he attended from 2007. A four-time All-American, Smith also achieved the college No.1 ranking in both singles and doubles.