Esqueda aims to retain Keowee Key title

BY ROBBIE TINSLEY
THE JOURNAL

SALEM — George Esqueda's first opponent in tennis was, quite literally, unbeatable.

Growing up in Mexico City, Esqueda volleyed back and forth against a brick wall at his parents' country club when he was just 6 years old.

Fast forward 32 years, and Esqueda, now the tennis director at Keowee Key Country Club, has become that wall.

He's not playing full-time like he was as a jet-setting teenager or as a member of the of the South Carolina tennis team, but the state's top open tennis player has not lost since May 2007, winning 79 matches in the process.

His next challenge will take place at this weekend's ninth annual Keowee Key Pro Tennis Tournament, with Esqueda aiming to win his home competition for the fifth year in a row.

Esqueda's tennis journey began when the local pro at the country club asked his parents if he could teach their son and sign him up for a couple tournaments. Esqueda discovered his love of competition as some discover an early love for their favorite school subject, as he won a national championship at the 10-and-under level.

"I started winning very quickly. I guess I had something of a facility for it," he said. "Much like some people have a facility for mathematics, I had a facility for competition."

His prodigal talent in the sport earned him a spot on an international tennis team at 16, and he went on to play in the biggest junior tournaments around the globe. Esqueda competed in the junior level at Wimbledon, the French Open and the Italian Open.

"In my house, the rules

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ESQUEDA: Has been ranked No. 19 in world

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were very simple," he said. "My mom said I could do whatever I wanted as long as I got straight As.

"My dad said I could do whatever I wanted as long as (I won) all the tournaments," he added with a laugh.

He notched his first win at 17 in his home city, taking home the Casablanca Cup in 1992. A year later, he retained his title and earned his highest ITF world ranking, No. 19.

"The folks I was traveling with, some of them became professional tennis players," Esqueda said. "But others, like me, had their SAT prep books with them."

Esqueda took the SAT in Paris, and he later accepted a full ride to enroll in the University of South Carolina honors college and play with the Gamecocks' tennis team.

He later graduated Summa Cum Laude with a degree in finance and economics.

When he graduated, Esqueda had a choice. He could either move into the business world, taking a job with Nations Bank, or he could stay with his first love and become a tennis pro.

Needless to say, he decided on the latter, signing on with Thornblade Country Club in Greenville.

"I've always loved teaching tennis," Esqueda said. "I have a great passion for developing players of all ages and levels. I think I have something to contribute to the tennis community."

Esqueda was the top-ranked open tennis player in the state in 2005 before backing off of his heavy tournament schedule to focus on his club. He then took a job at Cardinal Racquet Club in Anderson before moving to what he calls "the best job in South Carolina" at Keowee Key more than four years ago.

"Keowee Key is known for winning," Esqueda said. "We have countless league, state, sectional and one national championship team. I think it fits my personality very well.

"They care about the game, sure, but I think they care about winning more, which I like."

And a few years later, he got the itch to make another run at No. 1.

"Two years ago, I said, 'I think I can still hang with these 20-year-old boys,'" he said.

Esqueda returned to his perch as the state's top player and hopes to maintain that with this week's tournament, which starts Friday. However, his first priority is to make sure the players, which include the state's No. 4 and No. 8 players, put on a good show for the spectators.

"We are putting on this event for Keowee Key and anyone else who wants to attend," he said. "The main thing is they enjoy three good evenings of tennis, good food and a first-class event."

And, hopefully, wins No. 80 and beyond.

rtinsley@upstatetoday.com | (864) 882-2385
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Keowee Key tennis pro George Esqueda is the state's top open tennis player, as he hasn't lost since May of 2007.