

Bhullar's mentality shaped by experience

Thomas Martinez, Staff Writer

The journey from Norway to Tallahassee for junior men's tennis player Rana-Roop Singh Bhullar started 13 years ago when his parents enrolled him in a summer camp that would change the direction of his life.

"It became sort of an addiction for me and from there, my talent just started to grow and I took it more serious," Bhullar says.

Over the last decade of playing competitively, adversity faced on the tennis court has prepared him for situations similar to that faced by the 2018-2019 version of the 'Noles tennis team. Coming off of a season in which he finished 15-7 during a season in which the team finished 28-5 and reached the second round of the NCAA Tournament, expectations for Bhullar and the rest of a nucleus of five upperclassmen have been heightened.

After back-to-back losses to Tulane and UF around the end of January, the No. 22 Seminoles rebounded in their most recent match on Friday, Feb. 8, with a 4-0 win over 9-4 Auburn at the Scott Speicher Memorial Tennis Center. Bhullar, whose singles match was in a third set before the match was clinched, said that he felt confident despite the team's early setback this season.

"We win as a team and lose as a team and we kind of had that mindset that we'll bounce back and be better," Bhullar says.

Head coach Dwayne Hultquist has faced two-decades worth of adversity as coach of the 'Noles, navigating them to 16 straight NCAA Tournaments during his tenure. When he first saw Bhullar's high school tape, he noticed his solid movement and shots from the forehand side. What Hultquist has seen over the last three years from the 6'1" Norwegian is much more than that, though.

"He plays with a lot of energy, a lot of heart and enthusiasm," coach Hultquist says. "He's very passionate about the team and I think he's been a good leader, vocal leader, emotional leader, for the team."

Bhullar has found a home nearly 5000 miles from where he hails, finding a family made up of 10 players from nine countries. In the US, a country he first visited on official recruiting visits to FSU, UF and Iowa, he has been able to put his tennis life in perspective whilst separated most of the year from his family.

"The relationship I have with my friends as well as my family, I talk to them every day, helps me a lot to really mature and understand why I play tennis and look at the bigger picture and not let small things in life get the best out of me," Bhullar says.

College tennis is not the end goal for him. Bhullar — who has gotten off to a 7-1 start (4-1 in doubles play) during this season—envisions pursuing a professional career once he graduates with an Economics degree next year.

He says he's learnt that succeeding in college and potentially pro tennis doesn't always require having the superior talent but oftentimes being stronger mentally. He considers the mental aspect to account for 75 to 80 percent of the competition on-court, and considers his improvement in that department the reason for his heightened level of play so far this season.

"I grew a lot mentally going into matches, where I kind of see the bigger picture," Bhullar says. "I don't let losses affect me too heavily and I don't let wins get in my head too much either. I just try to stay grounded all the time."

Whether it's a practice on-campus or a match attended by 1,500+ and nationally televised on Tennis Channel vs. the No. 4 Gators, Bhullar has become accustomed to the kind of pressure he may face in big-time NCAA Tournament matches or ATP World Tour events down the line.

For now, though, Bhullar's role is that of a leader on the 9-2 Seminoles squad that faces Clemon at home next on Friday, Feb. 22. With his example, the team looks to adapt a singular focus that continues to provide them the type of results he's achieved since he was a 10-year old in Oslo.

"We win as a team and lose as a team and we kind of had that mindset that we'll bounce back and be better," Bhullar concluded.