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## Gigi Fernández oral history interview by Danielle Riley, February 10, 2004

Gigi Fernández (Interviewee)

Danielle E. Riley (Interviewer)

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USF 50<sup>th</sup> (2006) Anniversary Oral History Project  
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Interviewee: Gigi Fernandez  
Interviewer: Danielle Riley  
Interview date: February 10, 2004  
Interview location: USF Tampa Library, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
Detailed summary by: Arlen Bensen  
Summary date: January 8, 2009  
Final Edit by: Mary Beth Isaacson  
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### Summary of Contents

- 1:** NCAA final was first time playing tennis every day. Was college freshman at nationals. Mistake in selection process, chosen last for nationals and went to finals. Then thought, “I could be a pro, professional.” Beat Steffi Graf, turned pro at nineteen in sophomore year.
- 2:** Effect of demands on student-athlete academics? Demands realized when head coach at USF. You pay for your scholarship. No time, schedule set, mandatory study hall. When professional, focus on tennis, socialize, less demanding schedule, tennis could flourish.
- 3:** A privilege to be tennis professional: travelling and seeing world, playing sports, making lots of money. Feel blessed to have had that life.
- 4:** Residence: family lived in Puerto Rico, basically lived on airplane. Between 40 and 45 weeks on the road per year, different hotel each week. Four big tournaments, Grand Slam, are 2 weeks. Wimbledon, U.S. Open, French Open, Australian Open.
- 5:** Coach to manage life? Had coach, agent, nutritionist, mentor, physical therapist, whole package, around you. People always working behind scenes allowed me to become player that I was.
- 6:** Apartment? Lived in Miami, Aspen, Colorado, San Diego, then moved to Tampa.
- 7:** Professional career highlights. First major tournament win - won doubles at U.S. Open in 1988. Always wanted to win Wimbledon. Won there in 1991 or 1992. Family there for 1988 win in New York, easier for them to get there. Family not at Wimbledon win.
- 8:** Winning big tournament, on TV [television] is surreal. “Growing up, if someone told me I was going to win one Grand Slam. Little girl from Puerto Rico, win a Grand Slam, like, no way. When it actually happens it’s hard to believe.” On cloud nine for two weeks.

**9:** Two years later, played with Martina Navratilova, made next jump in tennis. At that time, she was the best player in tennis and picked Gigi to play doubles with her, before Monica [Seles] and Steffi came along. Gigi was twenty one years old playing with number one in the world. Won U.S. Open in 1990, set her at a different level in doubles. Played most of 1990s as world's best doubles player with Natasha Zvereva from Russia. Won seventeen Grand Slams: six French Opens, five U.S. Opens, four Wimbledons and two Australian Opens (total victories, fourteen with Natalya).

**10:** Enjoyable life? Spent most of 1990s playing tennis, travelling the world, making lots of money and working hard. It was great. People don't see, on TV, all the hard work behind the scenes – schlepping around the world, training, up in the morning, working out at gym when you don't feel like it. Tiring and exhausting but wouldn't trade it for anything.

**11:** Never once regretted leaving college, not for a second. “Always knew I would go back to college. Not much I could have done [in tennis] if I went back [to college] other than win NCAAs. No choice but to turn pro if I wanted to continue my career.”

**12:** Represented Puerto Rico in 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. [Olympic games] Made decision for Seoul in 1988, if wanted Gold [medal] needed to play for U.S.A. in order to have competitive doubles partner. Won Gold medal, pulled Puerto Rico flag out of pocket. Stigmatized to this day.

**13.** Last year a Puerto Rican government commission selected top 50 athletes in sporting history in Puerto Rico. “I think I'm only Puerto Rican ever to win a Gold Medal, so I should be a sure shot,” but was not selected. So it was a very controversial decision. No regrets because of 2 gold medals, one, 1992 in Barcelona, one in 1996 in Atlanta.

**14:** Seven or eight years after last gold medal, coach pickup team in Puerto Rico so will be attending Olympic games in Athens, Greece. Will be representing Puerto Rico, went full circle.

**15:** Olympic experience: great, lucky to have had a chance to win a Gold Medal. Most thrilling moment is walking into the Opening Ceremonies [Ceremony]. Just being able to participate is incredible. When athletes walk in is a rush. Was there in 1984, 1992 and 1996. Sat watching 2000 at home, want to get to 2004.

**16:** Pride for U.S.A.? “Yes, totally, because I am both, Puerto Rican and a U.S. citizen.” Is unique for Puerto Rico, as U.S. territory, to have indigenous Olympic sports team.

**17:** How she ended up in Tampa: Mom had lived in Tampa for 12 years (as of interview date). Always enjoyed it. Retired at 33 by 2001, living in San Diego. Decided to be closer to whole family, including two hour plane trip to family in Puerto Rico.

**18:** When moved to Tampa, looked at University of Tampa and USF [University of South Florida]. Decided to come to USF. Met with Ed Olmos at School of Adult and Transfer Services. Showed up August first and got admitted to start classes in fall semester. Negotiated exchange of donation one hour of private coaching (rather than a racket or signed photograph) for Athletic

Department fundraiser in exchange for priority registration privileges. Eventually met Sherry Benenfield, who was about to retire as women's tennis coach.

**19:** Impressions of USF? Had visited Chapel Hill (University of North Carolina) and Clemson, also lived in Boston with a sister at B.U. (Boston University). Those are very traditional, old world schools. USF seemed very modern and not like what you'd expect of a University. The past 3 or 4 years they've beautified it, more trees; it's getting there, a ways to go.

**20:** Balancing life as a coach and student? Averaged between 18 and 21 credits per semester. "My first year at USF, just a student, included no coaching." Second year added responsibilities for coaching team. Difficult. Time management skills are better as an adult. Partying not part of the equation. Majored in Psychology. Didn't have time to hang out in the department but established relationships with one or two professors.

**21:** "How did you plan to apply this major?" "You can't do anything with a B.A. in Psychology." Area of interest is sports psychology. Would like to pursue a Masters or Ph.D. in Psychology somewhere with a sports psychology specialization.

**22:** Love coaching team, love working with the girls. Didn't realize how much she would enjoy it on a day-to-day basis. After retiring, always thought to pass on tennis knowledge in my head. Focused at first on passing it to Puerto Ricans. Still coaching individual Puerto Rican women players. Always knew would help aspiring tennis players. Girls on team are like her children. They become part of her life. Enjoy learning from them.

**23:** Nine girls on team, recruited five of them.

**24:** In recruiting, look for someone who's going to help USF win first national championship, hard because right now don't have the facilities or the support.

**25:** Hard to get someone to choose USF over other schools? Yes and no. "Easier for me. They want to come work with me." Girl from Haiti was four hundredth in the world. "A lot of girls look at other schools that have surroundings that we don't have."

**26:** "Do you feel like University supports you enough?" "No. Tennis is not a priority at this University." "Do you think it's getting better?" Not right now. It will. Move to the Big East, big Athletic building built, those are priorities. In a state of flux, Athletic Director on sabbatical.

**27:** "What does that do to you as a coach?" Nobody likes uncertainty. Everyone's very uncertain. Athletic Director is captain of boat and right now nobody's captaining the boat, it's just kind of sailing aimlessly.

**28:** Any say in new A.D.? No. "Will you rethink your job here?" No. "Feel you're established here with a stake in this University?" "I graduated from here and I love Tampa. Question is how much am I going to get in return." Monetary reward is not it. Made enough money when playing. Rewards have to be there. "For me reward is appreciation. I'm working hard to bring USF a national championship."

**29:** “How close are you to that?” Not close. Have to go through whole recruiting cycle. Five years from today could have national champion team but a lot of things have to happen in the meantime. “I have to have a facility. Someone’s got to raise a half a million [500,000] dollars. The burden has been on me. I don’t think that should be my responsibility.”

**30:** “Could use my connections and go around and ask people for money. I just don’t want to. That’s not how I want to spend my days, the little free time that I have.”

**31:** It continues to improve. Hard to compete with schools that have been around for two hundred years, have a tradition, have alumni base. As an Athletic Department, we just started tapping our alumni base last year. Schools that have been around forever survive on alumni donations.

**32:** “How has the team done since you’ve been coach?” Great. Excited about starting year with entire team of my recruits. Awaiting NCAA ruling on eligibility of girl from Haiti. She had a disgruntled coach who, when she decided to leave, started calling the NCAA making all these claims, really bad.

**33:** “The biggest accomplishment so far, since I’ve been here, is that we made the finals of our regional event, in October, in doubles, second in whole south region.”

**34:** “Do you have any athletes in whom you see your athletic abilities on the team?” No. A few players stand out but not to the level of aspiring professionals. They could be good college players. Players that are going to be top ten in the world don’t go to college any more, a change in the last twenty years. In women’s tennis, kids turn pro at fourteen or fifteen and they’re full time playing tennis at that age.

**35:** Gabriella Duque is from Mexico, Mexican father, Russian mother. Great kid. Eighteen years old going on thirty-two. She’s team’s number one player right now, very poised, great under pressure. Could be a “top twenty” college player. Girl from Haiti is top one fifty [150<sup>th</sup>] in the world material if she is willing to work that hard. But she has islands mentality, a little bit lazy. You can change that but you have to work really hard.

**36:** How to coach balance of student and athlete life? “Because I just did what they’re doing really helps. I understand their issues better than most coaches, more empathetic, when they have stress over a test or are not one hundred percent focused.” Girl in psychology class last semester came running into class sweaty and dirty from soccer practice, a mess. Spoke to coach who said she had practice until 6. Class started at 6. “I said, ‘Come on. You can let her off 10 minutes early.’ He said, ‘Oh, no. She can handle it.’ ”

**37:** “Do you check their grades and attendance?” Yeah. Heck, yes. Had competition with players while still taking classes: anyone who beat my G.P.A. [grade point average] did not have to pick balls for the whole next semester. And nobody did, but one girl got close, within a B of tying my G.P.A. Athletics department does a great job of tracking student athletes and keeping coaches informed. NCAA has strict guidelines for what student athletes must do to remain eligible.

Harder than for regular students with minimum twelve hours per semester and designated percentage of degree you must complete each year in school. Grade checks are three times per semester. Students are disciplined if academics are below minimums. Fortunately tennis players are all good students. Other teams struggle more with that. "I make them run and run and run."

**38:** What advice do you give them for the rest of their lives? "The biggest advice I can give them is prioritize and compartmentalize. They must have priorities. They must put them in little compartments." Where does tennis lie in that? When they walk in the gates at one o'clock they have to forget about their problems, they have to forget about exams, and then, when they're done at four o'clock, they can worry about it again. Time manage it. Then you have to be focused and directed, you can't be scattered. "If they have too much going on I'll let them take a day off. For example, four exams and three matches in one week, I'll give them a day off from practice."

**39:** "Sounds like you're an exceptional coach because of school experiences. Do you think you would be as good of a coach if you hadn't just gone back to school?" "I'd be less understanding of their issues. I just went through it. Hard to know what somebody feels if you haven't walked the walk, if you're not in their shoes."

**40:** Additions? "I graduated *cum laude*. I was kind of proud of that because I transferred a not-good G.P.A. With the demands on my time, I couldn't do a full time Clinical Psychology program. I'll have to make a decision. I still have time. I'm not yet forty. After examining result from 5 years with a full recruiting cycle, how good will we be then?"

**41:** Anything to leave for University history, future athletes? "Go Bulls."