Navigating the Early Years of a Pro Tennis Career with CiCi Bellis

Welcome to the compete like a champion podcast. You’re here with mental skill specialists, Dr. Larry Lauer and coach Johnny Parkes. Today’s episode, we got a very special guest in the studio here. CiCi Bellis, and we’re going to be talking about navigating the early years of a pro tennis career. CiCi, welcome to the podcast.

C: Thanks for having me. I’m excited to be here.

J: Absolutely. So before we get going with things, it’d be great to just get a little bit here. So how’d you get started in tennis?

C: I got started. I think I hit my first tennis ball when I was three years old. My mom played when she was younger, so she kind of started me and then I played my first tournament when I was seven.

J: Nice, nice. When did you know that you wanted to be a pro player? Was it your first tournament when you were seven or did that kind of happen there?

C: Probably a little bit later. I’d always, you know, definitely had college as a backup. Ended up committing to college before I turned professional. I was older, but I think when I was around 14, 15, I definitely saw a pro career in my future.

J: So what happened around that time that made you think I give this ago, I think I’d be pro here.

C: I think it was just playing a lot more international tournaments. I was starting to do a little bit better and it was traveling the world and they’re really enjoyed it and um, yeah, I was just having a lot of fun and I thought it’d be really fun to have a career out of that.

J: So what do we stand right now? I know that, you know, you’ve been on the tour for how long?

C: Turned pro when I was 17. So two and a half years.

J: Well, CiCi, uh, where do we stand right now? I know that, you know, you’ve been on the tour for how long?

C: Two and a half years. So it really is the early part of your career, right? You’re at the beginning stages of it. How those two and a half years. Just overall how they’ve been. I mean, now you’re a pro tennis player. I guess maybe this is a dream that you had when you were young that you could be on this stage and you’ve been on this stage now for a couple of years. What has it been like?

C: It’s been awesome. I think my first two years were so much fun. I got to travel to so many different places that, you know, I wouldn’t have gone if tennis
weren't, you know, there and yeah, I mean I, I think I did pretty well for my first two years in the last eight or nine months it's been kind of a struggle for me with injuries. But other than that, I've been enjoying it so much and still enjoying it in the last year or so. But, um, yeah, it's been, it's been great overall so far.

02:06 L: So you've had a lot of time away from the court recently with, with your injuries. How do you keep yourself busy? Like what, what are your hobbies or different things that you're doing to keep yourself occupied when you're not able to play tennis?

02:18 C: Well, I started taking classes online, college classes and uh, I've been taking three at a time each semester and I've been enjoying it so much. Um, that's definitely keeping me busy and I'm still doing fitness twice a day in rehab twice a day. So that's definitely keeping me busy during the day as well.

02:32 L: Well keeping yourself busy, huh? Definitely don't have to think about the tennis too much.

02:36 J: What classes you've taking right now? I'm taking finite mathematics, macro economics and Spanish.

02:41 J: Hoh, heavy!

02:41 L: Did you even understand what she just said? JP?

02:45 J: I have no idea what that first one was. Something mathematics.

02:48 L: They don't have that in England.

02:50 J: I think I stopped maths when I was about 15. Never had to do an addition since.

02:54 C: My favorite subject.

02:55 J: Oh my gosh. My worst.

02:58 L: She can, she does a great job with it too. Cause I'm her proctor.

03:01 C: Larry proctors all my exams. Yeah.

03:04 L: I have a very important job. I sign off on things for CiCi.

03:09 C: He's my guy.

03:10 L: I'm very, I'm very powerful. Very powerful.
J: So you'll, your educational careers in Larry's hands? Yes. Yeah, definitely.

C: My teachers reach out to him and give him all the instructions and he, he takes it very seriously.

L: Very seriously. Yeah, I clear my schedule and I sit there.

C: For four hours.

L: Well you never take four hours.

C: No, but they say you need to be there for four hours, Larry, so you need an extra time, extra time. He times it, he's on me.

L: I would not proctor any exams you were doing JP.

J: Why is that?

L: it just would take too long and I'd have to wonder if you were cheating.

J: Brutal. My uh, my knowledge is taking a hit today.

L: Well that already did and when we started the podcast, but yeah, let's carry on with CiCi because that's more important here.

J: Absolutely.

L: So you know, you're traveling the world and, and you're playing all these players you see on TV. What was it like the first time you matched up against someone? Like, Oh, I saw her on TV years ago or a couple of years ago. Did you have that experience and what was that like?

C: Yeah, definitely. I think it's almost impossible to not have that experience when you're, you know, a young player coming up. It was pretty crazy. I think the most nervous I've ever been was when I was 15 playing Serena in Miami and that was, you know, such a crazy moment for me. Cause obviously looking up to her my whole life and her and Venus. So both times I played both of them and yeah, each time, each time I played them, it was pretty crazy for me. I was pretty nervous.

L: How did you feel like you did in those matches? Being young and they're the veterans and have been doing this for a long time and really the holding the torch, you know, of American tennis for a number of years now. How did that, how did you do in that environment?

C: When I played Serena, I think my nerves really got the best of me and I've never had that experience really ever when I've played. Just because, you know,
I've always thought, you know, going into the match that if I, if I play well, you know, I'm going to have a good chance of winning. And yeah, I've, I've never been that nervous. I was almost scared going out into the match and it was such a crazy experience for me. But obviously, you know, it was a great time to have that having that so young. So yeah, I don't think I handled that great. But then when I played Venus, uh, I think it was the next year I handled a lot better.

L: Awesome. Learning from experience, Johnny.

J: Absolutely. Well, one thing that stands out to me with you CiCi is you have this confidence and presence about you, not only just kinda how you carry yourself on the court, but also in practice. Is that something that you, that you practice, was it taught to you or do you think that you know, is it something that you know is just part of who you are?

C: I mean, I think a lot of my confidence stems from my practice and how hard I feel I work on the court. And then when I get to tournaments and matches, I feel like I've done everything that I can to prepare, you know, before the tournament. So I feel like that gives me a lot of confidence and just a lot of just not much doubt going into matches and tournaments. So that's really what, what does it for me?

L: So I, I watch you practice and to me it's a joy having around the campus because you bring great energy and part of that is that confidence and I think it's important maybe for players who are listening to this podcast or even coaches and parents, where does that come from? Because I watch you practice. It's not like a lot of other practices. And I relate this back, I went to a Michigan state university's hockey practice cause I know the coaches, I've worked with them and they're at Michigan state now. I went to the practice and the guys are having fun and they're joking with their series too and they're working hard. And I kind of see that in you. And that's pretty rare in tennis. I find a lot of times at tennis practices feel like, you know, almost like this, I don't know, it feels like people are uptight and walking on eggshells, but that's not that way with you on the court. Like what, how would you say your practice demeanor is and you know, where does that stem from?

C: Yeah, I mean, I think it's so important to enjoy what you're doing. And I mean obviously I love tennis so much. I've been doing it for so long, so I think it's so important to enjoy the hard work and that's definitely something I do. And just knowing for me that I'm, I'm working extremely hard and it's all gonna, you know, be paying off in the tournaments. And, uh, seeing all that, um, hard work come through is so important. I think that's what really gives me joy and like me playing well in practice and having good sets of drills and that's what really gives me joy.

L: So, I mean, I, again, like I said, I watch you practice and even when it's challenging, um, maybe you're not playing well at that point in time or whatever. And you might be getting frustrated. It's Not like you go away or you
know, because a lot of players do that right? In practice. Maybe they lower their effort, their focus. It's like yours intensifies, right? You, you challenge yourself more. How do you deal with some of those things? Cause I think a lot of listeners can benefit from that. You know, how you deal with some of the challenges in practice when maybe you're tired or you're not performing the way you want to, you're struggling with something that your coach wants you to do. How do you kind of work through that and keep going?

07:41 C: Yeah, I mean I think that's when you get better is those times that are challenging you. And I think that's what I've always thought in practice and when I do tough drills is those times are really what are going to help you in what's going to push you to the next level. So I actually, I find a lot of joy in challenges and practices. I know it's gonna help me.

07:57 J: There's another key instrument areas. When she's not feeling her game on the day she asked to hit with me and then she gets a lot of confidence back.

08:05 L: Your ball will do that.

08:06 C: I would say a lot of my confidence comes from beating Johnny and practice.

08:09 L: Yeah, I'm going to start playing with you then.

08:11 J: I go back up to the office after playing a set with her and they're like, how'd you do? And I'm just hanging my head.

08:15 L: And then he comes to me and he has a session.

08:19 C: Well, and then he goes down to the physio room and says some part of his body is hurting and he can't hit with me the next week.

08:25 J: Ah, okay. Okay. Yeah. It's his brain. Send him back up to the mental training room. That's what physiology is going on there.

08:32 J: So yeah. Well no, I mean you hit a good point in that Larry. And listen, you face a lot of choices, right? Every day when you, when you train, when you practice, and then when you're playing matches, how do you deal with, with making a lot of choices. So now you're, you're a young pro when you're getting pulled in a lot of different directions, you know, how are you navigating the choices but on the right balance between making sure that you do everything that you know, makes you comfortable, confident and prepared. And then some of the other side of it that is maybe having to, you know, there's media or parents is or ads and things like that. How do you balance it all out so that you can get back to the core as an essence of, of what it is that you, you're basically comfortable doing.
C: Yeah, I think that's, that's a really big part of it. And what's, um, you know, challenged me in the last year or two for sure. But I think what we've always done is put practice first and always make sure that, you know, I feel confident that I've gone in enough and what I needed to do that day. And then whatever other media stuff I have, the rest of the day can be done after practice or you know, I've had to take some trips for media and I just make sure I get my practices in and make sure those are maybe on weekends if possible or you know, on times that are supposed to be off tennis. So that's really, um, been the most important thing for me.

L: That's, that's a lot of maturity CiCi because one of the things that I see in professional tennis because the players have a lot of say in their schedule and how they train, which I think is important. They sometimes don't make the best decisions. I think you've made a lot of very good decisions. And I know a couple of years ago when you started up with Anibal, your former coach, you really made the conscious decision to have set train blocks. Right.

C: Yeah. We went through and scheduled them basically a year in advance and scheduled out, you know, my full year in the December before, before the year even started. And I think that's so important for me to have training blocks cause all of my good results in the past have come after I've had, you know, a good week or two here and there and getting it a lot of good time on core, a lot of good fitness and just giving me, you know, that confidence that we talked about from practice to get into tournaments and matches.

L: Well that's excellent. Again, I think isn't that a tough choice of that age because you, well part of it is you can only play so many tournaments. So that helps because you can, you know, the WTA rule, but at the same time when that's lifted, don't you just want to go play and play every tournament because this is the dream. Right. And why wouldn't you just go play, play, play, play, right. Is that a, was that a tough decision for you at that time and what kind of swayed you on that?

C: Yeah, I mean that was always something that we knew was going to happen at some point. And I think just knowing that the rule was lifted actually, even though I could play more, it gave us more freedom to kind of make those training blocks and put those in my schedule and know the times that needed to be dedicated to training and then others to tournaments and obviously we added a few tournaments into my schedule, you know, more than I could prior to the age rule lifting. But yeah, it was definitely important for us to still have those training blocks.

L: Now, one of the things that we talk about are, are managing distractions, right? And it's a little bit with Johnny was getting into and I find that for me focus is the biggest issue for players. Confidence and other things come from being focused in the present and you seem to do a pretty good job with that. Even with your training. I know that was an emphasis for you even in the last
couple of years is training without distractions. You want to talk about that? Like what, what does that mean and how does that work?

11:46

C: Yeah, that's, that's been a huge thing for me. And just basically starting from when I turned pro and like we talked about having those media obligations and other things outside of the court that would distract me from my training. And that's what we said. We were always going to put my training first and what I need to do for my tennis and then have the distractions come second. Or you know, at all.

12:05

L: When I'm at the US open I don't really see you much cause you're going about your business. Right. And you have very specific routines that you do. And am I going to ask you specifically what those are? Because you know, we don't want other countries to know, but uh, how important are your, your routines off the court to, to create the kind of training and then match what I would say state or mindset that you want to have. How important are those routines?

12:31

C: I think the routines are everything and we've, you know, you and I have worked on that so much over the last few years. I think, you know, just having set routines every single day before and after matches I think is so important to have. The same thing every day. I mean, we almost go as far as to have the same restaurants and, and food every day. And I think that's, you know, kind of a fun way to deal with it. But yeah, no, it's so important I think to have the recovery routines, the pre-match routines, the, you know, eating and, and hydrating routines. I think it's, it's extremely important.

12:59

L: Is it like the fried chicken dinner, like Wade Boggs, who used to play for the Red Sox and eat the fried chicken before every single game he played like what 3000 games or something. That dude, I hope that his cholesterol is all right, but.

13:10


13:17

L: Yeah. That's not a, then you just know that you're better than the rest of the field if you can get away with that.

13:21

C: I remember Michael Phelps is like 6,000 calorie diet per day or something. We were hearing about that. Yeah.

13:27

J: So CiCi tell us some of your most memorable moments so far. I mean, again, you and two and a half years into your pro career and you know, you're just at the beginning. What are so, so far, what are some of the most memorable fun moments that you have of, of matches on the tour?

13:41

C: I mean, I think, you know, traveling to some really fun places definitely are some of my most fond memories and obviously playing here in the US is amazing too. But, um, I think one of my most fond memories was I set, you
know, obviously goals and ranking goals during my playing time. And I think getting to those goals and getting to my career high ranking was a huge step for me. I think it was about a year and a half ago. And uh, yeah, that was, that was one of the most memorable, memorable moments for me along with, you know, a few other matches that year. And then kinda when I was younger, getting up into the pro tennis and being, you know, so starstruck at all these new tournaments and it's just, it was so cool when I was younger as well.

14:18 L: Well, one of those moments is one that I'm sure a lot of our listeners are aware of. And that is you playing Cibulkova at the U S open. And I want to preface this by talking about me because it's always about me, but I was actually at the U S open and if our listeners have been there, if you haven't, they have like a college stadium environment for courts four, five and six right. And so the fans are just kind of getting used to this as well as the staff, and so I'm, your match hadn't started and I ended up on four. I was watching, funny enough, Christina McHale and Shawnee Anderson, now a Sievers at the time. Right. So I was watching them play and then you had started and so I planned on going over and watching you. I couldn't get anywhere near the court. And then I would just hear like these roars of just noise of wall of noise and, and it started to emanate across the, the grounds like, Hey, there's something big going on on, I think court six. Talk a little bit about that match against Cibulkova cause that was kind of what we'd say, you're coming out party for a national audience. So we knew what you were capable of, but at that point the nation really became aware of CiCi Bellis. What was that match like for you?

14:41 C: Yeah.

14:41 L: So the fans are just kind of getting used to this as well as the staff, and so I'm, your match hadn't started and I ended up on four. I was watching, funny enough, Christina McHale and Shawnee Anderson, now a Sievers at the time. Right. So I was watching them play and then you had started and so I planned on going over and watching you. I couldn't get anywhere near the court. And then I would just hear like these roars of just noise of wall of noise and, and it started to emanate across the, the grounds like, Hey, there's something big going on on, I think court six. Talk a little bit about that match against Cibulkova cause that was kind of what we'd say, you're coming out party for a national audience. So we knew what you were capable of, but at that point the nation really became aware of CiCi Bellis. What was that match like for you?

15:27 C: Yeah, it was, it was obviously one of the biggest moments of my career and definitely a really good jumping off point. For me it was, it was so crazy that match and seeing all those people. I'd never played, you know, in front of that many people. And um, as time went on during the match, more and more people came and it was, it was so crazy. I remember the whole stadium of, you know, like you said, the college like environment of all the courts were filled with people just watching my court. Cause I think the other ones had finished for the day and then the whole side of the stadium plus the restaurant next door and top of Arthur Ash on the stairs going down. People were watching. I remember seeing that afterwards and it was one of the craziest moments for me for sure.

16:03 L: How was it, you know, how do you in that moment to have that belief against Cibulkova at the time was top 10?

16:10 C: I think she was eleven.
L: Okay. But she was at almost the height of her tennis. And how are you able to go into that match? Obviously being young and being an underdog and find a way to win that match.

C: I mean, honestly, like we said, I had so much confidence in my training and I think at that point, you know, I'd never played someone that highly ranked of course. And uh, I didn't really know any better, you know, I just started playing the match, like it was any other match and didn't really think twice about the person across the net.

L: Interesting. So then you get late into that match. You start to realize this can happen, right? And you're, you're getting into the third set. How was that experience that there's more fans, there's more noise, there's more intensity. Like how are you feeling at that point? What was that, what was that like for you?

C: It was crazy. Yeah, there was, there was so much going on and, uh, I knew that I was doing so well and I knew that I could definitely win that match if I, you know, kept going and kept playing as well as I was. And I think, you know, I just tried to stay as focused as possible and not on anything around me and just stick to my game plan and that's what I did.

L: You did a great job of it. And, and I think, you know, looking back, cause I, I was able to watch some of that match even though it was like pushing people out of the way. Uh, and then to watch your next match against Diaz, right. And court 17, which was also a pack steam. And I remember being on a top row at the top of 17 and looking down and there was a row of people or line of people way back beyond the other courts to try and get into watch you play. What was the, what was it like going through that experience of beating a Cibulkova and you're in New York and so biggest moment of the year, the US open for tennis in this country. What was it like after the match and then how, how might have that impacted your next round?

C: After the Cibulkova match? It was, it was crazy. I'd never experienced media like that before obviously, cause I was just playing in juniors earlier that year and that was, you know, my first real pro tournament. And uh, it was so much for me. I think I finished the match and I was there another five or six hours for, you know, media obligations. And I didn't really know how to say no at that time. I didn't know you could say no and I had so many people, you know, pulling me in every direction. And yeah, it was, it was a lot. It was good to have that experience for sure to, you know, know then obviously in the future when big things happen like that, um, just to know what's coming. But yeah, it was definitely a lot for, for me at that age.

L: And I mean, I think being at that next match, maybe that sapped you a little bit of your energy cause it didn't seem like the same CiCi on that day. Like how much did that take out of you going into that Diaz match?
C: Yeah, it took so much out of me. I think I had one day off after that before, you know, the next match against Diaz. And I remember practicing the next day and I was exhausted. I mean I was going, going, going up until, you know, late hours of that night and then had practice the next day and was exhausted and was doing everything I could to, you know, get ready for the next match. But I didn't even do fitness at that time. You know, I was just on-court practicing cause I was, you know, a lot younger. And, uh, yeah, my body couldn't really hold up.

L: Yeah. So there's some great lessons there for you, huh? In terms of how to manage some of those things?

C: Yeah. So many lessons I was, that was huge for me.

J: Sounds like just drains you mentally. I've been to go through all that stuff. You know, you already have enough to do physically.

C: And then so many things off the court. Yeah.

J: This is great. Well Larry, listen, we're running short on time here. Do you have...

L: Well, maybe just coming, you know, to the, the current kind of where we're at, you know, you're, you're dealing with this injury and maybe just some thoughts on how for maybe there's players listening who, how are going through an injury they're rehabbing or coaches who work with players who are rehabbing are going to have a surgery. Like what's some advice you might have having gone through this, really gone through this for the first time, right, a, a prolonged break from task because of injury. What's some advice you might have for people?

C: Yeah, it's, I mean, it's been so tough for me and I think it's so tough to be away from the game for so long. And you know, obviously like you said, I'd never had something like this before, so it was a shock to me. But I think just, you know, staying positive every day, you know, keeping your mind off of the fact that you can't play at the moment and just, yeah, staying as positive as you can and keeping a good team around you is so important.

L: And, you know, how important is it for you knowing when you look at things that you're still only two and a half years into your pro career, right. And you have this, hopefully this long career in front of you. Does that, does that help to understand that and to be able to look at, you know, you're still kind of in that beginning stage of your career?

C: Yeah, I think that that helped a lot. And, uh, you know, each time I had, you know, kind of a setback and the injury or I had to, you know, hear the news that I needed another surgery was so hard for me. And just knowing that I was still
so young and then I have, you know, a long career ahead of me, it was one of the reasons why I pushed through for sure.

20:41 So I made this, I had to say, Johnny, okay. I sat on a call, I've told CiCi this. I said, pound for pound CiCi Bellis is the toughest competitor out there. Could you, would you argue with that on a podcast? Absolutely not. I wouldn't. I've seen it firsthand and it's soul crushing.

21:01 L: Not for me.

21:03 J: No. I mean, CiCi for, for me, you, you know, it's, it's incredible, uh, to see your your confidence, the way you present yourself and you know, you're such a, he's such a happy person around, even though you're going through the injury now, it's, it's been an absolute, well, there's, it's an absolute pleasure when you're going around. You say hi to the kids when we have camps here and, and all that. And they, you know, for you, you're just saying hi to them. But to them that's like the biggest deal in their life, you know. And so, you know, at the end of the day it's, you know, I think it comes back to, you know, you've got great character, good person and you work hard, you know, so, uh, you know, we're obviously all rooting for you and you know, just keep your chin up, work hard through the injury and you know, when you're back up and running, you know, you can, you know, you can beat me up some more weeks.

21:45 C: Ready to go in a couple of weeks, Johnny. Wow.

21:46 L: Maybe she'll graduate up to playing me.

21:48 C: I'm down, Larry.

21:50 L: Mental games. The physical game isn't going to dent her, but.

21:53 C: I have to play Johnny and then also mentally play Larry at the same time.

21:57 J: Get the chess board out.

21:59 L: We'll get hockey pucks out now we're talking.

22:02 J: Listen, we gotta wrap it up CiCi. Thank you so much for joining the podcast. Absolutely. And anytime you want to come on again. And then just chat tennis or anything in general.

22:13 C: Whenever you guys want.

22:13 L: Awesome. Awesome. All right. She can be our third person on the podcast.

22:17 J: I know. You want to be a regular every Tuesday.
C: I would love it. I have time.

L: You have time now? You won't have time for us later though soon enough.

J: Alrighty. Alrighty. Well, thanks again. CiCi. All right, and that's a wrap on today's episode of compete, like a champion podcast. We thank CiCi Bellis for joining us here in the studio. Join us next time we'll be diving into more topics around in the psychology of tennis.