

discover



Lelelie Bliman (4)



DUSTIN BROWN

JAMAICA'S TOP PLAYER
MARCHES TO THE BEAT OF
HIS OWN DRUMMER

BY CHRIS ODDO

WITH A PAIR OF MASSIVE HEADPHONES DRAPED AROUND HIS NECK, AND A GIANT SWATH OF LONG, DREADLOCKED HAIR bundled like a bees' nest behind his head, it'd be easy to mistake Jamaican tennis player Dustin Brown for a house music DJ or the bass player in a popular ska band. But the fans adorned in Jamaican-colored flags at his recent Grand Slam matches have made it abundantly clear: *He is a tennis player.*

And even though he's getting little to no assistance from the Jamaican Tennis Federation, Brown has been able to defy his grim economic reality by increasing his ranking while living hand to mouth and rambling around Germany in his camper van on the futures tour.

"When I finished juniors my parents were thinking about how they could get me to keep playing," says the 25-year-old descendant of a Jamaican father and a German mother. "We got a big camper in Germany, and I was basically playing tournaments week in and week out anywhere near the area," he adds. "Even if you would lose first round in a future you'd still have enough money for gas to go to the next tournament... Once in a while you think, 'Oh my God, is this ever going to end? Does it make any sense?'"

It makes complete sense when you see Brown in action. His movement has an effervescent, poetic quality. He's wiry, nimble, and improvisational. With a chiseled frame and natural grace that belies his lack of a full-time coach (he can't afford one yet), Brown can overwhelm with power, or dazzle with finesse.

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Brown ON...

His shoelaces:

"I don't know how important they are, but I'm leaving them in, let's put it that way."

His headphones:

"Lil Wayne and Mavado (dancehall artist)."

His future:

"It can only get better."

His Davis Cup plans:

"For what country?"

Why he chose tennis over soccer:

"I'm responsible for my own game. In soccer you could be the best guy on the field that day and still lose."

Being asked to play Davis Cup for Great Britain:

"I guess they weren't as interested as was portrayed in the media."

Andy Murray:

"He read my drop shots pretty well."

His growing popularity in Jamaica:

"My Facebook has been blowing up."

A possible shoelace endorsement in the future:

"Why not, bring the money, I'm ready."

Playing for Jamaica:

"I'm Jamaican, my dad is Jamaican, if the possibility is to stay in playing for Jamaica, I would definitely love to do that."

Key Milestones in 2010:

Highest ranking No. 98, July 26; First Top 100 win, Bjorn Phau; First Top 20 win, Sam Querrey.

Yet in spite of his natural athletic grace, results on the futures and challengers tour haven't always come easily. "The last six years I was between 450 and 550 in the rankings," says Brown, "and then the last year I just took off." Indeed he has. The results have been so impressive that the British Davis Cup team has been attempting to convince the 25-year-old to acquire a British passport so he can come lend their squad a hand.

"What a personality," says Greg Rusedski, a Canadian player who reached No. 4 in the ATP rankings while playing for Great Britain.

"Sometimes when you've had to struggle for something, it makes you that much more hungry. You have to have that hunger. If you don't have it inside, you won't make it."

Thanks to his hunger, Brown certainly has come a long way. But he may not have been so lucky without the shoelaces. Ah, yes, the shoelaces, the Dustin Brown story wouldn't be complete without them. Call it superstition, call it crazy, but no matter what you call it, Brown is not going out on court without the yellow and orange shoelaces whose magical powers Brown unabashedly believes in.

"We went to a future (futures tournament) in Spain, and we were packing stuff at my friend's house," Brown says. "I just found a bag randomly with a bunch of colored shoelaces, and I'm like 'if we play finals the first week, you have to put them in your shoes, and me too in the same colors.' We lost the finals and he took them out, but I was like, 'I like 'em, so I might as well keep them in there'... Since then it's just been going good."

Shoelaces or not, Dustin Brown is a joy to watch, because he plays with joy in his heart. And, he's one of the few players outside of the Top 100 with the rare ability to electrify crowds. "I don't really do it to make other people happy," says Brown, when asked about his captivating style of play. "It's just the way I play...if other people are happy watching, then even better." 🎾

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