



THE PURSUIT OF GREATNESS

◀ **MAX** from C1

“There was always a plan and goals,” he said. “I was focused on that.”

Max is now 16, and, by any metric available, one of the best junior tennis players in the world. Over the past five years he has won national championships in singles and doubles and, at various times, reached No. 1 in the USTA rankings for boys 12-and-under, 14-and-under and 16-and-under.

Talk to anyone involved with tennis about Max’s progression and they will acknowledge two dichotomous truths: His accomplishments are incredible, and they guarantee him nothing.

That’s why last year was a swirl of airports and international tennis matches. January in Costa Rica and Ecuador. February in Paraguay and Brazil. May in Spain and Italy. June at the French Open. July at Wimbledon. September at the U.S. Open. Back to Spain in November for the Junior Davis Cup.

The journey Max is on is grueling and full of sacrifice, not just for the athletic space he is trying to occupy but for the family that surrounds him with their time, money and support. His last tether to any semblance of a normal childhood that is quickly coming to an end.

His 2024 season will, once again, catapult him around the world. It started with a bang at the Australian Open in January, when he won his first junior Grand Slam trophy in boys doubles. The milestones come quickly and recede into the daily focus on incremental improvement. Most of his matches this year will be junior or entry-level pro events played with no broadcast cameras and few people watching.

The ultimate goal is the ATP Tour, the top professional men’s tennis circuit. Few Minnesotans have ever made it. Everyone involved knows it could take years. Max’s dad has a mantra, “We’re all in.” But he often adds a caveat, “You have to be a little crazy to do this.”

‘I always felt a bit different’

For most of his life, everyone mentioned how small Max was. He often played against boys four or five years older, and it added to the dynamics of watching him on the court.

Little boy, huge swing. When he played team tennis for the first time, his teammates stood him in the ball rack for the annual photo.

“From a really young age, I always felt a bit different,” he said.

But Max has grown into his body and his confidence.

He has tousled sandy blonde hair that sweeps above his justifiably sleepy green eyes. He describes himself as “just a pretty chill guy,” and that shows, despite the occasional itchy attention span.

His parents still ask him routinely if he is OK with the professional path he’s on. For now there are no plans for college, though he could earn a scholarship to play anywhere in the country. He takes his online Excel High School courses in the gaps of his life — in the backseat of the car, on a plane, in the hotel room.

What does Max want? “My goals have always been to win Grand Slams, be No. 1, definitely winning the U.S. Open is probably my biggest goal,” he said. “It would be amazing.”

He was sitting at his kitchen table on a rare visit home to Savage, eating pizza, nibbling on vegetables and watching a replay of an NBA game when he said this. It sounded like the kind of outlandish thing any teenager would dream up, but to him it’s possible.

It was also a reminder that he’s lived an insulated, utterly different childhood: hitting next to castles in London; training sessions with American pros like Chris Eubanks and Madison Keys; practicing on Paris red clay at French Open courts next to Novak Djokovic and Coco Gauff; getting sponsored clothes and shoes from Adidas and sponsored strings, racquets and bags from Babolat.

His family is both thrilled at what he’s accomplishing and worried about the pressure he’s under.

His brother, Alex, who is seven years older, played tennis at Northern Colorado. He works in downtown Minneapolis for a software company and still coaches tennis. Alex sees genius in his brother but knows a tennis life is grinding. He sometimes wishes he could bring Max to work for a week to show him what a 9-to-5 job is like, figuring that would keep him passionate in his pursuit.



Family meals are a rare occurrence at the Exsted home, top, in Savage. In 2023, Max spent a grand total of two weeks in the state. But those two weeks included a tournament at Minneapolis’ InnerCity Tennis, above, where he played growing up.

“I think he is very special,” Alex said. “I try not to overload him.”

Max’s older sister, Isabelle, was his first hitting partner. She played tennis at North Carolina Central after spending three years at an academy in Florida and now runs an online clothing store.

“I was trying to get to the highest level in Florida and training very intensely and doing tournaments,” she said. “I thought, ‘Wow I’m in one of the best positions in tennis to be the best I can be,’ not knowing there’s a whole other level.”

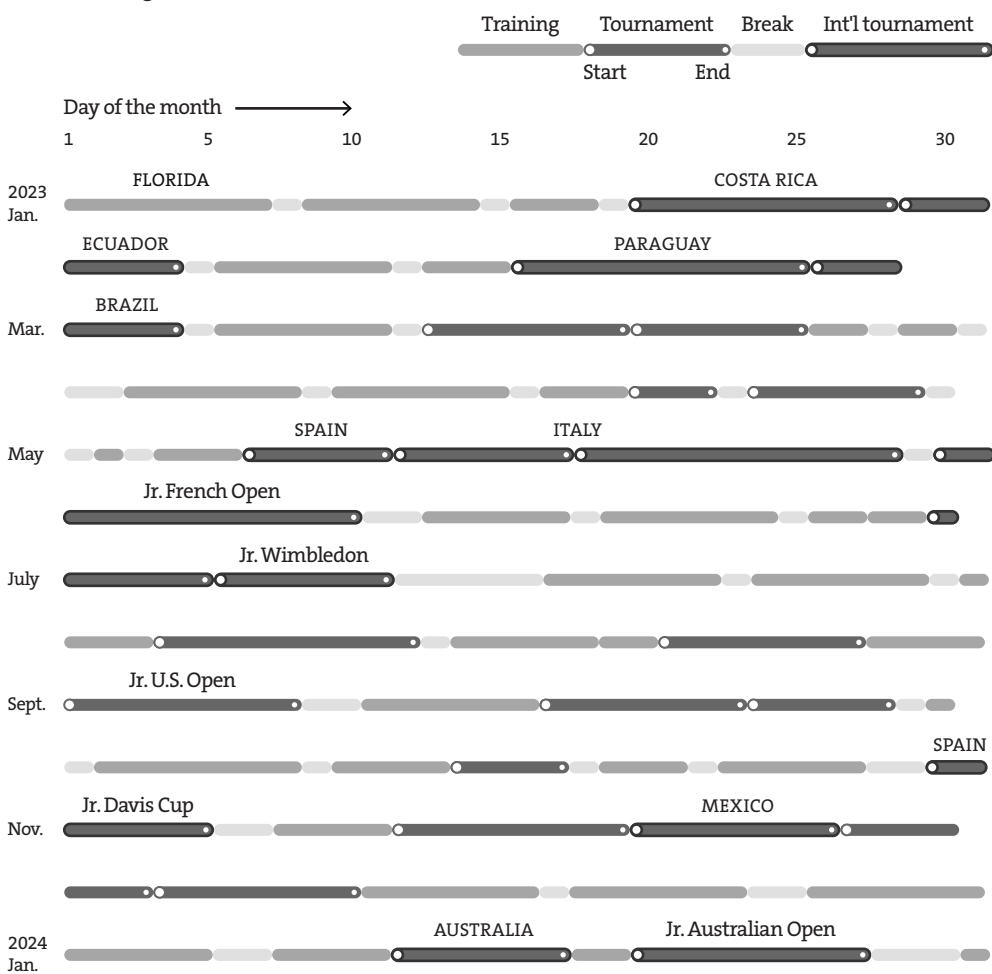
Max’s parents didn’t know at the time, but Alex and Isabelle were showing the way. Alex played some national junior tournaments and Isabelle played in the Caribbean on the International Tennis Federation circuit.

“They were our guinea pigs,” their mom, Jodi, joked.

A family member always travels internationally with Max, a necessary, vital companion. When Chris is the chaperone, he balances the changing time zones with his professional life as a sales rep in Minnesota, waking up in the middle of the night to take conference calls. Jodi, an attorney, feels loss of Max’s absence; in the past year she hasn’t traveled with her youngest son as much as she’d like.

MAX EXSTED’S SIGNIFICANT YEAR: A GLOBAL TENNIS JOURNEY

Over the past 13 months, Max Exsted’s whirlwind journey took him through tournaments in 10 countries and numerous domestic events across several states. His training hub is primarily the USTA Training Center in Orlando.



Source: www.maxexsted.com

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