

Special Feature

An Interview with World's Top Junior Ricardas Berankis

by Colette Lewis, 28 February 2008



Ricardas Berankis had a memorable 2007, capturing the U.S. Open Junior championship, training with Roger Federer, playing Davis Cup, signing with IMG and winning the season's last two ITF junior tournaments to finish the year as World Junior Champion. The 17-year-old from Vilnius, Lithuania won both the Eddie Herr and Junior Orange Bowl in 2004, and over the next three years steadily rose through the European and ITF junior circuits to become a consistent performer at the junior Grand Slams. As a 16-year-old, Berankis won an ITF Men's tournament in Portugal, and although he is still eligible to play junior events this year, is concentrating instead on Futures tournaments.

Now training at IMG/Bolliettieri Tennis Academy, the 5-foot-8 155-lb right-hander is working to improve his ATP ranking, which is currently 643. I had an opportunity to talk with him last month at the Pro Circuit event in North Miami Beach, where he reached the semifinals. In his rapidly improving English (he also speaks Russian and of course, Lithuanian), Berankis offered his thoughts on the differences between junior and professional tennis, his daily routine, the state of tennis in his home country and the shot he'd most like to have.

Q. What's the biggest difference between junior tennis and Pro Circuit level tennis?

A. The difference is in professional tennis you cannot lose concentration, even for one minute. Once you lose concentration your level straight away drops and the other guy comes up and starts to have all the momentum of the match. Then it's pretty tough to come back.

Q. Has your life changed since becoming world junior champion?

A. I don't really think so. Of course it changed with more interviews, public things coming a little bit more. Only that. Of course it was one of the dreams to be No. 1 even in juniors, and it was a great achievement in 2007.

Q. And you did it the hard way...

A. Yes, it's hard to imagine to play two tournaments and to win both of them - Grade A and Grade 1 - that's pretty tough.

Q. Have you been back to Lithuania since becoming World Junior Champion?

A. No, I will go back in April or May for the clay season.



Q. What do you expect?

A. We'll see how it goes; I don't expect anything. I'm just trying to lift my level up.

Q. Have you seen a change in your level?

A. Of course I think I am improving, like each player. The difference is how you improve and how fast you improve, how hard you work, it depends on that.

Q. How much time do you spend on the court?

A. Five, six hours on the court and then a few hours of fitness. One hour of eating and then you are sleeping already.

Q. Now that you've signed with IMG, how has that changed your routine?

A. I actually don't know. Right now I am practicing more in Bradenton than in Saddlebrook, so that's the only difference for me. I actually don't know those contracts and things, my manager and my coach know everything about it, but I'm not too interested in those things.

Q. Did you take some time off after Yucatan (the tournament where he clinched the world title)?

A. Yes, one week (laughs) Christmas time. I just rested at Saddlebrook with my sponsor and my coach and a few close people. It was fun, I think. It was nice.

Q. I spoke to Iveta Dapkute after her Junior Orange Bowl win and she said you were an inspiration to her.

A. Oh, I don't know about inspiration, it's nice to hear that from her. It's great that she could reach that level in 14s and she could win it, something amazing. I was the first one (from Lithuania) who won the 14s and she is the second.

Q. What's the status of tennis as a sport in Lithuania?

A. Tennis is getting more and more popular in Lithuania but it's a pretty expensive sport. Now a lot more people can afford it. They are building a very big tennis school right now in the capital (Vilnius), 24 indoor courts, so it's a pretty great thing for them.

Q. Is it a government project?

A. I don't know, maybe the country and the sponsors, all of them together.

Q. Was there a tournament you won, whether back in the 14s or last year, when you said, now I know I can be a professional?

A. I always thought that I could be a professional player, but it depends how hard you work and how you progress.

Q. What are you still working on?

A. Everything. Everything. I'm trying to improve on everything.

Q. If you could magically have any professional's shot, which would it be?

A. Federer's forehand. It's something amazing. I think you knew the answer.

Q. If you had one piece of advice for a junior hoping to be a professional, what would it be?

A. Work hard, that's it. There's nothing else to tell. You cannot say hit this forehand better, hit the backhand better. You need to improve on everything, concentrate and work hard.

Q. What's your favorite thing about tennis?

A. The game. Sometimes it's very interesting to think about your past when you're in a tight moment, whether you missed it or you made it, it's very nice to remember those things. It's very nice. I just love the game.