

“Pressure is a privilege.”

—Billie Jean King

Grand Slam: US Open

Surface: Hard

Where: Queens, New York

When: August 27–September 10, 2023

CHAPTER ONE

Time never runs out in tennis. It's one of the few sports in which the clock ticks up instead of down. As long as the match is still in action, it's never too late to win. And yet, Leo Chambers, tennis's top-ranked American man, has an innate fear of time running out.

At the moment, though, in a podcast studio with a mic staring him in the face, Leo is tucked inside a memory from when time still felt limitless. He's thinking about the big piece of blue confetti that landed on his shoulder at the US Open men's final in 2003. It stuck to his T-shirt while he was cheering his lungs out alongside his dad, both of them clapping their hands until their palms were raw. The twenty-one-year-old American superstar Andy Roddick was hoisting what would be his first and only Grand Slam trophy into the muggy September air. Leo glanced down at the confetti resting on his shoulder and then back up at the thousands of pieces swirling around Arthur Ashe Stadium, applause and whistles reverberating in his ears. He was only nine years old, but he remembers it distinctly: This was the day he fell in love with tennis.

But he's not going to talk about a big piece of blue confetti on *What a Racket*. His dad's friend and fellow retired tennis star, Paul Davis, has hosted this podcast for over a decade as part of the Tennis Network and chats with lots of different players about their careers, including Leo—who's been featured, what? About 8,724 times now? Fine, it's more like eight, but he's never particularly enjoyed being a guest on this show, or speaking with most interviewers. For all the hours he logs at the gym and at practice, talking with the media is actually one of the most draining parts of being a tennis pro. He's only here now, in the studio, yet again, because his dad asked and because Paul's at least a decent guy.

"What will you be thinking about or, you know, reminding yourself of, as you hit the court at the US Open next week?" That's the question Paul has just asked Leo, no doubt hoping that he'll talk about being aggressive on court, playing first-strike tennis, the typical stuff. Leo wants to scream, "I'll be thinking about that big blue piece of confetti! The moment that made me want to win the goddamn US Open in the first place!"

"I'll be thinking about how I need to stay aggressive out there," Leo says, his voice polite and measured, "and how I'll have to play first-strike tennis if I want to get the win."

"I hear you, Leo, I hear you," Paul says. "And I know your dad has been working you hard to get that second serve percentage up, right? Johnny had a pretty good one himself back in the day. Tripped this guy up a few times, in fact!"

Lost in his own nostalgia, Paul doesn't wait for Leo's response before pressing on: "How's your dad doing, Leo, with the MS? He still hanging in there?" He adjusts his round wireframe glasses that, alongside his graying mustache, look like they were teleported from 1985.

"Yeah, he's been feeling fine, just fine, thanks for asking," Leo says, providing his boilerplate response to this question—one that people often ask him with a certain tone of pity or

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because they can't ask what they really want to: *Should he still be coaching you?* "He's got me working hard on my second serve, like you said. It's been failing me a little too often this season. But I wish he would take a break sometimes. I've barely gotten to go out and enjoy New York this year!" He forces a smile, rumpling his face, freckled from the summer sun.

"Well, we're just days away from the start of the action, so the Statue of Liberty will have to wait, my friend," Paul says. "I'm glad to hear you're gearing up. As always, you're a home favorite to lift the trophy. You've been having a solid season. But it's been an elusive thing for you, hasn't it? Securing your first Grand Slam title, that is."

It sure has, Paul!!!

"It sure has, Paul," Leo says. "But I've had my heart set on winning the US Open since I was a kid, so I'm going to take what I learned during my semifinal run last year and hopefully use that to go all the way this time. It was really tough to get that close and not clinch it."

Leo, who turned twenty-nine last month, has been on the ATP Tour (Association of Tennis Professionals) since he was eighteen and has fifteen singles titles to his name. He's had a stellar career, no doubt about it. But for Leo, and for all tennis players, the year revolves around the four Grand Slams, the most esteemed titles of the season: the Australian Open, Roland-Garros (a.k.a. the French Open), Wimbledon, and the US Open. To win a Grand Slam is to cement yourself in tennis history, to announce yourself as one of the greatest athletes on the planet. And Leo wants that more than anything. Like most players, he spends at least forty weeks a year traveling and competing on the ATP Tour, chasing his dream of winning the US Open. So, while he's managed to rack up those fifteen singles titles at other tournaments, he still can't call himself a Grand Slam champion, and he still can't sleep at night when he thinks about that fact.

“I have to be honest, it reminded me of when your dad came close to winning the US Open in '90! Boy, was that final a heart-breaker,” Paul says, shaking his head. “Okay, now, I know you’re probably tired of being asked this, but it’s been twenty years since Andy Roddick won the US Open in '03, and no American man has done it since. You’ve been compared to Andy a lot throughout your career. Do you feel pressure coming in as the American favorite?”

It’s true. From the moment Leo started winning matches on tour, the press started likening the two, from their serves to their smiles, nicknaming Leo “Baby Rod” and printing headlines like “LEO CHAMBERS: AMERICA’S ANDY RODDICK 2.0.”

“I’d be lying if I said it doesn’t add more pressure,” Leo says. “I think all the American men want to be the next one to win it. It pushes us to bring our best out there.”

“Well, you’ve got a lot of fans cheering for you, lots of admirers,” Paul says. “You frequently pop up on, um, well . . . to be honest, my producer insisted I bring this up . . . an Instagram account called Serving Looks.” Paul practically chokes on those two words as they come out of his mouth. “Can’t say I understand the name, but it’s essentially a tennis gossip page, isn’t it?”

“Oh God,” Leo says, flustered while thinking of how to explain that people on the internet think he’s hot. “I mean, sort of. It’s, like, news and pictures of players, especially ones they think are, uh, attractive. They talk about who players are dating, which ones are having the best season, that type of thing. But yeah, I get tagged once in a while.”

“And, so, I guess I should ask: *Are* you dating anyone, Leo? Some of my listeners might want to know if you’ll have a *special lady* rooting for you in your player’s box at the Open.”

Jesus Christ, Paul.

Thirty Love

“Jesus Christ, Paul,” Leo says, then realizes he just said that out loud. “Oh. Oh my God. Sorry. That just slipped out. Sorry. I think I’m just really tired from pract—”

Through muffled laughter, the podcast’s producer, cute and curly-haired Jesse, interjects over the speaker: “Don’t worry, Leo, we can cut that in post.”

“Okay. Okay, thanks, Jesse. Sorry again,” Leo says. “Um, no, no, I’m not seeing anyone at the moment. Just focusing on my game.” His other boilerplate response.

“Good man,” Paul says, looking only slightly agitated. “I look forward to watching you play, as always. It’s going to be a thrilling two weeks of tennis.”

Leo forces a smile and shifts in his swivel chair.

“I’m sure I’ll be seeing you around the grounds, Leo. And I’m sure I’ll be seeing many of *you*, my listeners, around the grounds too!” Paul’s face is back to looking bright and confident. “You can always feel free to stop me and say hello or talk match picks. Well, folks, I’m Davis, Paul Davis, and this has been another episode of *What a Racket*.”

Why does Paul always state his name like James Bond during sign-off? Who can say.

“Sorry about that,” Leo says, lifting off his headphones, further ruffling his already messy hair. “My brain is just—”

“Focused on the Open! I get it,” Paul says. “It’s really no problem, Leo. It’s really no problem. Right, Jesse?”

“No problem!” Jesse says, waving from the sound booth, smiling at Leo.

“Okay, well, thanks, guys, and yeah, I’ll see you around the grounds next week,” Leo says, reaching for the doorknob.

“Tell your dad I say hey, and send in the next guy, will you? Gabriel’s out there,” Paul says, shuffling through some papers.

“Gabriel? You mean Gabe? Montoya?” Leo asks, turning around, brow furrowed.

“No, Leo. Peter Gabriel, from Genesis.”

Leo blinks. “Who?”

“Yes, Gabriel Montoya! You know, the guy who knocked you out of Wimbledon this year?” Paul says with a smirk. “Send him in. He’s recording a clip for an episode, too.”

Leo steps into the next room and there he is. Gabriel. Gabe. Gabe fucking Montoya. Sitting on the fucking sofa in the fucking lounge. Is there anybody worse Leo could bump into while trying to keep himself centered ahead of the Open? Look at this guy! Look at his loose, black curls, perfectly coiffed! Look at his tight gray T-shirt, barely stretching over his broad shoulders! Look at his jawline, likely able to saw wood! Oh, ha ha, no, just kidding, Leo doesn’t notice any of that. Hold on, is Gabe reading a *book* while he waits? Leo can’t quite make out the cover, but he’s probably reading up on Bitcoin or Brooklyn sex clubs or something. This man is the living worst.

Leo and Gabe first met as teenagers, back when they were junior players at Break Point Tennis, a premier tennis academy in Boca Raton, Florida. It should be noted that, for tennis players at least, Florida is heaven. It’s an elite hub for the sport, offering gorgeous weather year-round and an endless supply of world-renowned coaches and facilities. The expansive grounds of Break Point are lush—lined with palm trees and flowered shrubbery, all hugging a Tetris-like grid of thirty tennis courts as cerulean as the South Florida sky or Leo’s own eyes. Those eyes caught sight of Gabe a year after Leo first started training at Break Point. Playing there every day after school for months at a time, he considered the academy a second home. Growing up a short drive away in the small, tennis-obsessed town of Delray Beach, he spent as much time at Break Point as he could, making sure he could “become one with the court,” as his dad told him all pros must. But the familiarity of his life at Break Point shifted seismically when Gabe arrived one sticky August afternoon.

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Leo was really cool about it from the beginning.

“Who is that? Do you know who that kid is? I haven’t seen him at BP before. Who is that over there? On court three,” he asked his dad during their practice session, oblivious to how rapidly he was now bouncing the ball with his cherry-red Wilson racket.

Square-faced Gabe, who must’ve come out of the womb with that perfectly coiffed black hair, was doing some stretches before starting his practice session a couple courts over. It’s not that things of a sexual nature hadn’t ever crossed Leo’s mind before. He was a hormonal fifteen-year-old with dial-up internet access, after all. But he had developed such narrow tennis tunnel vision that he never thought too critically about his own sexuality. Not to mention, it was the early aughts, in Florida. “Your swing is so gay” and “Don’t be such a fag” and “You’re playing like a pussy” weren’t exactly uncommon remarks he’d hear other guys toss around at school or BP, sometimes directed at Leo himself.

Whenever he would notice another guy was cute, he would pretend it was nothing—just a blip, a glitch—and continue thinking about his next match. He was usually able to push it aside. But he had never felt his breath catch in his throat like this before. He had never felt his mind fixate on a person like this before. Not until Gabe showed up and cracked his concentration right down the middle.

But, hey, it was probably just the humidity. Right?

“Did you hear me?” his dad asked. “His name is Gabe. He’s the same year as you.”

Leo continued to bounce the ball—and stare.

“Go ahead and serve!” his dad shouted. “Leo?”

Bounce. Bounce. Bounce. Bounce. Stare. Stare. Stare. Stare.

“Hello? Leo?” Gabe says, rising from the couch in the studio lounge.

“Oh. Didn’t notice you there,” Leo says curtly, snapping out of it. His breath? Definitely not caught in his throat. “The

doctor will see you now.” He gestures toward the recording booth, immediately regretting this joke.

“What did you and Paul talk about this time?” Gabe asks. “How I’m going to kick your ass at the Open like I did at Wimbledon?”

The tension is building in Leo’s body, and he can see Gabe feeding off it.

“That makes it, hmm, let’s see . . . a 10–0 record against *the* Leo Chambers? The number nine player in the world? Damn, I’m good.” Gabe winks.

“That’s some big talk for somebody who won’t even be seeded at the Open. You’re what, number forty-seven now? Too busy partying, perhaps?”

“Quit talking about your seed,” Gabe says. “It’s gross.” He winks again.

“Hilarious,” Leo says. “And *stop wink*—”

He doesn’t quite get this sentence out before Gabe closes the door in his face, tilting his head as it shuts, flashing him a smirk.

Leo stands there for a second. The air still holds a little of Gabe’s scent. Fresh, crisp, like cedar . . . Wait, what? No. This trip to *What a Racket* needs to end.



Sufficiently rattled from his awkward morning, Leo is relieved when he finally steps onto one of the practice courts at the Open. Jogging onto the court, in the shadow of the hulking Arthur Ashe Stadium—the largest tennis stadium in the world, named for the first Black US Open champion—he spins his racket in his hand (still cherry-red, still Wilson), ready to lose himself and the sound of Paul’s voice and the smell of Gabe’s body in the rhythm of his routine. The Open starts in just a few days, and while Paul called his season “solid” on the podcast, Leo knows all too well that he’s been feeling tight on the court this year.

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Uninspired, even. He can't seem to get out of his own way. And if he doesn't make another deep run at the Open, he'll lose the ranking points from his semifinal appearance last year—and watch his spot in the top ten disappear. So, it's time to compartmentalize the bullshit and focus on his game.

Leo smacks a forehand crosscourt.

"Footwork, Leo," Johnny says.

He rockets a backhand down the line.

"Swing through."

Another forehand.

"Take that earlier!"

Shuffling side to side, Leo returns each shot from his assistant coach, Brian Wilkins, with power and precision. Backhand, forehand, backhand, forehand. One of the best players in the world and the number one American player right now, Leo is powerful in his shot-making and swift on his feet. You'd be forgiven for thinking you're at a shooting range upon hearing the forceful pops of his groundstrokes. Groups of fans looking to glimpse their favorite players ahead of the tournament press up against the court's fence and pack into the elevated stands behind him, their eyes glued to Leo's every move. His forehand, flat and fast like a bullet, is a sight to behold. And it helps that he's shirtless. Is one of the fans sending a photo of him to Instagram sensation Serving Looks as we speak? Most likely. Leo wipes his wristband across his sweaty, scruffy face.

Leo's dad, who's been observing from the wall behind him during practice, makes his way onto the court, his right leg taking a moment longer to lift off the ground than his left.

Johnny was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1991, just a year after he was the runner-up at the US Open. Even though his symptoms are manageable, they impact his mobility and energy, and they ended his career as a pro player before he got

another chance to go for the US Open title. So, Leo's dream of winning it? It's as much for himself as it is for his dad.

"Looking pretty good," Johnny says. "But remember to keep that—"

"Elbow up on the backhand, I know, I know."

Leo has an elegant one-handed backhand modeled after his dad's that, like any player with a somewhat uncommon one-handed backhand, is a major point of pride for him.

"Everything okay?" Johnny asks.

"Oh, yeah, just a weird morning," Leo says.

"Don't tell me Davis, Paul Davis, didn't treat you right," Johnny says.

Paul and Johnny go way back.

"Don't make me bring up our doubles run at Wimbledon '87," Johnny always says.

"I never would," Leo likes to say in response.

"No, no, he was fine," Leo says now. "I mean, I wasn't the ideal guest but—wait, yeah, why does he talk like James Bond at the end?"

"Leo, I have never understood that man," Johnny says, deadpan.

Leo knocks his head back with a laugh.

Click click click. The fans immediately take photos. Perfect content.

"But I appreciate you going on there again," Johnny says. "Between you and me, I think he's been scrambling to get the best players on that show of his."

"Well, that can't be true. Gabe Montoya went in after me."

"Gabriel! Ah, what a good guy. I don't know what you have against that kid, Leo. Other than your losing streak against him, I guess." He grins.

Leo ignores his dad's quip. He's all too aware he's never won a match against Gabe, starting with their very first one, when Gabe stole the winning point from him.

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Leo's game is all about overpowering his opponent. It's a straightforward approach, a classic strategy. The problem is that Gabe's game absolutely dismantles it. He has a wicked slice and a mean drop shot that Leo never sees coming. Gabe also comes into the net to volley. A lot. The tempo and finesse of Gabe's game throws Leo out of his rhythm every time they meet, causing him to make errors left and right. It doesn't help that the mere sight of Gabe's face doesn't just dismantle Leo's game but his entire existence.

For Leo, in every sense, Gabe hits different.

"Hey! Speaking of good guys," Johnny says, holding out his hand to shake Ollie's, who has just arrived for their practice session. A Canadian player, Olivier Tremblay—Ollie—grew up in Montreal but moved to Florida to pursue tennis as a teen and remains Leo's best friend to this day.

"Don't go easy on him, okay?" Johnny says to Ollie with a knowing smile. "Remember your footwork, Leo. Your footwork." Johnny turns and begins to walk toward the back of the court again, more slowly now, his breathing a little heavier.

"Dad, you can just watch from here," Leo says, quickly moving his stuff from one of the benches, which is positioned in the shade of a big white umbrella.

"No, I'm good," he says, his right foot dragging a bit.

Leo looks at him concernedly. "Please?"

"All right, all right, I'll sit with Brian," he says, and takes a seat with a quiet groan and his clipboard. "I do need to make some notes for us to go over later, Leo."

"Sure," Leo says.

"I thought we were practicing on Ashe," Ollie says, pulling a neon-yellow racket from his giant black Babolat bag.

"Didn't you see the schedule?" Leo says. "Sascha already has it booked all afternoon."

"Of *course* he does," Ollie says, his subtle French accent coming out more, as it always does whenever he raises his voice. As does his favorite Quebecois swear: "Tabarnak!"

Over the course of another two-hour session, Leo rockets the ball back and forth with Ollie, Johnny looking up from his clipboard occasionally to yell to Leo about his elbow or his pronation or his topspin. Leo has always loved hitting with Ollie. Lanky, loyal Ollie, whose blond hair has been in a buzzcut for as long as Leo can remember. He's probably the most disciplined guy on tour—consistently a top twenty player for years now—but he also makes Leo laugh more than anyone else, a delightful curmudgeon.

“Did you hear him on *What a Racket* the other day?” Ollie says. The two of them are chatting at the net now, drenched in sweat.

“Who?”

“Sascha,” Ollie says. “His advice to kids who want to make it in tennis? ‘A little less focus on pronouns and a little more focus on practice.’”

“I saw that on Instagram! What the fuck?” Leo says, his brow furrowing.

“So, let's see. Sascha Volkov, he/him/his,” Ollie says. “I wonder if *he* will break *his* racket when I beat *him* again this year.”

“I can't with you,” Leo says, chuckling, and heads for the benches to start packing up. “Ah, I forgot—”

“How to hit a second serve?”

“Hilarious! Everyone's hilarious today!” Leo says, looking up from his phone. “No, I forgot that I'm meeting up with Tess tomorrow after practice with my team, so I won't be able to hit with you. Sorry. Tess and I are playing mixed doubles again this year, so we need to figure out our game plan.”

“Ah, okay, I see who the favorite is,” Ollie says, inserting his rackets back into his bag. “You two better win it this year.”

“I mean, I'd prefer to win singles, but—”

Ollie gasps. “No! *Leo Chambers* wants to win the US Open? Mon dieu, I had no idea.”

Leo stares at him, straight-faced.

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“Okay, but I’m glad you’re playing mixed again, dude. Tess always helps you loosen up. She helps you play more fearlessly, more like you used to,” Ollie says.

“Well, thanks. I think.”

“Anytime!” Ollie says, and starts heading for the exit. He’s walking backward, facing Leo. “Let’s just hope you don’t draw Gabe!”

The draw—the tournament’s bracket—for men’s singles will be released tonight, and Leo will most likely pass away if he’s forced to play Gabe in the first round.

“If you wink right now, I swear to God,” Leo says.

“Why would I wink at you?” Ollie asks.

“Never mind,” Leo says. “I’ll text you once the draw is out!”

Ollie throws up a peace sign to Leo as he turns to greet a group of fans outside the court who rushed over when they saw him leaving.

“I gotta make a call, LC,” Brian says, and tosses Leo a banana to keep his strength up.

A forty-three-year-old bald and built Black man, Brian joined Leo’s team at the start of this season. A former pro himself, Brian has a collection of nine titles and a career-high ranking of number five. After struggling to come back from a serious ankle injury, he retired at thirty-three, and has since coached some of the best players in the world. His crowning achievement, however, as he’s told Leo on many occasions, was earning the Arthur Ashe Humanitarian Award for his work supporting the Crown Heights Junior Tennis Program in Brooklyn.

It’s always a good idea for players to have additional voices on their team to offer perspective beyond the head coach’s, especially when that head coach is the player’s dad. Leo knew that bringing Brian on board would improve the team dynamic exponentially, and it was an anticipatory move, too, to provide support as his dad pushes sixty and MS pushes his limits, even if Johnny won’t admit that.

“We’ll hit the gym in a few?” Brian asks, pointing to Leo.

Even when practice is over, practice isn’t really over. Leo will hit the gym for an extensive fitness session, followed by an appointment with his physiotherapist, where he’ll work out any pain or knots in his body.

“Yeah, see you in a bit,” Leo says.

“Wait up,” Johnny says to Brian, trailing behind him. “Let’s walk and talk.”

For now, Leo is by himself, catching his breath before heading to the gym. Beads of sweat cover his forehead and stomach as he performs his instinctive scan of the fans still gathered by the court, monitoring whether they’re watching or judging his dad’s careful steps. He knows he should be relaxing during these free minutes before diving back into his packed schedule, but the knot that always forms in his stomach while looking out for his dad is one that can’t be worked out.



Leo’s hotel room in Midtown Manhattan is enormous and sterile. His match clothes from his Nike kit and extra Wilson rackets in plastic wrapping are scattered across the California king bed and the concrete floor. With his full team—Johnny, Brian, his physio, his agent—in a half-circle behind him, he’s hunched over his laptop at the desk, watching a livestream of the US Open draw announcement.

Leg bouncing up and down like the tennis ball before his serve, he’s waiting excitedly to see what his route to the final will look like this year. Who will his first-round opponent be? Will Gabe fall in his path? Who else will be in his quarter of the draw? Unseeded players, like Gabe, are randomly positioned within the draw. Will Gabe fall in his path? Will there be any potential blockbuster matches along the way? Will Gabe fall in his path? These questions ricochet off the walls of his brain

Thirty Love

ahead of every tournament, but especially ahead of the Grand Slams, and especially the US Open.

Just after seven PM, it's out. The draw is finally released for the field of 128 hopefuls, all the men in the midst of this exact same ritual in their hotel rooms across the city. Hunching even closer to the screen now, Leo scans down the bracket carefully, eyes squinted as he hunts for his name among the list of players. When he reaches the third quarter of the draw, he finds this:

1st Round

Leo Chambers 9
Gabriel Montoya