



# DOUBLE ACT

When Matt Ebden steps on the court, the WA tennis star has an ace up his sleeve — wife Kim. The couple share the rollercoaster ride of life on the tour.

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Kim Doig was adamant. She was sure her friend's brother was lovely but the 19-year-old also knew Matt Ebden was a professional tennis player — there was no way she was going to get involved with someone who spent so much time away from home.

"We met through Matt's sister Tarryn, who I was good friends with for about a year before I met him, because he was always travelling," she recalls. "She was always hinting that she'd like to matchmake us but I said 'No, he travels, not going there, don't want to do long distance'. Eventually we met and hit it off and", she pauses, laughing at her ultimately futile resistance, "famous last words!"

The smitten couple managed to keep the flame burning long distance for 5½ years while Kim was studying a double degree in law and arts at UWA, and then practising law, and Matt was working his way up the world rankings.

"I'd say I was away for more than half a year those first five years," says Matt. "The longest (time apart) was 3½ months."

But they knew if they were to build a future, it wasn't sustainable. "Once we got married we decided to take it on the road together, otherwise we wouldn't see each other at all," Kim says.

Matt and Kim Ebden call tennis "the family business", and it's a real partnership. While one is clocking up the miles on the court — this year cracking the top 40 in the world for the first time since he turned pro in 2006 — the other is making sure everything is ticking along behind the scenes. Travel agent, bookkeeper, nutritionist, PR assistant, fill-in coach, part-time physio, and full-time cheer squad ... there's no end to the descriptions Kim could put on her business card since becoming one half of Team Ebden. "She's the team manager basically," Matt says. "I couldn't do it without her."

At least the end of this year has been a little less hectic than usual. With Matt gearing up to play tennis in his home town, partnering the in-form Ash Barty at the Hopman Cup, there have been no hotel rooms or flights to book. In fact, by the time the tournament wraps in early January, the couple will have enjoyed one of their longest stints in Perth in recent years — a whole two months.

We're sitting out the back of their new home, an unassuming house in the northern suburbs they bought over the internet. Such is the nature of the family business they didn't set foot in it until after the deal was done. It also means any improvements take longer than most. Newspaper covers the windows on one wall, with the trims still to be painted. A TV sits in a box waiting to be set up, while Kim apologises for the lack of furniture. What they do have is relaxed and inviting, the white couches suggesting there are no children or animals in residence, though Matt says his two-year-old nephew is often over — "the covers wash" — and they also welcome four-legged visitors.

The couple are relishing the extra time to spend with family and friends, a luxury those of us with regular jobs take for granted. And it's a close-knit group, with the two sets of parents regularly socialising without Kim and Matt. The Ebdens are still working out where Christmas lunch will be this year — "I don't think we have enough furniture" — but it will be a real celebration for a breakthrough year.

**MATT HAS BEEN AT HOME ON A TENNIS COURT** since he was little. His parents, Charles and Ann, were members of a local club in Durban, South Africa, and his two older sisters, Tarryn and Candice, were also athletic. "Every afternoon or at the weekend, I just remember I'd be at the tennis club. First I was hitting against the wall, then started having lessons myself, at four or five, and then I think by six, seven, eight you start playing a few little tournaments," he recalls. "By then my

sisters were under 12 and under 16, playing top level in juniors. My middle sister Tarryn was one of the best in our country for her age and probably very capable to go on the tour herself but when she came here decided it wasn't for her and went to uni and did physiotherapy at Curtin, and she's a physio, so she treats me pretty often! The pressure and the life wasn't for her."

Young Matt, however, thrived on the pressure and he loved the attention, being on centre court and playing in front of others. Inspired by then leading South African players Wayne Ferreira and Amanda Coetzer (who won the 2000 Hopman Cup), he set his sights high from an early age. He wanted to be as good, if not better, than his idols.

When his parents decided to move the rest of the family to WA in 2001 — Candice was already in Perth — in search of better opportunities, Matt remembers being excited rather than daunted at the prospect of a new home in a new country.



"Everything was changing, I was about to leave middle school and go to high school, so it was sort of easy to adjust and I went to Hale, which was very similar to the school I was at," he says. But with their son something of a tennis prodigy, Charles and Ann had to work out a way for him to pursue his on-court dreams without sacrificing his education, something they all agreed was critical.

Rather than leave school to attend a tennis academy, they received the school's support for Matt to skip a year, jumping straight from Year Eight to 10, so he would finish Year 12 early to focus on tennis. It speaks volumes of the young man's work ethic that his education didn't suffer, with Matt gaining high enough marks to start a commerce/law degree at UWA — something that he has dipped in and out of as time and tennis have allowed.

Along the way, Matt has had to learn as much about losing as winning. "Even on the tour, at a professional level, only one guy out of 32 wins each week. Everyone else will lose during that week. You're kind of got to get used to losing in a way. Of course you try to win as many tournaments as you can but dealing with losing as well as winning is important to be able to keep doing it." »

Home comfort  
Matt and Kim  
are relishing  
the extra time  
in Perth.



**Family man**  
Matt (above) with his dad Charles, mum Ann, and sisters Candice and Tarryn; on his winning way in South Africa.



« Coming from Australia presents its own challenges, as Matt wrote in a piece for Players Voice earlier this year. “Nobody spends the amount of time away from home that we do. It’s just a fact. We often go on the road for four months or more at a time; Americans or Europeans are away more than three or four weeks from home and they are sometimes fried. They think this is inhumane. We’re like ‘Three or four weeks is like a weekend, guys!’ One year I did eight months. Maybe it was too long. I ended up with a fatigue virus late in the year.”

Kim believes making it on the professional tour is as much about attitude as it is about ability. “You can have all the talent in the world but if you don’t have that mental toughness, that capacity to withstand the pressure, and the attention, and the ups and downs... you won’t succeed.”

The vivacious young lawyer may have been reluctant for romance with a globetrotting athlete but, as their relationship blossomed, Kim had little hesitation in giving up her career – or at least putting it on hold – to follow Matt around the world.

“I had known for a while that I would do it. I think if I had wanted to progress my career to the point of becoming a partner at a law firm I don’t think I would have, but that wasn’t in my sights,” she says. “And I can’t say I was as passionate about law as Matt was about tennis. I loved my job but it was an easy decision at the end of the day to become a team and do this thing together, rather than separately. And I don’t regret it at all.”



**Wedding bells** The couple tie the knot at Brookland Valley. PICTURE LANCE CHICOTE



**On the ball** Matt and Jarmila Gajdosova celebrate their mixed doubles title at the Australian Open in 2013; taking it in his stride at the Hopman Cup.



Those first five years were tough on them both but Matt says it also made their decision to live and work together, effectively be together 24/7, so much easier. “We built our whole relationship on communication really. We’d be on the phone every day for three hours, just lie in bed and talk for three hours. That much communication I think has actually been good for our relationship.”

And absence definitely made the hearts grow fonder, and more appreciative. “Missing each other a lot all those years meant that now when we’re always together we don’t take it for granted,” he says. “And we’re together a lot, nearly all day, every day.”

Team Ebden has had a good year, Matt’s best since turning pro. While he boasts a grand slam title in mixed doubles – he won the 2013 Australian Open with Jarmila Gajdosova (now Wolfe) – it’s singles that still fires him up the most and where he’s made great inroads in 2018. Matt had beaten top 10 players previously, but it’s the consistency with which he has done so this year that he has found most pleasing. And he’s done so on some of tennis’ biggest stages, beating David Goffin at Wimbledon and John Isner at the Australian Open.

“My goal since I was a kid was always to be in the top 10, that was my heart’s desire and that’s what I thought I could do and wanted to do. It’s not that easy I can tell you,” he says. “But you know, I’m happy that I hit the 30s and I’ll keep working hard and smart and trying to improve, so next year I can try to hit the 20s or 10s, let’s see what happens. But I’m mature and experienced enough to know how hard it is and that you can’t take anything for granted, including injuries and form.”

Kim has been riding those ups and downs every step of the way, though she admits her court-side demeanour initially lacked a little subtlety.

“The first time I watched him play, he’d miss a shot, and I went ‘ahhhhhhhh!’,” she says, with a big intake of breath. “No, like this,” says Matt, putting his hands to his head in faux shock to illustrate her response. “I look over and I’m like ‘what’... We had to coach her how to watch.”

His wife concurs. “I’ve perfected my poker face, put it that way. It is a learnt art, you learn how to watch it and to separate yourself from the emotional side and the outcome. You realise that life is so much

bigger than winning or losing a tennis match,” Kim says. “At the end of the day, win or lose, our night is going to look exactly the same. We’re going to have dinner together, we’re going to watch TV, we’re going to go to sleep, and then we’re going to start the next day.”

But don’t you get excited, for example, when Matt beats someone like (the No. 9 seed) Goffin and goes on to make it to the third round of Wimbledon? “It’s not like it was a surprise. I’ve known all along that Matt’s an amazing tennis player, and I’d always almost be expecting him to go deep at Wimbledon every year, it was kind of like OK, we’re doing this, and we’re going to keep going.”

If the Ebdens are clearly each other’s biggest fan, they are also mindful that professional tennis, at least on court, has a shelf life. Can Matt, who turned 31 last month, see himself doing a Federer and pushing on into his late 30s? “I’ve always thought I’d play until I was 35 at least, God willing, body and mind and all that, but I sort of think after 30 you can’t take anything for granted.”

An injury setback a few years ago, which took him off the circuit for six months, was obviously frustrating – particularly because it was a relatively minor knee problem that took too long to be diagnosed properly – but it was also strangely liberating.

“The first couple of months was obviously frustrating. I can’t play, I don’t know what’s going on, but then after a while every other night you’re hanging out with friends or family and this is amazing, this life is unbelievable,” Matt says. “And I got to a place with myself and who I am as a person – my identity is not from what I do or my results in tennis. A lot of our best friends don’t even care, we never even talk about tennis; well, of course they care, they know what I do and they respect it but it’s just what I do. So that was sort of nice and freeing because you put a lot of pressure on yourself when you’re starting in your career to be this person, and get this ranking. I was able to look at what I had already achieved.”

So what might the “family business” look like in a few years? Matt says he will probably knock off that commerce degree, then perhaps look at doing a masters or MBA.

“I already do bits and pieces in property with my dad and I’m always interested in business ... but of course my whole life is tennis and I’ve done a 25-year degree and PhD in tennis. That’s my life and passion. I feel like I have a lot to offer and a lot of experience, I’m sure tennis and business will be in our future.”

Both of them are thrilled about Matt’s return to the Hopman Cup. (His first outing, with fellow West Aussie Casey Dellacqua in 2015, came to a premature end after he injured his calf.)

Kim recalls going along as a spectator, face painted, as an 11-year-old, while the Burswood Dome, the tournament’s first home, was one of the first places Matt mixed it with the big guns. “I was training at 16/17, and Lleyton (Hewitt) was playing for Australia and I got involved with him and Tony Roche and I was his training partner for the week or so.”

When he was coming back from injury a few years ago, he was a reserve player, training with crowd favourite Federer. He’s excited about the calibre of matches ahead of him, and confident he and Ash, who is ranked No. 15 in the world for singles and No. 5 for doubles, will make a great team.

“I’ve obviously been playing well and Ash has been going really well. She’s good at doubles and I’ve had a bit of experience. I was able to win at the Aussie (Open) with the mixed doubles ... I think if we play well we’re as good a chance as anybody.”

And the prospect of having not just family and

friends, but a home crowd behind him, is exciting. “It’s an unbelievable stadium, it plays very similar to Rod Laver Arena, the feel and the size. And to be at home with friends and family and my whole city and State hopefully behind me and us ... it’s a great feeling.”

Candice is flying home for Christmas with her family, including Matt’s eight-year-old niece, who might just follow in her uncle’s footsteps. “She’s a little sweetheart ... she loves tennis, she’s always calling me, saying I’m playing tennis four or five times a week, asking me what she should do with her coaches, the techniques.”

While Matt is thrilled to be able to share his passion with his niece, he isn’t ready to pass on the baton to the next generation yet.

Asked to list the best and worst of life on the tour he doesn’t hesitate.

“I love what I do, I wouldn’t change it for the world. It’s an incredible amount of sacrifice, and hard work, and toil and blood and sweat and tears and ups and downs and all that, but I do love it and I always have. I always envisaged being on tour. And also having my wife with me on tour, that’s my favourite part.”

The worst? “I could do without the long flights. I don’t think I’m alone in that, especially from Australia. We live very far away, so I could easily do without the long flights.”



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