

The Quiet American

In Rob Kuseski's senior season at UNC, tennis became fun again.

And why not? His stellar 21-1 record for the spring season as the Bears' top singles player placed him among the best Division II players in the country. He captured his second North Central Conference title at number one singles, his fifth NCC championship overall (the others were at number three singles as a freshman and number one doubles this year and last).

At the Division II level, foreign players dominate tennis, and Kuseski is perhaps the highest-ranked American in the country. UNC men's coach Jonathan Casper predicts Kuseski will finish in the top 25 nationally. He made the NCC All-Academic team and was voted Colorado Collegiate Player of the Year over players from Division I schools. He recently received UNC's Outstanding Male Athlete of the Year and Sportsmanship awards and earned national honors with the James O'Hara Sargent Sportsmanship Award.

But there were times in his UNC career, as he made steady progress toward being one of the university's best-ever male tennis players, when playing was as much a grind as a game.

"When I first started (at age 11), it was the most fun thing I could do," he says. "Over the years, the level of fun decreased. But this year, it's been fun for me to play matches."

The winning helped, but he's always been a winner, dating back to

his days as a standout at Loveland High School, where he was ranked number one in Colorado in the 16-and-under category. He also won plenty at UNC. His career record was 70-22 in singles and 43-29 in doubles.

The joy really returned when the physical and mental aspects of his game converged, making him a complete player. Kuseski also credits his faith in God for sustaining him.

There's also the satisfaction of having game enough to beat players who are often bigger, stronger and have better stroke production. Yet in a sport where mental toughness is as important as stylish strokes, Kuseski excels, says Casper.

"The hardest part about tennis is keeping your head in it," he says. "Rob plays tennis the way it was meant to be played. He never reacts to bad play by himself or bad sportsmanship by his opponent.

"As far as sportsmanship goes, he's the ideal."

Kuseski, a computer information systems major who will graduate in December, says being a good sport and a winner aren't incompatible. "Every match, I want to win. But I want to prove that you can be blood-thirsty and courteous at the same time."

Along with mental toughness, Kuseski's strengths are his quickness, court coverage and a strong serve-and-volley game. His serve isn't overpower-

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ing, but its variety and placement often create opportunities for his lethal volley.

His game carried him to the title that not even he expected to win – the Rolex regional tournament in October (the tennis season is split, with

an abbreviated fall season and the bulk of matches in the spring). He went on to finish sixth at nationals. During his run in the two tournaments, he beat some of the best players in the country, although many aren't from this country.

Division II tennis has no age limit, so coaches often recruit abroad, offering scholarships to players from Europe, South America and Africa who are in their mid-to late-20s. At home, most have played club tennis for years, with its attendant sponsors and coaches. In some cases, they play for their country's elite Davis Cup team. "When I play, it's definitely an international event," Kuseski says. "Sometimes I'm the only player speaking English."

Casper predicts that Kuseski will end up as the only player from the United States ranked in the top 50 in Division II.

"Rob really moved to an elite level this season," Casper says. "He had a season greater than anybody could really expect."

After graduation, Kuseski plans to teach tennis to junior players and perhaps try his hand on the semi-pro satellite tournament circuit, just a notch below the big time.

But wherever he is on the tennis court, he'll be having fun.

**Kieran McDonnellogue is editor of
Spectrum.**

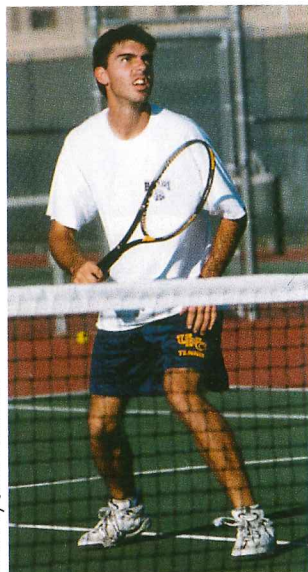


Photo by John Newman

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