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I carry with me "The Way" and "The Forge"

Tim Smyczek, who was praised by Rafa Nadal for his surprising sportsmanship, talks about the importance of faith for his life as a tennis pro in a recent National Catholic Register interview.

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A GENTLEMAN'S GUIDE TO PRO TENNNIS (AND LIFE)

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After battling 14-time Grand Slam singles champion Rafael Nadal for more than four hours in the second round of this year's Australian Open, Tim Smyczek did something no one expected him to do. He was down 5-6, 0-30, in the fifth set, when Nadal missed a first serve badly during a verbal outburst from the crowd. This prompted Smyczek to allow Nadal to take his first serve over, and Nadal soon won the set 7-5, and along with it, the match.

Smyczek's sportsmanship drew praise from the crowd and attention from the media, but he isn't as impressed at his move as so many others have been. He considers it routine, since his parents only allowed him to pursue a professional tennis career on the condition that

he conduct himself as a gentleman on court.

Smyczek, who has been ranked as high as No. 68 in the world in singles (he is currently ranked 95), spoke with Register correspondent Trent Beattie before the U.S. Open, which runs Aug. 31-Sept. 13 in New York City.

You got a lot of credit for being a good sport earlier this year during an intense match with Rafael Nadal at the Australian Open. What are your thoughts on that?

We had been going toe-to-toe for four hours in a tough, second-round match. Rafa was ahead 6-5, 30-0, when someone in the stands yelled during his serve. He missed it by a few feet — something he hadn't done all match. I let him do it over, and then he won the match.

I would have loved to have beaten Rafa, but the do-over was the fair thing to do. This would have been true whether the match was starting or ending and whether I was ahead or behind. It's just part of something my parents required from me before I started to play tennis seriously. No matter what else happened, they wanted me to be a gentleman on the court.

Lots of people cheered for me, and the do-over got a lot of attention in the press. It might be a good thing for younger athletes to see that sportsmanship is possible even in tight situations like that, but I think getting so much attention for what I did is a sad commentary on where sports are today. People are amazed when someone does something like that with a lot on the line.

You've invested a lot of time and effort into your tennis career, even in your

teenage years. Was it tough to move away from your family in Wisconsin in order to play more tennis in Florida?

It might sound terrible, but it wasn't tough to do that at the time. I loved playing tennis, and at 16 or 17, you get a kick out of having more freedom and branching out in to the world. It's not that I didn't like my family, but at that age, you're not really concerned about being able to see them every day when you can talk on the phone.

My main concern was not having a car, which sometimes made it difficult to get to places. I always made the effort to go to Sunday Mass, though. That was ingrained in me from childhood, so it was kind of automatic, even 1,300 miles away from home. It's something that has stayed with me through the years. It's

been a constant in a fast-paced, ever-changing life of tennis.

Today, as I travel all over the world, I miss my family more than when I first moved out. My parents do get to see some of my matches, but most of the time, I'm on my own or with my coach, Billy Heiser. He's only one year older than I am, and we actually competed against each other many years ago in junior tournaments, so he is kind of like family.

Even though you've always attended Mass, was there a specific time that your faith deepened?

About four years ago, I had a pretty serious girlfriend. We were considering marriage, but the problem was that she didn't practice her faith. She was a fallen-away Catholic, which would have made our married life together complicated. We would have had conflicting beliefs and practices,

which wouldn't have been an ideal environment for raising kids.

It was a tough thing to do, but I made it clear to her that if we were going to be married, she would have to take her faith seriously. She didn't accept the challenge, so we broke up. What made that unpleasant experience easier was hearing Scott Hahn's conversion story, which I had picked up at a Lighthouse Catholic Media kiosk.

Even though Scott was a convert and already married, the parallels in our lives were similar enough that I could see how being a practicing Catholic was an unsurpassed blessing. Even if it meant I would lose a friend or potential spouse, I just had to remember that a Christ-centered, Church-empowered life should be my top priority.

What do you think is the most empowering aspect of the Church?

It's probably something that Scott Hahn has spoken about in a CD called *The Healing Power of Confession*. As Catholics, we can take this sacrament for granted, but we really shouldn't. It's a hugely empowering thing, because we're made right with God and given the grace to avoid sin in the future.

If we didn't have confession, we would probably go from bad to worse, because the guilt and sinful momentum would build. Confession removes the guilt, stops the sinful momentum and pushes us in the other direction of virtue. It's truly a healing sacrament, so I make an effort to go at regular intervals, even when I don't feel like going.

It's funny how some people might think that if you go to confession regularly you must have tons of serious sins to confess. The opposite is actually true. The more you go, the

less you usually have to say; but the less you go, the more you usually have to say. The closer you are to a source of grace, the more you get, and the further you are, the less you get, so it makes sense.

What's really encouraging, though, is that no matter how bad off you are spiritually, you always have the mercy of God nearby in confession, where any sin can be forgiven. The whole point is forgiveness, so you shouldn't be ashamed to ask for it.

Do you have a favorite Catholic book?

I carry around little books like The Way and The Forge from St.

Josemaría Escrivá. They are very handy while traveling, because they don't take up much space at all. What they lack in size, they more than make up for in wisdom from St. Josemaría, who wanted people to treasure, share and live out their

religious beliefs rather than hide them.

One way to make this happen is by praying the Rosary, which I try to do every day. The Rosary is a very effective means of making the mysteries of the life of Christ more real to the individual. You see things through an incarnational lens, because you're calling on the Blessed Mother for help. She knows the Incarnation better than anyone, so she's in a unique position to help others understand it.

The Rosary helps me in a very real-life, tennis-specific way. When I was competing on the Challenger's Tour, which is the equivalent of the minor leagues in pro baseball, I had almost constant anxiety about whether I'd make it to the main ATP [Association of Tennis Professionals] tour. When I stated praying the Rosary regularly, it helped to give a sense of routine and

structure, which lessened the anxiety. Then I could approach tennis with a healthier mindset.

Speaking of the Rosary reminds me of a story from earlier this year. I was invited on a Protestant radio program to talk about being a Christian in pro tennis. The interview went okay, and at the end, the host asked me to lead the audience in prayer. I'm not used to leading spontaneous public prayer, so the first thing I thought of was a Hail Mary, the most-recited prayer of the Rosary. I think the host was shocked when I prayed it, but the Hail Mary is very biblical, as seen in Luke, Chapter 2, so maybe that one Hail Mary will get some people to consider being Catholic.

What are your personal expectations going into the U.S. Open, and which players do you think have the best shot at winning it?

One of my top memories so far in tennis was at the 2012 U.S. Open. I made it to the third round, and I was the last American male left in the singles draw. That got the New York crowd heavily on my side, and they almost pushed me to a victory. It was a close, five-set match at night on the Grandstand [Court].

This year, I'm just going to try to peak at the U.S. Open, after a tough series of hard-court matches in the summer heat. I hope to win some matches and do some damage, but as far as a favorite to win, that status goes to Novak Djokovic. It's hard to bet against him. He's ranked No. 1, was victorious at the Australian Open and Wimbledon this year, and won the U.S. Open in 2011.

Aside from Djokovic, it would be fun to see Roger Federer win, who, even at 34, is still playing great tennis. Others have a shot at it, but those are

clearly the top two guys, so we'll see what takes place.

Whatever happens in New York, I'm looking forward to getting married in November. After my tough but faith-building experience related earlier, I did find a good Catholic woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. She's the daughter of a tournament sponsor I had known for years. I'm very happy I met her, especially because she helps me to be a better Catholic. That's what matters most.

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Link to interview with Tim Smyczek in the National Catholic Register: [A Gentleman's Guide to Pro Tennis \(and Life\)](#)

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