

Guy Iradukunda embraces new home with FSU tennis

Alfonso Flores, Assistant Sports Editor

The game of tennis meant more than meets the eye to junior transfer Guy Iradukunda. It served as his means of obtaining the opportunity to travel the world and earn an undergraduate degree in social science at Florida State University, all while working toward achieving his aspirations of playing professionally once graduated.

Born and raised in Gitega, Burundi — the second largest city in the East African country—Iradukunda established his affection for tennis at a mere five years old when he would accompany his father to the local tennis club. What started off as friendly competition among him and his friends three times per week eventually cultivated into a searing passion for the sport.

For much of his adolescent years, Iradukunda appeared in numerous national tournaments— most of which he won. Soon after, he expanded beyond his country’s borders and started representing Burundi in East African tournaments.

“I was 14 when I won the East Africa Championship,” Iradukunda explained. “There were development officers for the International Tennis Federation who came to see players who can play tennis from underdeveloped countries. He saw me and asked me if I was interested in attending a tennis academy in South Africa. He chose me to go there for a month, like a trial, to see if I can compete with them.”

Sure enough, the 6-foot-3 right-hander displayed a dominant competitive nature against the other players at the academy, which afforded him a full scholarship to train with Africa’s best junior tennis players. For two years, Iradukunda attended the high performance tennis academy, which ultimately allowed him to gain renown as the top ranked junior tennis player in Africa by the age of 17.

During his tenure at the academy, he had won four ITF junior single championships, five junior doubles championships and had also traveled to China to represent Africa in the 2014 Summer Youth Olympics.

“From when I was young, I always dreamed that I’d become a tennis professional. I was on a full scholarship so I used to travel everywhere to play in junior tournaments,” Iradukunda recounted. “When you’re over 18, you have to leave the academy if you’re trying to go professional. I was trying to go, but it is very expensive and my parents wanted me to get a degree first and I wanted a degree in case I didn’t make it professional.”

While attending the ITF academy, Iradukunda took class courses online, which therefore restricted him from attending a division I school. In light of his drive to take his game to another level and pursue a college degree, he attended Seminole State College, a junior college in Oklahoma. In the two years of playing at the JUCO level, the Burundi native proclaimed the top rank, once again, among all junior college players.

During the two years that he played for the Trojans, Iradukunda had compiled several accomplishments and accolades that made for an appealing résumé. In 2016, he garnered All-American honors after winning national singles and doubles championships. Additionally, he was recognized by the Intercollegiate Tennis Association (ITA) as the 2016 Sophomore of the Year.

“When I came to the U.S to play in junior college, the level was good but not as good as division I. Division I, now I realize, is much, much tougher; every player is really good,” Iradukunda said. “In junior college, it depends on where you play. In the top 10 teams, one and two are pretty good, but the other teams are not so good at that level.”

But what ultimately brought Iradukunda to Florida State — more than 6,700 miles away from home — was a friendship he had developed with fellow teammate Aziz Dougaz while playing in tournaments in Africa. Once the two future teammates collided, Dougaz and Iradukunda paired up and collected two professional tournament wins in doubles play before parting ways.

“When I was 15, I went to South Africa to play in tournaments. We played doubles together in a few tournaments,” Dougaz said. “After that, we both went to an ITF center in Morocco. I was there for two years, and the first year with him. Then he went to junior college in Oklahoma and I finished my year and went to FSU.”

Once the word reached to Dougaz that Iradukunda would be looking to transfer to a division I school after his second year of junior college, he contributed to the recruitment of the nation’s top junior college tennis player to Florida State.

“I was speaking to him because we were really close friends and I told him that I committed to FSU,” Dougaz said. “I tried my best to convince him to come to FSU. I told him that we could play doubles together, that we are going to be the two from Africa on the same team.”

Now representing Florida State, Iradukunda hopes to accomplish just as much in the classroom than he has on the court. As an alternative, the junior is currently working toward a social science degree, in which he intends to work with if professional tennis does not work out as anticipated.

“Without tennis, I would not be right now in the U.S, studying for my degree. I accomplished everything because of tennis,” Iradukunda concluded. “I’ll try to do my best on the court to win every match if possible. With the team, I’ll always do my best to support them, train with them, do everything as a team to try to be top 10 in the nation.”