

Tennis pro Esqueda fitting in at Keowee Key

BY BROOKS GALLMAN
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SALEM — It's likely the nearly 300 members of the Keowee Key Tennis Association have had the time to get to know head tennis pro George Esqueda.

After all, he's been there for nearly a year now.

But on the off chance they haven't yet, now may be the time to as the association gears up for its sixth annual Keowee Key Pro Tennis Tournament coming up this weekend.

One thing is certain approaching his first full year in Keowee Key at the end of August — Esqueda says he wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

"I love it, I love it," Esqueda said. "It's the best job in the world."

The 35-year old son of an Italian father and a mother from Mexico, Esqueda got started in the tennis gig at the ripe age of seven in Mexico City, where he spent most of his time as a youth despite bouncing

THE DETAILS

Keowee Key Pro Tennis Tournament

When: Friday through Sunday

Where: Keowee Key Tennis Center, Salem

Cost: Free

Schedule:

Friday — Pro Doubles Tournament, 6-9 p.m.

Saturday — Pro Singles Quarterfinals and Semifinals 6-8:30 p.m.

Sunday — Pro Singles Finals, 6:30-8:30 p.m.

between there, Spain and Italy.

"My dad was always at the country club playing golf and I used to hit on a wall they had set up like a backboard at the club I would use," he said.

"So, I used to go when dad played golf and hit around some with my mom, just back and forth, nothing really serious."

Nothing serious until the club's head tennis pro made his father an offer, in the words of Vito Corleone, that he couldn't refuse.

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KEOWEE: Key tourney starts Friday

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"The tennis pro at the club we were in asked my dad, 'Have you seen your son play tennis?' and dad said, 'Yeah, he's pretty good,'" Esqueda said. "So, he made my dad an offer and said, 'Let me give him 10 lessons and sign him up for a local tournament, and if he wins the tournament, you don't have to pay me'.

"So, I took 10 lessons and won the tournament, and from then on it was tournament after tournament. I've been playing competitive tennis since I was eight years old."

Playing in the likes of the Junior Wimbledon, the Junior French Open, the Junior U.S. Open and countless other international tournaments while reaching the No. 19 world ranking by the International Tennis Federation, oddly enough, is what led him to South Carolina of all places.

"I was playing a lot of international tournaments in South America and Europe," he said. "And I started receiving scholarship offers from three universities who offered me a full schol-

arship — Pepperdine University, NC State and the University of South Carolina. I visited the three and thought a better fit would be USC, so I ended up going there and I've been in South Carolina ever since."

All while earning Suma Cum Laude honors and graduating with a degree in Finance and Economics, Esqueda also racked up another impressive accolade. More than a decade removed from his playing days as a Gamecock on a full scholarship, he still holds the record for the highest winning percentage of any USC tennis player.

Now, Esqueda has turned to the teaching side of the game, and after a five-year stint as Thornblade Country Club's head tennis pro and another stay in Spartanburg, he says he rather likes the Keowee Key atmosphere.

"I like that fact that it's quiet. It's a very peaceful community and extremely well organized," he said. "I like the peaceful side of Keowee Key. It's kind of like going on vacation everyday."

Though it may feel like a vacation, he's at it working hard to bolster the image of the community's Tennis Association.

"The main goal right now is to grow the tennis program to achieve higher recognition in the Upstate," he said. "I think that goal will soon be accomplished. We're in the process of adding four more clay courts to the club, which will put us facility-wise as one of the best clubs in the Upstate."

"Once we add more courts, the program is just going to take off, and I want to be a part of that when it does. I think the main goal is to grow the tennis program to achieve a higher standard of excellence and recognition, which we're in good shape of doing in moving towards that."

One thing he can't get used to, however, is living in enemy territory.

"The paws on the road, it's a little hard to get use to those," Esqueda joked. "My wife is from Easley and went to Clemson, so she's thrilled that we live here. I'm getting use to it, and I kind of realize I'm outnumbered."