

In the Spotlight: Nicola Kuhn & Rudolph Molleker

Nicola Kuhn and Rudolf Molleker are spearheading a memorable season on the Tennis Europe Junior Tour for Germany. Both have spent the year so far ranked firmly inside the 14 & Under Top 10, and the pair has combined to win both European team competitions, the Tennis Europe Winter Cups by HEAD and the Copa Del Sol, as well as a number of individual events.

Recently they reaffirmed their dominance when Molleker won the European Junior Championships (Kuhn reached the semifinals) and they teamed up to claim doubles silver medals. We caught up with them in Pilsen to ask them to evaluate their season so far...

This year's Winter Cups win was a big one for Germany; the first in thirty years. How was the tournament for you?

Rudi Molleker: Well, it was the first time we'd played together on a team. We'd met before a few times, and had played doubles together, but not at a team event. Once we started to play we felt very good together. We didn't think that we would win the cup, just because it was our first time together, so it was unbelievable. And after that at the Summer Cups we felt differently, like "OK, so we know we can win this!"

Did you feel more pressure at the Summer Cups, knowing that you had won the Winter Cups in Correggio?

Nicola Kuhn: Not really. We had to play one match at a time and try to do our best. Of course we had the motivation to win the Summer Cup and be able to win both events, but really there was no extra pressure for us from outside.

The Summer Cups also serve as the qualifying for the worldwide 14 & Under team event. What do you expect from the World Junior Tennis finals in Prostějov?

NK: Well, we have to play good of course, because the players there are very good – the best in the world. We just have to play one round at a time and not think about the finals too much. [The boys went on the win the championship, beating Canada 2/1 in the final]

What have been your other favourite tournaments this year? You have both had some impressive results on the regular Tennis Europe Junior Tour.

RM: Mine was definitely Tim Essonne in France, that's the best I have played this year. I beat three good guys and in the finals I beat the top guy from Russia [Alen Avidzba] 6-0 6-0, which was unbeliev-



able. So that was definitely my biggest tournament.

NK: Mine was at Tarbes [Les Petits As], where I lost in the final. Everybody was playing there, him also [Molleker], so to reach the final, and play against the French guy in front of a big crowd, was a big thing for me. I won at Bolton the week before, which was also a good result so those were a good two weeks.

When you play against each other, who wins?

RM: Well, we've played only once so far...

NK: It was quite a tough match, and he won in the third set. But we're going to play many, many times in the future, so it won't be the last one!

Nicola, you train at an academy in Spain. How did that come about?

NK: I live in Germany normally, but since I was small we would always go to a summer house in Spain for holidays. I was also practicing when I was there and then two and a half years ago, we saw that the academy of Juan Carlos Ferrero [Equelite] was fairly close – not really near, but about 120km from my house, so we thought OK, let's try to train there and see if I like it. I liked it a lot, and now I'm living there at the Academy and that's where I train.

What's it like to live away from home at 14?

NK: [Laughs] To be honest I feel quite at home everywhere I go! But it's a very nice atmosphere there. They support us a lot when we travel on social media, and it's a good motivation. They are doing a very good job; Ferrero is on court with us most of the days, and that's very helpful. Everybody there supports everybody else.

Where do you live and train, Rudi?

RM: I stay in Berlin, where I practise with my coach. I've been with him since I was 5 so we've already come a long way. Sometimes I go to Hannover >>

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Kuhn (centre), Molleker (right) and team-mate Henri Squire (left) celebrate Germany's Winter Cups triumph in Correggio in February.

<< where I play with Nicolas Kiefer and I have like 10 weeks in the year where I can practise there with him, so that helps me a lot.

Who would you say are your tennis heroes and inspirations?

RM: Mine is Roger Federer. I just love to watch him on the court. He is quiet on the court and focused on his game. It's unbelievable to watch him, especially his footwork and his technique.

NK: Well, it's quite difficult for me to say because I like Djokovic very much. He fights all the time and produces some unbelievable shots. But most of all, I think I admire Ferrer. Also I know him very well, since I was 8 years old. I have practised with him in Hamburg at

the ATP event, and the guy is just unbelievable. The way he fights for all the balls, he never gives up, mentally he is so strong and I think that he is the nicest person that you can meet on the ATP Tour right now.



What are your goals for the rest of this season?

NK: Obviously this week [the European Junior Championships], and the World Junior Tennis finals. Both are important, and we want to have as many as wins as possible, together and separately, because it's vital for our confidence. At the end of the year maybe the Orange Bowl. The calendars are not fixed yet, you have to be a little bit flexible...

Will we see you at the Tennis Europe Junior Masters?

NK: I don't know...

RM: It depends. I don't know if we will qualify...[in fact, Molleker qualified automatically by winning the European Junior Championships, while Kuhn is currently in fifth place in the Race to Masters rankings]

NK: There is an Under 14 event at the ATP Valencia Open, so that is also a goal for me. Then afterwards we have to prepare well for the next year, because we will think about Under 16s and starting to play ITF events too.

RM: It's also important to rest and not play too many events. Some holidays are nice, too!