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Three months after a wreck, the Bucks teen is playing in tournaments.

Path to recovery quick for tennis player

By Michael D. Schaffer
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Alex Kuznetsov's pro tennis career had barely begun when it very nearly ended in one reckless moment.

The Bucks County teenager, who made it to the finals of the French Open junior championship last year, was training at the Saddlebrook Tennis Resort near Tampa, Fla., when he got behind the wheel of a Ford Mustang on May 22.

Kuznetsov, 18, mashed down the gas pedal. A few minutes later, the Mustang was a wreck and so was Kuznetsov's timetable for conquering the tennis world.

"I was a NASCAR driver for a second," he said with a dry laugh. "I was trying to go too fast and lost control of my car and hit a tree."

Kuznetsov's right leg was broken. He didn't feel any pain at first, but when he looked down, he saw that his leg was "pointing in every which direction."

"Then, I realized that something was wrong."

Within hours, a surgeon in Tampa inserted a titanium rod in Kuznetsov's right femur. Doctors told him it would be six months to a year before he was ready for tournament tennis.

They reckoned without Kuznetsov's determination and the skill of Center City physical therapist Joe Zarrett.

A little more than three months after the accident, Kuznetsov was ready to test his rehabilitated leg. He made it into the U.S. Open to play doubles with Scott Oudsema — they reached the second round before losing yesterday to Spain's Feliciano Lopez and Fernando Verdasco — and will play singles in the U.S. Open Junior Championships, which begin today.

"The doctor said I was very lucky just to have a femur fracture," Kuznetsov said on a recent morning as he took a break from his rehab at work at Zarrett Rehabilitation Associates, across 19th Street from Graduate Hospital.

"He's lucky he lived," interjected Zarrett, a genially imperious taskmaster. "The fracture was through the midshaft of the femur, which is the thickest, the strongest bone in the human body." Breaking it required "terrific impact."

Kuznetsov, a trim 6-footer with a mop of brown hair, began his rehabilitation June 6, two weeks after the surgery. In the beginning, Kuznetsov couldn't put much weight on the healing leg, but after a month, "we really worked him extremely aggressively," Zarrett said.

"The outcome is pretty much unheard of as far as how quickly he came along."

Three hours a day for five days a week, Kuznetsov sweated his way back. There were slide workouts with weights, cardiovascular exercises, conditioning on hip machines and knee machines, agility and footwork drills, sit-ups, running and, interspersed among all that activity, lots of stretching.

"We really put the rehab in overdrive," Zarrett said.

And Kuznetsov handled it all.

"He works extremely hard," Zarrett said. "He did not complain."

The leg doesn't hurt, Kuznetsov said, and proved it by jumping lithely on and off a big rubber half-ball with 20 pounds of weight on his ankles.

He said that he isn't 100 percent yet, more like 85.

The rehab may have been hard, but Kuznetsov's life revolves around tennis. His parents, Yuri and Julia, Russians who moved to the United States when Alex was 3 and now live in Richboro, have home-schooled him the last few years to accommodate his tennis schedule. And Kuznetsov is determined to make his mark as a

tennis player.

Can he do it after the accident?

Making it as a professional tennis player is tough enough; making it after a major accident "is even more of a challenge," said Eric Riley of Malvern, who has coached Pam Shriver, Lisa Raymond and John Paul Fruttero.

But Kuznetsov is tough and resilient and has the advantage of working with Zarrett, Riley said. "If anybody can do it, Alex has a good chance to do it."

Kuznetsov said that he will go into the Junior Open hoping to win.

"Just being out there playing tournaments again, that's what I'm looking forward to doing."

He learned a hard lesson from the accident.

"I got a little carried away," he said. "I thought I was a little untouchable. Teenagers think that."

In a way, he mused, the accident may have been "a blessing in disguise for me because before, I think, I was taking my game for granted."

"If you're really focused on something, you wouldn't be going out and driving cars as fast as you can, so now I definitely look at my tennis career in a whole different way."

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AKIRA SUWA / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Alex Kuznetsov works out on the elliptical trainer under the care of physical therapist Joseph Zarrett. Kuznetsov, who broke his leg in a car crash, will play in the U.S. Open Junior Championships.