

SPORT

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No.1's secret weapon

O'Shannessy finds his way to the top

CRAIG O'Shannessy believes his endless hours of match practice growing up at the Forrest Hill Tennis Club propelled him to where he is today.

O'Shannessy says playing with and against some of Albury's greats developed his mind and helped him become world number one Novak Djokovic's strategic analyst.

He is widely regarded as having one of the best brains in the game.

The former Border Mail journalist, who is now based in Texas, spoke to **BRETT KOHLHAGEN** during a flying visit to the Border this week.

BK: Welcome home, how is life as Novak Djokovic's strategic analyst?

CO: It's great, I'm absolutely loving it.

BK: What's it like dealing with the world's No.1 player on a regular basis?

CO: Novak is fantastic. We get along so well. He's got a great sense of humor but when we go over opposition analysis he just locks in. His attention to detail is second to none. When I first started working with him I said how much do you want to see and he replied: 'I want to see everything you have got'. It's amazing.

BK: How much time do you put into it?

CO: I do a lot of opposition video analysis. I do every single match which takes about seven hours. There are literally going to be no surprises when Novak gets out there to play. We have a plan A, B and C.

BK: Are there many strategic analysts in world tennis?

CO: I'm the only one who takes it to this level of detail and commitment. Other teams have coaches who dig in a little bit but I'm the first person in our sport to be a full-time strategic analyst.

BK: Give me an honest answer here, does Djokovic pay well?

CO: Yes, he does.

BK: Want to elaborate on that?

CO: I don't.

BK: Well, can you tell me if Novak pays much more than when you were a cadet sports reporter at *The Border Mail* in the 1980s?

CO: He does, yeah (laughs). We have a really good arrangement. I'm

super happy with it. The financial side is very good and he looks after his team very well. I'm very fortunate to be in my situation, particularly because I love my job so much.

BK: You have worked with Djokovic for two-and-a-half years, ever had an argument?

CO: Not one. There hasn't even been a time where he has questioned me. Early on in 2017 he played half the year and then he's out injured with an elbow problem. We met in December, 2017, just to catch up. We met on the 60th floor of a downtown skyscraper in a sushi restaurant. We started with some small talk and then I opened my computer up and I asked him if he was interested in what I actually do. He said sure and it just went from there.

BK: He's obviously very good at putting into practice the intel you give him?

CO: He's always asking questions and wants to learn. To be that good and still want to learn says a lot about the guy. After the US Open we went to a restaurant to celebrate and people including journalists were asking me what it's like working with him. I told them it's like working with a 14-year-old boy and Novak just laughed. I said: 'Novak this is the biggest compliment I can give you as you are so open to learning, you are like a sponge which is a huge reason why you are so good'. Others would be too stubborn or proud. You have Novak the player and Novak the mind. He's outrageously good on both fronts.

BK: Is there a big rivalry between Novak, Roger and Rafa?

CO: God yeah. It's those three and daylight. They have had incredible careers and love to win. I think they can all keep going for a while yet as well with all the fitness staff, nutritionists and support staff that are in place in today's game. Everything is so precise and planned these days.

BK: Novak has 16 grand slams, Rafa has 18 and Roger has 20. How many can your man win?

CO: It's unlimited. Rafa at Roland Garros is a different



NO PLACE LIKE HOME: Craig O'Shannessy believes Novak Djokovic is on track to win more grand slams than Roger Federer. **Picture:** JAMES WILTSHIRE



World number one Novak Djokovic is steaming towards 20 grand slam titles.

animal but since we've been together we have won four of the last five so the proof is in the pudding. I think he'll continue to dominate the slams and surpass 20. He's much younger than Roger and about the same age as Rafa.

BK: Who has best serve in world tennis?

CO: I would say Nick Kyrgios for sure. He's very cemented as one of the top five servers in the history of our sport. He's that good. Nick on his day is one of the best because of his unpredictability, particularly on his second serve. Novak is good as well. Serving is not about raw power any

more, we are in the golden age of the returner. The best years for serving were in the mid-90s when you had Mark Philippoussis, Goran Ivanisevic, Richard Krajicek and Boris Becker. Right now the return rules the world. It's about hitting spots and not power.

BK: Would you like to work with Kyrgios?

CO: I would. I spoke to his agent at Roland Garros and got an understanding of what makes him tick. Yes he's controversial, yes he crosses the line there is no doubt but at the heart of it you have an unbelievable tennis player. He's only a click or two away. I see a

good kid who sometimes doesn't know how to handle the situation. He definitely could win a slam. A lot of it is the team you have around you.

BK: Who is the next big thing in Australian tennis?

CO: Alexei Popyrin. He's got the body and game and a good head on his shoulders. I'm keeping an eye on him. He's certainly a talent.

BK: How often do you get back to Australia?

CO: I've still got family in Albury. I get out once a year for the Australian Open. Four years ago we came back to Albury for December and some January. It's great to have my wife and kids here this time. They will remember this trip. I'd love to come two or three times a year but I travel so much at the moment that it makes it hard.

BK: What's the best grand slam tournament?

CO: Wimbledon sits apart. It's the home of tennis, it's on grass. What they do with the tradition you just can't compare it. Then everything else is fair game. The Australian Open is by far the number one but the US Open and Roland Garros are chasing it. What Craig Tilley has done with improving, developing and making it so player and fan friendly is jaw-dropping. Outside of

Wimbledon, the Australian Open sits at number one.

BK: Do you ever sit back and pinch yourself in regards to how your tennis career has evolved?

CO: Yes and no. In a lot of ways everything I did was a stepping stone towards this. It goes back to my dad buying a camcorder and I'd take it to the Wodonga courts and film the kids playing tennis. Then we'd go upstairs and look at the tape. It showed me the power of videoing tennis. People will say it's lucky and in some ways it is but I think it's a natural progression as well by working through all the levels.

BK: You had some strong influences on your tennis growing up didn't you?

CO: Frank Tynan was the number one guy. I lived six doors up from the Forrest Hill courts, went to school at Albury High and just played sets after school until it got dark. Frank, Phil Shanahan and Ken and Rodney Wurtz were around then and having such great players like them pushed you. I probably wish I had more lessons but I think the massive amount of practice sets I played helped develop my mind which is now helping me.

BK: Thanks for your time and good luck at the US Open next month.