

At the Individual State Tennis Tournament I lost a close match to one of my future JTT team members, Olivia. It stung, like all losses do. However, soon after the loss, Coach Stu asked me to be on the Cheesehead JTT team with her and the others. I was honored to be invited, and I had seen posts from the year before when Team Wisconsin had won it. I wanted to win too. Going into the tournament, it was that simple.

When we boarded the plane from O'Hare to Orlando, thoughts of victory motivated me. I hadn't considered the social aspect of being a team member. Soon after landing, though, I sat at the first team dinner with five other people I barely knew. The two other girls on my team, Olivia and Bella, were two grades older than me which was intimidating. On the boys' side it was a bit easier. I trained with Finn and Alex, but Aiden was a new face. He made a bad first impression too-putting pineapple on his pizza. However, as the conversation continued, I realized that I had gotten lucky. Everyone was chatting as if we were an old group of friends who hadn't seen each other recently.

At morning warmup, instead of feeling nervous, I felt excited to make my team proud. The girl I played first was loud. She shouted after most points. This kind of opponent usually affects my game negatively. However, this time my team had my back from the sidelines. They smiled at me when she shouted and clapped when I earned points. They gave me confidence to push through and get us the win.

By the third round, the team was fully bonded. We had lively dinner conversations and constantly joked around with each other. Entering this round, we researched UTRs and WTNs together and concluded we could win. However, Team Long Island came in

swinging, beating us in overtime. We were upset. However, I couldn't shake the feeling that the friendships we gained from the past few days were greater than any win I wanted.

I was watching my teammates compete for 5th when I asked Aiden if he was glad to be here despite our loss.

“Of course,” he answered, talking about the fun he'd had. Then he added, “And, if I hadn't come to this tournament I wouldn't have met you.”

Although casually stated, his answer had a lasting impact on me. Kids my age can protect themselves by keeping their feelings hidden. When Aiden openly expressed gratitude for our friendship, he said what I was feeling. All the pieces of my team experience—the competition, work for a common goal, and support from teammates clicked into place.

Making friends and battling side-by-side with them in the heat of the well-manicured National Campus changed me. The camaraderie of other kids chasing their tennis goals broadened my understanding of my opponents. We're just a bunch of kids with lots of tennis dreams in common.