

Alumni Spotlight

Craig Tiley, CEO of Tennis Australia

From South African professional tennis player to director of the largest sporting event in the southern hemisphere, alumnus and Tennis Australia CEO Craig Tiley '89 credits UT Tyler and East Texas with putting him on the pathway to success.

After finishing school and completing his compulsory military service in South Africa, UT Tyler alumnus Craig Tiley '89 aspired to make a career out of being a professional tennis player. With bases in London and Paris, Tiley traveled to tournaments across Europe and in the United States. After a few years on the professional circuit, he knew it was time for a change. "I had come to the realization that to make money at being a professional tennis player was going to be a long journey and I needed to find other ways to forge a career."

Tiley knew at a young age that he wanted to be an American. "My parents used to joke about it. I always as a kid wanted to be an American. I don't know what it was. I always had this aspiration that I wanted to live in America," Tiley said. Attending school in the United States became an appealing option. He applied to colleges all over the country. "Like throwing darts at a map," Tiley said. He first came to East Texas for Tyler Junior College's Tennis Tech Program which prepared students to be coaches, administrators, and managers in sport.

Although he found the East Texas community very inviting, people he ran into often had some misconceptions about what life was like in his home country of South Africa. "I always remember running into Texans who would ask if I had giraffes and elephants in my yard back home. So of course, I played it up and showed off pictures of my 'pet giraffe,'" he joked.



*Enjoying some laughs
with Rafa Nadal*

After completing the two-year program, he transferred to UT Tyler to complete his second bachelor's degree. "Dr. Keith McCoy was my advisor and helped me put together an academic program that was a combination of biomechanics, ergonomics, and technology all related to my interest in sport." He would go on to nearly complete a master's degree in kinesiology, but his life journey took him away from UT Tyler before he was able to finish his dissertation. "I remember that Dr. McCoy was mad with me, but I knew I needed another eight or nine months to extrapolate and correlate all of my research data, write up the results, and defend them, but in my mind I was finished with that journey. I don't have to get the stamp of approval for someone else to say I'm finished; I just know when I am." Following his gut and pursuing opportunities as they come up are what has helped him navigate his career.

After graduating from UT Tyler, Tiley had an extremely successful career as a tennis coach, first at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign in 1992, and then as the head coach of the University of Illinois men's tennis program from 1993-2005. A member of the Fighting Illini's Hall of Fame, Tiley led the team to several Big Ten conference and tournament championships culminating with the NCAA Division I National Championship in 2003. Tiley left Illinois in 2005 to accept a position with Tennis Australia as their Director of Player Development.

Fast forward to today and Tiley is the CEO of Tennis Australia and oversees a team of around 600 full time employees across nine international offices and an additional 13,000 employees during their three-month busy season around the Australian Open which was held earlier this year. During the tournament more than 1.2 billion fans watch the action from around the globe with over a million people in attendance over the course of the two-week event. "It is probably like having 14 straight NFL Super Bowls, every single night. So it's a big logistical operation," he said.

Being in this role has given him opportunities he never imagined he would have. "We are truly a global company but do a lot of our big work in Asia. Places like China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, and India. So it's been interesting living here in Melbourne and being able to spend a lot of time in Asia, it just something you normally wouldn't have the opportunity to do if you lived in North America or Europe, so it's been great."

As an "embracer of people and people's differences" he has appreciated the opportunity he has been given to learn about the different cultures he has encountered in his work travels. "I have a desire to learn about how other people live and I really enjoyed that and respected that chance to learn about these cultures and grow to appreciate them more."

As with many companies, Tiley and his team had to make some tough decisions when considering how to handle the COVID-19 pandemic. “We predicted that this was going to take at least a year, so we closed our offices for one year in March 2020 and set the whole company up to be able to work from home.” Working remotely hasn’t slowed the business down one bit. Tiley said a typical day during the pandemic is usually between 16-18 hours. Prior to the pandemic, much of his work time was spent on the road with 1-2 international trips per month and domestic trip each week. Domestic trips include traveling to the eight states and territories in Australia and often involves dealing with the Premiers and Federal government including the Prime Minister. “We work a lot with Australia’s nine governments who are the ultimate decision makers when it comes to much of what we do, especially during this pandemic.”

Outside of work, he’s able to make time for his three children (twin 7-year-old boys, and his 8-year-old daughter) and his wife, Alicia who is from Naperville Illinois. In his downtime, which he doesn’t have much of these days, Tiley enjoys playing tennis and heading to the beach to swim and surf. “A lucky good life”, he states when asked about spending time with family.

Tiley is also actively involved in the community. He sits on the board of directors for the Melbourne International Festival of the Arts, also known as “RISING MELBOURNE”, Arts Festival, which is one of the largest arts festivals in the southern hemisphere. Tiley is also the chairman of The Coalition of Major Professional & Participation Sports a lobbying group that represents the seven major sports in Australia that covers approximately 90% of the country’s participation in sport.

“Sport in Australia is very prominent, everyone does it. You can do two sports a year when you’re in school a winter one and a summer one. It’s a cultural thing, everyone watches sport and plays sport.” Of the seven major sports in the country, tennis is the most popular. “The Australian population is about 24 million and there are 1.8 million Australians that play tennis regularly, so it’s a high percentage of the population.”

And while he is no longer on the court coaching, being a teacher is still something he is passionate about. “I spend a fair bit of time mentoring up and coming businesspeople with a particular focus on start-up opportunities and especially for women.” He enjoys working with people and helping them grow and develop. “From the perspective of starting out I think I always wanted to be a coach and UT Tyler helped me figure that out,” Tiley said. “And it didn’t matter where. It could be a coach of the sport, which it was at the beginning, and it became the coach of people in business which it is now.” Tiley said.



Top Right: All time Grand Slam Champion Serena Williams and Tiley following her 2009 Australian Open Title; Bottom Right: Tiley with 20 Grand Slam Champion and good friend Roger Federer.

Tiley developed a strong connection with East Texas through the generosity of donors and friends of UT Tyler like the late Helene Hudnall. “Helene was like my surrogate grandmother. Thanksgiving and Christmases, we’d always have at her house. She was very caring and inviting.” Her generosity lives on today through the Helene A. Hudnall Endowed Scholarship that provides scholarship support to international students in the tennis program at Tyler Junior College.

Tiley’s philosophy around success has three components: opportunities, change, and resilience. “Opportunities don’t come to you, you go to them,” he said. “I was always the one looking for opportunities. The Tennis Tech program at TJC, UT Tyler, the University of Illinois, and then onto my career with Tennis Australia. And even in this job today, I’m always looking for what’s the next big opportunity career-wise.” Leaning into those opportunities allows you to find ways that you can change the world around you. “I’ve always said the pain of change is greater than the pain of losing.” He continued, “If you expand your horizon and you get out of your own world and you learn to adapt and learn how to change, you can pretty much do anything.” Along your journey through life, Tiley expresses the need to find resilience. “One of the things I instill in my own kids today is the resilience piece because I think our kids are growing up in a world where they’re going to need that more than anything.”

“I loved everything about my experience. I loved my time at Tyler Junior College, I loved East Texas, I loved Tyler, and I loved UT Tyler. I’ve always had a very soft spot for Tyler because it gave me my start in America.”

In all his journey to this point has been worth it. “I have been very lucky. I have a high-profile job because tennis is Australia’s number one sport and we run the largest sporting event in the Southern Hemisphere. It’s very important to the country. It’s a very influential role which I enjoy and with it comes great responsibility.”

As he moved through his career journey, he stayed connected to UT Tyler through his relationships with Emeritus Faculty members Drs. Keith McCoy and Joyce Ballard. And while he thinks it is wonderful that the university is growing and expanding, he emphasized the importance of the impact faculty and staff have on the student experience. “I got a lot out of my time at UT Tyler,” he said. “You can build buildings and you can have a great campus and it can be beautiful, but if the people inside are not delivering for you, then all of that doesn’t matter. For me, those individuals delivered, and I was very fortunate.”

