

A Bigger Stage

A former minor-league tennis player tries a new act. BY L. JON WERTHEIM

» Michael Kosta slept at a La Quinta Inn last night. “La Quinta’ is Spanish for ‘Next to Denny’s,’” Kosta deadpans. “But then again, ‘Denny’s’ is Spanish for ‘food poisoning.’”

But seriously, folks. Kosta does spend the bulk of his time on the road, pinballing around the country as a professional stand-up comic. The 27-year-old is working his way up from smaller venues to the biggest stages.

He’s out there alone, performing by himself, making adjustments on his own. “It’s all on me,” he says. “When I kill, I did it. When I eat it, I did it, too.”

Which is to say, Kosta’s existence as a funny man is a lot like his previous one as a tennis player. A native of Ann Arbor, Mich., Kosta was a top junior in the late ’90s, playing the national event in Kalamazoo twice. He also played for four years at the University of Illinois at a time when the Illini program was beginning to establish its supremacy in college tennis. “Once I left, they won [64] straight matches and an NCAA title,” he says. “Guess they got rid of the right guy, huh?”

Kosta graduated in 2002 and, like so many good-but-not-great college players, he circumnavigated the globe trolling for ATP ranking points at Futures events. A big-serving baseliner, he topped out at No. 864 in singles and No. 439 in doubles. He first made use of his down time by writing a book, *101 Tips for Winning More Tennis Matches* (Coaches Choice Books). He then took to writing down observations and assorted thoughts that he found to be funny.

After two years, having exhausted money and patience in equal measure, he quit the ATP grind to become an assistant men’s tennis coach at the University of Michigan. Having transformed his observations into a five-minute comedy act, he tried his hand at stand-up, and damn if it didn’t fire him with the same intoxicating rush that had surged through him when he played a big tennis match. When juggling his coaching duties with a steadily increas-



ing performance schedule became overwhelming, he chose pacing stages over pacing sidelines. “I went to my parents’ house to tell them,” Kosta says. “By which I mean, I went downstairs.”

“My dad told me to go for it,” he continues. “My mom started reading a book titled, *When Our Grown Kids Disappoint Us*.”

On stage, Kosta channels a cross between Jerry Seinfeld and a better-looking David Spade, his act a mix of satirical narcissism, biting sarcasm, and self-deprecating sex jokes. Some—OK, most—of the material isn’t fit for a family publication. Let’s say this: His business card begins, MICHAEL KOSTA, COMEDIAN AND LOVE MAKER (I MAKE LOVE) . . .

So far, life in front of the faux-brick wall has treated Kosta well. He still teaches tennis in Ann Arbor a few hours a week to supplement his income, but he’s been steadily working his way up the ranks. In March, he performed at the HBO Comedy Festival in Aspen, and he did a New York gig that will air later this spring on Comedy Central.

He’s been hit with a beer can, but he’s also had audience members ask him to autograph their breasts. “It’s a full-time job,” he says. “You’re constantly traveling, writing more material. But I’m loving it. I admit it: I like attention.”

Kosta says he can’t overstate the parallels between comedy and tennis. If he once needed a few minutes to adjust to the wind and court speed, he now eases into his act, gauging the light-

Kosta in his playing days at Illinois (above left) and working his current gig.

ing, the age of the audience, its sobriety level. Just as he once “zoned” and “choked” on the court, he can now “kill” and “bomb.” The same way he once watched videotapes of his matches, he now takes the stage with a digital audio recorder in his pocket so he can later dissect his performance. Asked to cite the biggest influences on his career, he ticks off a list of comedians that includes Ellen DeGeneres, but singles out Craig Tiley, his tennis coach at Illinois.

“Preparing. Traveling by yourself. Taking the good nights with the bad nights. Knowing yourself inside and out. Barely making enough money to live on. That’s tennis right there,” he says. “The biggest difference is that in comedy, the competition smokes more, drinks more, and farts more. Otherwise, it’s practically the same drill.” ♦

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