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Words That Change Our World

By Lou Fancher



Matthew Dellavedova Photo Tod Fierner

Former Saint Mary's College Gaels guard and Cleveland Cavaliers basketball player Matthew Dellavedova can't remember which SMC coach handed him a page printed from Andre Agassi's autobiography, "Open," but he's never forgotten it.

"I had to get the book, and then, I couldn't put it down. He was so honest. You felt like you were right there with him, riding the highs and lows of his career," Dellavedova said.

One week before returning to Moraga to coach in the first Gaels Basketball All-Star Classic and fresh off his rookie season with an NBA team, the soon-to-be 24-year-old Australian playmaker is definitely riding a career high of his own. The Gaels' all-time leader in scores, assists, and games played left the college in 2013 with a psychology degree and a raging thirst to go pro. He had draft workouts with 12 teams, didn't get picked, went to the summer league with the Cavs, flipped back to his homeland to play and train, then returned to Cleveland after getting a partial-guarantee for fall training camp. A full contract arrived in January and now, about to enter his second year, Dellavedova said sleeping is the key to success in the NBA.

"There's so much travel and playing three to four days a week and practicing; you sleep a lot more than a normal person," he said.

He also hydrates, eats, stretches, foam rolls and "prehabs," not "rehab," his body - anticipating and preventing injuries by jumping ahead of them. Strength work for hips, knees and ankles; balance work for the all-essential fundamentals of a sport that has players more off-kilter than on - he said the biggest challenge is not letting emotions get too high or too low.

"You can't get too excited because there's another game coming tomorrow. And you can't be too frustrated or depressed for the same reason. Staying level and trying to see it as a long process helps."

Which brings up the question: why did a book written by a radical tennis player known for his volatility and wild hair as much as for his talent, appeal to Dellavedova?

The first page of "Open" includes: "I play tennis for a living, even though I hate tennis, hate it with a dark and secret passion, and always have." Agassi resents the push he receives from his father, roils against media who underestimate him, curses at players who beat him - not to mention his berating clay or grass surfaces, court officials, and importantly, his own body as it ages or fails to perform perfectly.

After all, Dellavedova had supportive parents who drove him everywhere, but never pushed him. In an interview during his SMC playing days, Coach Randy Bennett said about Dellavedova, "I don't know a player who plays harder. Anything that requires hard work to get, he's got it. You've gotta' kill him to beat him."

Bennett's comment contains a kernel of the connection between Dellavedova and Agassi. Hard

work was a hallmark of the tennis wonder, who writes in his book about turning around while driving to his hotel after a long day of training. Dissatisfied with his practice, Agassi knew there'd be no peace of mind if he tried to lay his head on a pillow and forget about it. It's Dellavedova's favorite part of the book.

"When you train hard and do everything you can do, that's when you can sleep easy," he said. "I always have confidence in my abilities, but yes, like Agassi, I feel a bit underestimated. When I'm discouraged, in a game, I just have to move onto the next play. When you're unsuccessful, like not being drafted, you just have to use that as motivation."

Dellavedova said he's not sure if he'd ever want to write his own life's story. If he did, it would center on not limiting one's dreams and working hard to achieve. He's hoping to play as long as his body holds up and he's having fun. "I'm figuring I have a long time to figure out what comes after, but coaching is definitely where I'll head."

When he does, it's likely he'll come across a young player, perhaps a kid who operates just out of the spotlight, a kid who shares his love of reading. Dellavedova knows already how to inspire that boy or girl to press on: he has the perfect book.

Reach the reporter at: info@lamorindaweekly.com

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