

SPORTS

THE BATTALION

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Double Trouble

Men's doubles team of Cook & Matijevic put fear in opponents

By Blake Kimzey
THE BATTALION

Forget threatening. Forget intimidating. When juniors Ante Matijevic and Lester Cook step onto the doubles court they are downright scary. As the No. 2 doubles team in the country, they make their opponents weak in the knees, double over with dry heaves and run for cover.

Their notoriety has only increased after they convincingly knocked off the nation's No. 1 doubles team at the Icy Hot/ITA All-American Championships earlier this fall.

Certainly, this is a phenomenon that Texas A&M tennis coach Tim Cass has had the joy of watching up close.

"Being second in the U.S. is pretty good when there are 300 Division I tennis teams," Cass said. "Ante and Lester are obviously two of the top tennis players in the nation, and more people are going to gun for them. It has been fun to watch them and it is an honor for them to be ranked so highly."

The two All-Americans are the definition of what it means to be a finely-tuned on-court duo and could go down as one of the most persistent and over-achieving doubles teams in the 100-year history of men's tennis at A&M, and they've only been teaming up together since their sophomore years.

Cass said Matijevic and Cook are stepping in where A&M tennis icons and All-Americans Ryan Newport and Shaun Madden left off.

"There have only been seven All-Americans in the history of tennis at A&M, and Ante and Lester are two of them," Cass said. "We talk about these guys making memories and an impact, and their play on and off the court demonstrates that. With more than

3,000 Division I tennis players out there, and only 35 named All-Americans each year, Lester and Ante are stepping out of the crowd."

Stepping out of the crowd is an understatement. As one of the most feared doubles teams in college tennis today, Matijevic and Cook know they are in the crosshairs of their opponents every time they hit the court.

"Because we are ranked as highly as we are it does give us an advantage," Cook said. "But, you always have something to lose every time you step on the court. On the court, the rankings don't mean anything, but it does give other doubles teams extra juice to come after us."

While tennis seems to come with ease to Cook and Matijevic, being one of the best doubles teams in the country hasn't come without countless hours of practice and conditioning, especially in the fall season.

"Doubles is a different game because you really have to work with your partner," Matijevic said. "We play so well together because we get along with each other. We feel the ball really well and every match we play is better than the one we played before."

While both players share a passion for tennis, their backgrounds are markedly different.

Matijevic came west to A&M from halfway around the world, growing up in Split, Croatia.

His tennis roots run deep: He is a five-time Croatian national champion and is the defending U.S. national champion. With those credentials, Cass came looking for Matijevic at Birotehnika-Zagreb high school.

However, Matijevic put his homeland in the rearview mirror because he said the atmosphere at A&M that Cass and his fellow teammates have culti-



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Texas A&M doubles partners Ante Matijevic (left) and Lester Cook have climbed to the No. 2 doubles team in the country.

vated makes him feel at home. It is an atmosphere that has helped Matijevic ascend to national prominence.

"Coach is like my second dad here, and I respect him so much," Matijevic said. "When I came here as a freshman, I had no idea how to play doubles. So, how I play now is a credit to coach Cass because he taught me."

Cook, however, came east to A&M after dominating juniors on the west coast in Sherman Oaks, Calif. His older brother, Jason, played tennis for Cass while Cass was coaching in New Mexico in 1996, and that gave Cook a look at the kind of coach Cass is.

Cook also has the added benefit of having played doubles with departed superstar Newport during his developmental freshman year at A&M.

Cook says he and Matijevic couldn't be as in-tune as doubles partners if their relationship wasn't strong off the court.

"Ante and I get along great," Cook said. "He is from Croatia, and it is great to learn about other cultures. I love talking to him, and he is a great guy to be around. On the court we are a natural team; you have to get along to be a good team or else your communication isn't going to be there. A whole bunch of skills can fall apart

when you are on the court."

Thus far their skills have done everything but fall apart. Because the duo are humble to the core, they don't talk about the fact that they could be No. 1 by the end of the fall season.

"One motto our team has this year is 'a little more than the other guy,'" Cook said. "Every time we step on the court we are trying to work a little harder than the other team."

Cass said the two are destined for great things. "They came here to make a mark," he said, "and that is exactly what they are doing."



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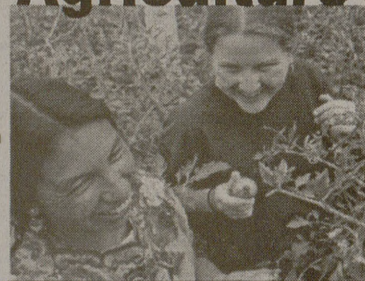
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