

Israeli-born tennis star wears a cross, but his mother considers him ‘Jewish’

Denis Shapovalov was first Israeli-born player to reach Canada’s Rogers Cup semifinals since 2000, beating Nadal along the way

By **MARVIN GLASSMAN** | 14 August 2017, 7:07 pm | 13

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Denis Shapovalov, of Canada, salutes the crowd after defeating Rafael Nadal, of Spain, 3-6, 6-4, 7-6 (4) at the Rogers Cup tennis tournament Thursday, Aug. 10, 2017, in Montreal. (Paul Chiasson/The Canadian Press via AP)

MONTREAL — Eighteen-year-old Israeli-Canadian tennis player Denis Shapovalov made history at last week’s Rogers Cup tournament in Montreal as the youngest player ever to make the semi-final round, and made headlines for beating superstar Rafael Nadal en route.

Born in Tel Aviv, Shapovalov also became the first Israeli-born player to earn a berth in the Rogers Cup semifinals since Harel Levy finished as a finalist in the 2000 Rogers Cup in Toronto, then called the Tennis Masters Series Canada.

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Levy was ranked #144 when he went to the final of the 2000 Rogers Cup tournament, losing to Marat Safin of Russia. To achieve his historical milestone, Shapovalov, ranked #143, also upset higher ranked players at the tournament.

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“I had my best week of tennis in my career, defeating so many players like Nadal, who are idols of mine growing up,” Shapovalov told The Times of Israel.

Shapovalov was knocked out of the tournament late Saturday night, losing his semifinal match to fourth-seeded Alexander Zverev of Germany.



Israel-born Denis Shapovalov of Canada celebrates his victory over Rafael Nadal of Spain during day seven of the Rogers Cup on August 10, 2017 in Montreal, Canada. (Minas Panagiotakis/Getty Images/AFP)

Despite losing out on a chance to compete for the cup, the string of victories boosted Shapovalov’s world ranking to #66 and has earned him some \$220,760 in prize money. Levy achieved a career high #30 ranking in 2001.



Shapovalov and Levy have more than just a tournament statistic in common — they also shared the same coach. Oded Jacob, a former Israeli now working with Tennis Canada, helped develop both athletes’ careers, along with those of fellow Israeli tennis stars Dudi Sela — who was ranked #90 internationally going into the Rogers Cup this year after a banner performance at Wimbledon — and Shahar Pe’er, who retired this year with a career peak rank of #11 in singles in 2011.

Under Jacob’s tutelage, Shapovalov won the prestigious 2015 Junior Davis Cup in Madrid.

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Shapovalov’s parents came from the Soviet Union to Israel in the 1990s, and he was born in Tel Aviv in 1999. His mother, Tessa Shapovolova, who is Jewish, wanted to emigrate to Israel despite being an elite tennis player from the Soviet Union.

“Although my husband Viktor [and father of Denis] is Greek Orthodox and not Jewish, he was just as eager as I was to go to Israel,” said Tessa Shapovolova.

Tessa competed in tennis tournaments in Israel and coached Israeli youngsters while she was there. Denis’s older brother Evgeniy was born in Israel as well.

“We decided to move to Toronto before Denis was one because it was too dangerous to continue living in Israel,” Shapovalova said.



Rafael Nadal of Spain congratulates Denis Shapovalov of Canada for his victory during day seven of the Rogers Cup at Uniprix Stadium on August 10, 2017 in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Denis Shapovalov of Canada defeated Rafael Nadal of Spain 6-3, 4-6, 6-7. (Minas Panagiotakis/Getty Images/AFP)

The family chose Toronto because of the large Jewish population there, among other reasons.

Tessa taught tennis for 10 years at the Richmond Hill Tennis Club before opening her own academy, Tessa Tennis in Vaughn, a suburb of Toronto. She taught Denis his potent one-handed backhand that along with his powerful serve generated enthusiasm from his fans in Montreal last week.

“I have many Jewish players as my students. Also, I wanted Denis to compete for Canada at the Maccabiah Games in Israel, had he not had huge prominence as a professional tennis player,” said Tessa.

Although born in Israel, it is unclear how tied to the Holy Land — or Judaism — Shapovalov is since he left as a baby.

“My parents had a hard life and I respect what they had to do. I love playing for Canada, but am friendly with the Israeli tennis players I met, such as Dudi Sela [who also competed last week at the Rogers Cup],” said Shapovalov.

Shapovolov wears a cross around his neck while playing matches.

“Denis identifies with his father’s religion, but I consider him Jewish,” said Tessa.