

Striving for Excellence in a Healthy Manner With Irina Falconi

- [00:00](#) Hi, I'm Kathy Rinaldi, US Fed Cup captain and you are listening to compete like a champion.
- [00:11](#) J: Welcome to compete like a champion podcast. You are here with Dr. Larry Lauer, mental skills specialist, and coach Johnny Parkes with USTA player development. Today we have a very special guest on the podcast Irina Falconi, WTA player and cohost of the tennis channel podcast. Irina, thanks for joining.
- [00:28](#) I: Thanks for having me.
- [00:28](#) L: Thanks Irina. We're excited about this.
- [00:31](#) I: Me too.
- [00:31](#) L: We're turning the tables because you had me on the TC podcast and you all were so nice.
- [00:37](#) I: I love being on the hot seat, so I'm ready.
- [00:38](#) L: All right, this is great. So JP.
- [00:40](#) J: So just going to do a very short intro for the, for the listeners. So your professional career, your your highest WTA ranking got up to number 64. You played collegiately before that at Georgia Tech where you were a two time All-American. So you've got that whole pathway from juniors through collegiately up to the pros. How was that journey?
- [00:58](#) I: It was a long one. I actually didn't really play very many junior tournaments growing up. I grew up in New York. And then when we decided at 14 that we were going to go to Florida just for better weather, not looking for parking for two hours anymore.
- [01:11](#) J: Smart.
- [01:11](#) I: Yeah, we decided all right, Florida is the Mecca of tennis and my dad really saw something in me and from then on I played some junior events here in Florida locally and then at 17, at 18 I decided, I was like, all right, I need to go to college. Even though I was meant to go pro, I was so adamant about going pro, I played this match against college player at the time and it was like, 0-6 6-0 0-6 loss, like the weirdest score line ever. And then I knew I was like, I need to go to college. And there was a spot open at Georgia Tech thanks to my friend Nina. She told me, she's like Rebecca Marino just decided to go pro and I was like, okay, Georgia Tech it is. So I just sent an email to Brian Shelton and I was like, Hey Brian, hope you're doing well. Just want to know if you guys had a spot. This was one month before school was meant to start and he said, yeah, we do have

a spot, but we have to hurry. So he had to go in front of the board. I had to do a lot of paperwork, still had to take one more credit of a foreign language and a month later I was at Hardcourts and I was already going into Georgia Tech, but it was the first time he'd actually ever seen me play at Hardcourts that year.

[02:14](#)

L: Wow. Yeah. It's an amazing story of just sort of how things came together. I'm really curious in if you want to tell me more about what your dad saw because you went from not playing much junior tennis or tournaments, right, but yet made the move to Florida like it must've been something really strong that he saw that that made him think, or did he just want to come to the sun and the and the beautiful weather?

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I: It's a combination of both. He taught my sister how to play, taught my mom how to play and then I came along and I just, I guess I kind of wanted it more and he would come after work every single day and train with me. Rain, snow or shine. He would just go out and we had nine public tennis courts in front of the building that we lived in. So it was kinda meant to be. And then when we moved to Jupiter, it was one of those things where I went to a public tennis court and one of the kids that was working in Brenda Scholtz Academy saw me. He's like, you need to see Brenda. It turns out, had a former top 10 player living 10 minutes away. So yeah, it was, it was one of those things where like the stars were aligned. Destiny, all that stuff was there. So, yeah, I honestly, if I were to say what he saw, I couldn't speak for him, but you know, I think it was just a certain drive that I had that my older sister didn't and he didn't know that I would make it in pros, he just knew that I really enjoyed playing and I love to compete. So

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L: He saw a passion and a desire to put effort and time into an endeavor and that is tennis. That was tennis in your case. And uh, he wanted to, it sounds like he wanted to do whatever he could to help you follow that pursuit. And that's how I would take that. But that's really cool.

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I: Absolutely. He actually was a professional soccer player in Ecuador cause I was born there and you know, some people would say okay, he was trying to live vicariously through you and depends who you ask. But you know, at the end of the day, he just wants me to live out the best, I guess be the best of my potential, you know, just really do everything I possibly can to get every ounce of talent I have out there. So don't let it go to waste, if you will.

[04:09](#)

L: He was a professional soccer player, so some would argue that he was able to follow his dream and he wasn't necessarily living vicariously through you because he was able to do what he wanted.

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I: Well he says that he wasn't able to make it because he met my mom. Yeah. But it was, it was one of those things where he met my mom and then soon after they got married and had my sister. So yeah, I mean if you ask him now, would he have wanted to, would he have actually made it in that team? I don't know. So yeah, I can't speak for him.

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L: Interesting. Well we'll stop asking about that. So you, you talked about this pathway and this pipeline, the journey and everything that's gone into it. What continues to motivate you to keep pushing to keep playing more? Do you find that, is it similar to what you started with, the joy in playing and hitting the ball? Or what is it like for you now?

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I: I would say it's the high that you get from hitting a great shot. You know, gutting out a really tough match, winning an important point, I think it's all of that. I made a commitment last year, well actually this year that as long as I'm happy on the court I will play. And so that's been the most important thing that I seek out every single time I go out there and you know, win or lose, as long as I'm happy I'm going to keep playing. And that's been my mantra, that's been my motto and I will continue to do that until I decide, okay, I'm not happy anymore.

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J: Uh, and that's, that's awesome, and if you're okay talking about this, last year you took a break from tennis, are you able to talk about that and what led to that decision?

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I: Absolutely. I was at US open last year and I was playing against the girl, Elena Rybakina and I mean she just smoked me. And it was one of those moments where I was like, Ooh, what am I doing with my life kind of thing. And I had had a pretty decent grass court season, but for some reason that match just kind of led me in a really dark place. And then I was going to Chicago that following week and I remember it was just like the day before the matches start, the matches were starting and I had a girl, it's like, Oh, do you want to practice in the afternoon? Like I saw that you're only hitting like half an hour in the morning. And I was like, no, I'm good. And I'm one of those people that's like twice a day, you know, before a tournament usually is how long I play. And so I knew that my mind wasn't right at that moment. At that moment I knew, I was like, Hmm, that's not good. And my friend from college was in Chicago at the time and she's like, do you need to go do any fitness training? Like I'll pick you up for dinner later, but whatever you need to do, rehab, fitness, training, whatever you have to do, like if you have to hit again. And I was like, no, don't worry about it. I like, I just want to go to dinner. I don't really care about the other stuff. She's like, okay, like she didn't think anything of it. She just thought that was the way I was. And then played my first match, won my first match. And in that match I was playing against someone that was a little bit older than me and I realized that she was getting mad for losing. There were a few points where she was just getting so upset and she's, she was only a doubles player, like a doubles only player and she was getting so upset and I'm sitting over there and I'm, I'm not sitting, I'm playing. And I'm like, why is she getting so aggravated? Like she's a doubles only player and she's losing to me and I'm out there and I'm just not enjoying any, any of it, even though I'm winning. Win that match, win my second match against Ashley Kratzer who was playing pretty well that year and her coach was actually my old coach. So there was a little bit of an edge there that I wanted to edge out. But other than that, like even after the match, I was just not really into, it didn't really care whether I won or lost. I remember texting my boyfriend, I was like, huh, not really feeling great. He said,

well you just won. You just qualified for this tournament. It's a big deal. And I was like, I'm not happy about it. He's like, Oh. And it was just kind of a moment where I was like, this is not great. And so I lost it to Tatiana Maria the following match and after that I like texted him and called him, I was like, pulling out of Quebec city, I need a break. He's like, all right, do what you have to do. And I did a, I think it was a medical withdrawal form. They're like, are you sure you still have like a few tournaments left? Are you sure you want to use this medical withdrawal form? I'm like, I'm not going to play for a minute. So yes, I'm going to use it. And in that moment I took initiative and I didn't care that it was still so much tennis to be played. I was 155 in the world. I didn't care. I just had to get away from the court.

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J: So with, so you took some time away. What did you do during that time that helped you come back to what you just talked about? Which was when I decided to come back, I just want to be happy. You know what was a moment during taking time off that helped you get to that point?

[08:20](#)

I: So there were a few things that I decided to do. One of them was coach a little bit. I would hit with people and I enjoyed it, but it took a few months for me to actually pick up a racket once I decided to stop to actually get on the court again, and then I opened up my own meal prepping business, which was a lot of fun. I love to cook and then I just said yes to everything. If people wanted to go on trips, they wanted to go out, whatever it was, I was just the yes lady, like I was just like, all right, you want to go to Aspen this week? You want to go this, do this, like I'm still trying to do that. I know it's not always easy, but um, I'm like, that needs to be my mentality all the time. And so I would say it was around June or July, kind of had a moment where I was like, is this really it? Like, am I just going to do like two hours of coaching in the morning and like two hours of cooking and then I'm done for the day. That's it. That's it. That's really it. I kept asking myself, huh? And I had had the question brought up to me of what's your purpose? And I couldn't find it. I couldn't figure it out. And I knew that when I was playing, I had that I knew exactly what my purpose was. I knew that I wanted to get better. But when you're coaching someone that really doesn't want to be out there, you're hitting with someone that's just there for fun. You can get them better. But I wasn't, I didn't feel like I was getting better. And so my sister texted me and she's like, Hey, can you come into the office? She's my financial advisor. I go in and I kind of told her a little bit about what I was going through and she's like, look, I'm going to be honest with you, like you can do the coaching, you can do the hitting for the next 50 years of your life. Pro tennis, you've got a very short window. So my opinion, I don't think you're done. I don't think your effing done. That's what she said. And I was like, you know what? You're right. And then the next day I went and practiced and thankfully all the staff at USTA was able to open up their arms and open up the facility for me as if I never left. And ever since then I've been playing and I've been happy. So that was it.

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L: And I can confirm that cause I've watched her play and she was happy and she lost. But she wasn't happy about losing. But you were somewhat at ease with what had happened. This is the way I would take it.

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I: It was a very tough match. Um, tough conditions and I lost to the eventual winner so I wasn't too too bummed about it.

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L: You know, it's interesting Irina, cause I think one of the things that's important when someone's taking a break is to actually take the break and get away from tennis because they say, well I'm taking a break, but then they're going hitting some, they're going in, they're thinking about it a lot. And I think if you're really trying to find your purpose and refind that passion for tennis, you have to take out like cold Turkey. Like I'm done. And then we'll, we'll see if it hits me.

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I: I remember talking to you a little bit about that right after I decided to take my break, we were at Starbucks and I was just like, I just need to get away from it. Like I, there's really nothing that is calling my name that's like, wow, you need to be back on the court. No. And at that time there was no coach really that was like telling me like, Hey, no, like stay in the court. So it was 100% my decision. And there's a sense of ownership and independence about that that you can't really beat. And the best praise I think I've gotten from people has been, wow, you were able to do it the moment you knew. And a lot of times what you hear with players is that they have that moment, they're unhappy, but they keep playing. And the amount of players that have reached out to me and have told me like, Hey, I'm going through exactly what you're going through. Like help me. And I'm like, well I'm not dr Larry Lauer here. I cannot help you per se, but I can talk to you. I can be there for you. So yeah, it's, it's been a journey for sure.

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L: But I think you have helped people, cause when we talked at the tournament, you were talking about how you, you're almost reaching out to, to players to talk about taking care of themselves and taking the time to recover and taking breaks so they need it. Do you feel like that sense now after coming back that yes, you're a professional tennis player but in some ways you're, you're becoming a mentor to other players.

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I: I do find that there's been a few girls that have reached out to me, even male players that are like, how did you do it? Like what was the moment for you? And I was like, I can tell you my moment. That doesn't mean that moment's going to be the one for you. And it's the same thing I tell everyone. It's like when you know you're not enjoying your time out there, that's when you need to stop. Like you have to be, you have to be committed to the break and I think that that's so important because a lot of people are just like, Oh, let me just play one more. Let me just see how it goes next week. Let me just try it out. It's like it's not about trying. You have to, you have to commit to either be there or not.

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L: I think a lot of times in those cases Irina and JP that people are looking for that week where it all clicks and everything feels amazing and they win and

everything's resolved, but usually that's not what it's about. I mean, it's in there, right? Because maybe you're not happy with how you're doing, but there's more to it than that, wouldn't you say, Irina? That it's not just about the wins and losses, although those have a big effect. It's more than that.

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I: There's so much more than that because to get to those wins and losses, you still have to go through the grind of traveling, of coaching, of the all the hours in the gym, all the hours in the training room and on the court just because you're winning or losing, they don't, you don't really know all the stuff that's going on behind the scenes and I think that's also the important part because if you're not enjoying the grind, how are you going to enjoy the time out there on the core and and the wins and losses.

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L: I think there's an important thing to think about here too. You know, JP, when we talk about people enjoying things, a lot of times people think about just that pure joy in a moment. That immediate gratification, like you know we need a Skittle or chocolate, right? But that's not what we're talking about here. When you're a professional tennis player, your endeavoring for something of excellence, you actually have to delay gratification and be okay with some of the things you have to do. They might not be inherently fun for that person like going out and doing something else but, but there's a delayed gratification where, you know, this might not be the most fun thing right now, but it's, I enjoy it because I know what it's creating in me.

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J: I think that's a good point because I think it looks a lot different. And what does enjoying the grind mean? And because, you know, when we see this sometimes, or maybe more often than we would like to see is that we are taking a model that say that you, you know, you're doing it. You're working hard on the court twice a day, you're in the gym, you're doing all these things. And you have people that see what pros are doing and they think that's what they should be doing. So if you take a 12 year old girl and they're applying the same model and they're not doing maybe what's appropriate for them at that age, their level, then they may end up resenting that type of work. Because you know, it, it is, it does become a more reliance on you as an individual to be really highly motivated in an individual sport. Now at that young, they're still formulating what that means, what that looks like. And so it, you know, now your, your level, you know, your age in pros, you're doing what is necessary for you, for your individual needs to, to meet the performance that you want to get to. And so it comes back to what does, you know, enjoying the grind mean at those different ages. And that's something I think about a lot when we see what the pros do and we take a pro model and we try and apply it with the juniors and it doesn't always work out that way. So we still have to remember. And I, I love what you said was I just want, I want to be out there and be happy to be out there and being happy means that you obviously want to enjoy it and have a lot of fun, you know? So again, what does fun and enjoyment look like at the younger ages? What does it look like as they're starting to see their level improve a lot and then what's it look like at a collegiate level and then what's it look like at a professional level? Well the enjoyment, the fun, the grind looks

different along the way and you know, so I think that's a really good point. And I think it's something we always need to be aware of. And you know, at the end of the day, it always comes down to the individual once of the person, but then the individual needs the, you know, I think needs to be, I mean maybe you could speak more to this, that that's being done together from you with your coach, with family as you just mentioned there with your sister, giving you a bit of a rocket. Hussey uses this term as a rocket, like kind of lighting a rocket under, you know, you know, it seems like your sister gave you a bit of a lighten up a rocket there, but you know, but it's maybe get some perspective on that, you know, what does that look like and how you go about it?

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I: I think it's very easy for a pro to be like, Hey, this is, this is what I'm doing. And a 12 year old be like, okay, this is what I should do. No, that's, that's not the case at all. As a 12 year old junior, I mean, I'm sure you can attest to it, I mean you just cannot compete and you can't work and train as hard as a professional or collegiate player. And that's the one thing where I find with young juniors, they're trying to do the same thing we're doing and getting burnt out at young ages and then you wonder why. It's pretty easy. You have to still make it fun at that age. And that's the part where I think at that 12, 13, 14 I'm getting a little bit better. I'm getting a little bit better, but you're forgetting that you started playing because this was a game. This was a sport. It was not that, I had fun out here. And I think once points start coming in and sponsorships and grants and endorsements, I mean that can really mess up a 12 year old, 13-14 year old. And so now, I mean I don't, I don't, I don't even know what I was thinking at 12, 13, 14. All I know is that I wanted to beat the boys. That's all. Like I was playing with the boys and that's all I wanted to do. Yeah, that's, that was my main focus. And then at the collegiate level, I just wanted to win for my team. That was the most fun for me. I just wanted to win for my team and at the, at the pro level, I just, I just want to have fun. People always tell me that they love to watch me play because it looks like I'm having fun and for the most part I am. And so that's, that's probably my biggest thing. I mean I actually, I'm not, I'm be honest with you, I, I've kind of forgot what you wanted me to go, where you wanted me to go with that. But I think that as a 12 as a junior, I think kind of reiterating and reminding yourself that you, why you started and I think that no matter what level, I mean, you see Roger Federer talking about it. He says, he's like, I started this because I wanted to, like, this was a fun game. This was a sport. He's like, when you start making it a job, that's when it becomes a little different. He's like, I do it because I want to. I don't have to do it. I do it because I love to do it. So I think that's what you kind of have to just ingrain in juniors I think.

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L: And there it is because from your break you determined that you were taking the break and you determined that you were coming back on your terms. And that is what had to happen for you to have this perspective and to feel this way. I believe, psychologically.

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I: I agree. And that's, that's the one thing if I, if I were to tell a 12 year old, 13 year old, Hey, if you want to take a break for a year, you can, they might not understand that concept as well as someone that's in a pro level. And I

remember just talking to Katie McNally the other day and she's 17, I think she just turned 18 and we were talking about vacations. I was like, Hey, are you going on any vacations? Like soon? She's like, I don't know. It just depends on what my parents want to do and stuff like that. And I was like, Oh, I forget, you can't just book a flight, go and get a hotel and you know, do that stuff. So there's still a lot of things that you can't do just because it's not, you're not legal to do it. But at the end of the day, I think even as a junior, just reminding yourself to have fun and treating yourself. I remember I was talking to a junior, I was like, you should treat yourself. You just won Orange Bowl. She's like, no, I'm practicing for the next tournament. You know? I'm like, you gotta take some time to realize what you just did. And I, yeah, that's super important to me too.

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I: Celebrate those moments, right? And I think there can be a moderation here, you know, of going out for dinner, having a good time, enjoying yourself. And then if it's the next day, getting up and getting back to work, I think that's awesome cause you're learning how to stay in the, in the process while celebrating your victories. I think there's another important point here as we talk about developmentally and taking breaks that I think Irina you'd probably say that you wouldn't want it to get to a point where you had to take that much time off, but that's what you needed at that point in time. A young junior doesn't necessarily have that ability to do that or have the voice to be able to do that, right? And many times they're expected to play. Parents are paying for it, coaches are expecting them to show up so they can feel entrapped in this sport, right? And that that saps that motivation. So we have to start also looking at ways to create recovery every single day and breaks here and there. What would you say about that Irina in terms of recovery?

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I: I think that's super important. I just wanted to touch on the fact that you said, you know, a junior might not be able to take a break per se because their parents are paying for it, expectations and all that. As a parent though, I think you need to be aware, Hey, my kid's not happy. Why am I continuing to pay for him to be unhappy?

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L: Boom. Right there.

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I: Right? I mean it starts from the parents though. Cause I mean you see kids out there that are literally there because their parents made them. Oh do you enjoy tennis? No. Do you want to be out here? No. I understand tough love. I get it. I've been there, done that. But at the end of the day I just value happiness and health so much more than ever. So wouldn't you want to establish that kind of sense of Hey, you do have a voice. I know that you are still young but you do have a voice in this. If you really are not enjoying it, let's do something you do enjoy or let's just not be out there 24 hours a week. It's just too much for junior I think.

[21:14](#)

L: And having those real conversations about, you know, cause I think parents get scared that kids will quit and they've invested so much and, and, and they need to have perspective on that. They also worry about, the kid doesn't really

know what they want a lot of times. And they say these things but they're not really sure. To me, then you need to explore that and part of that exploration is going and doing other things. If you're not feeling the motivation, because it's not always about joy, but there's, there's a drive. You talked about that passion your dad saw in you to work and to play and the joy you got from hitting the ball. If that's missing and it was there before, to me there, there is a conversation that needs to be had about what happened. Is it the way that tennis is being presented and offered to you? Does it need to change? Maybe, like you said, it's too much, too much time on the court. Maybe we're not taking those vacations that we used to do as a family and so now you start to resent tennis. I think parents really need to take hard looks at how much kids are playing and are they still having that family life that, you know, I think parents want, but they get maybe misguided on how much they have to play and practice?

[22:17](#)

I: Yeah. I remember talking about it actually with my sister and my mom and my dad because back in the day, I mean that's all we talked about with my dad. Literally it was just tennis, it was just tennis, it was just tennis. That was, that was it. And in a sense, this past break, one of the things we talked about as a family, it's like wow, what are you and dad going to talk about now? And it was kind of eye opening cause it's like, Oh you enjoy to do this? Oh cool. I didn't know this about you. That's awesome. So there were a few really positive things just from a family point of view that I was able to gather from this break. And yeah, it was fun. It's I, I'm not, by no means am I saying that I know how to parent a child. This is not what I'm saying. But I think there needs to be a little bit more open communication of explaining and sharing what, what a child is going through. I still remember being on the court with a young player. I think they were maybe 17, 18, 16 at the time. And she's whispering something to a friend, to another junior player. They've both been top 50 on the tour and she's saying, she's like, she's whispering something and I was like, what's up ladies? Like I'm a little older, so I was like, enough with this whispering, what are you guys talking about? She's like, Oh no, she's just saying that her shoulder, her arm and shoulder really, really hurt and she can barely lift it. And I'm looking at the basket that she is bringing and he goes, Hey guys, like we're about to do serves. I'm like, that can't be right. That's not going to be good for her shoulder. If you're, if we're about to, if we're about to do serves and your shoulder's hurting, you should probably say something. So I look at her and I was like, Hey, like why don't you just tell him that your shoulder's hurting, go get treatment? No, no, no, no, no, I can't. I can't. I can't do that. Like, no, my dad's watching like I can't. I have to hit. And that just freaked me out. I was like, are you kidding me right now? And sure enough, goes on the court, hits I mean 150 serves, was out for a while with a shoulder injury. Whether it was the exact reason why she was out, I can't attest to that, but there needs to be just open free communication in my opinion.

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L: That's excellent Irina. And I think it'll certainly get our listeners thinking about this in a different way and, and sometimes people worry about players getting soft or we talk too much about feelings or, but what we're doing is we're talking

about the whole person and what the whole person needs to strive and to thrive in this game. And so, really appreciate your perspective on this because I think it's going to challenge people, coaches, parents, people in the game to think differently because right now, you want to play every week you can, you want to practice nonstop. You can, there's nothing stopping you, unlike in little league where you can only pitch so much and, and certain other sports was only so many games you can play. You can play as much and practice as much as you want.

[24:59](#)

I: That's scary.

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J: Awesome. Awesome. Well Irina, we always leave, like to leave the listeners with a few takeaways. So what are maybe bits of advice knowing that our audience here is parents, coaches, players, what's some three key takeaways for the audience?

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I: Wow. Way to put me on the spot. Thanks.

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L: We like to see people under pressure.

[25:18](#)

I: I guess, I guess the first thing is, remember why you started. Two is, if it's not making you happy, if, if you're not happy before you go out there and after probably need to reevaluate what you're doing. And three, I think keep it fun and just remember to celebrate those victories, whatever they may be.

[25:37](#)

J: Awesome.

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L: Outstanding. Love it.

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J: Well we really appreciate you coming on and for the listeners out there Irina's on her podcast with the tennis channel. It's a great podcast. If you don't listen to it already, be sure to tune into that. You can also follow Irina on Twitter and Instagram. Handle is @Irinafalconi. Fairly simple one there. No random digits and numbers that are just splashed out so that that's, you know, you can, you can follow her. And, and, and continue that connection with her. So, dr Larry, that was phenomenal. Thank you for bringing Irina on.

[26:10](#)

L: That was awesome. Thank you.

[26:12](#)

I: Thanks for having me guys.

[26:12](#)

J: Awesome. So, uh, as always, for more information about player development, what we do and how we go about it, you can visit our website playerdevelopment.usta.com. We'll be sure to add some of those information about Irina into our show notes. And until next week, Dr. Lauer and I are checking out, and Irina.

