

TENNIS

A Wimbledon Journey That Began in a Van

By GREG BISHOP

WIMBLEDON, England — Dustin Brown, the most accomplished tennis player in the history of Jamaica, was born in Germany and trained by an American before polishing his game near the picturesque shores of Montego Bay.

He remains a man of worldly influences, fluent in German and English, with distinct dreadlocks and a serve-and-volley style. But Brown's rise into the top 100, his first Wimbledon singles appearance and his late-blossoming career can all be traced back to an unlikely vehicle — a Volkswagen camper van.

"That camper was basically my last chance," he said Sunday, on the eve of his first-round match against 16th-seeded Jürgen Melzer.

Brown's parents purchased the van in 2004. Inge Brown and her husband worked in tourism in Jamaica, and although those jobs provided necessities, the family was far from rich.

Inge said she felt abandoned by the Jamaican tennis federation and squeezed by the mounting costs of her son's career. At least until an idea came to her one night while she sat on the beach and sipped a beer and stared into the ocean. She would buy her son the camper. He would travel around Europe, playing futures tournaments, for as little as 100 euros at a time.

"Maybe God himself told me a van would be the answer for everything," she said. "I don't know. But it was."

The camper was bigger than some Manhattan apartments, with a kitchen, a bathroom and three beds. Brown turned the space into his home. He added a computer and a machine for stringing rackets, and decorated the walls with pictures.

The personalized German license plate provided the final touch, the reminder of the goal. The plate read CE DI 100 — CE for Brown's birthplace in Celle, Germany; D for Dustin, I for Inge; 100 for the ranking he wanted to surpass.

Brown played as many tournaments as possible in the same country, to cut down on expenses. He remained largely in Germany one year, mostly in Italy the next. His day-to-day existence depended largely on results. Earnings went first to gas money and equipment, necessities. Then food. He often cooked pasta, sometimes for weeks on end. If



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Dustin Brown, ranked 105th, is a rarity: a West Indies singles player in the Wimbledon draw.

he performed well, he sometimes splurged and dined at restaurants.

Brown admitted there were low points, nights spent lying awake, days he wondered: "Is this ever going to get better? Is this ever going to end?"

The turning point did not come in one tournament, match or moment, but rather in six years spent near the bottom, struggling for survival. Brown, who turns 35 in December, described the process as "just keep going and going and never stopping, just trying and believing and hoping that, you know, sooner or later something, anything would happen."

The crucial changes came in the past two years. Brown excelled on the ATP Challenger circuit in 2009, reaching the final in four tournaments. He started topping top players.

Eventually, Brown obtained the highest ranking ever (99) for a Jamaican player. (He is 105th in the latest rankings.) He arrived at Wimbledon as perhaps the first singles player from the West Indies in more than four decades, although that has not been confirmed.

Asked if he ever could have imagined this, Brown laughed and offered a simple answer: no.

He lived in Germany from 1984 to 1996, with Leroy, his Jamaican father, and Inge, his German

mother. She sat next to Brown on Sunday, a moon with blonde hair with her dreadlocked son.

The family lived comfortably in Germany, and Brown learned tennis under the tutelage of Kim Michael Wittenberg, an American abroad. Everything he knows, he learned from Wittenberg, he said.

Everything changed when the family moved to Montego Bay. Brown received little money, and

Dustin Brown of Jamaica found his way far from home.

he practiced mostly on cracked public courts, searching for opponents, using any ball "that was yellow and would bounce." The better he played, the more tournaments he won, the more Brown received access to the resort courts. This began the family's protracted struggle with the Jamaican tennis federation. In a country that boasts the world's fastest man — Usain Bolt — track, soccer and cricket are heavily financed. Tennis, as Brown found out, is not.

Brown said he generally received only one e-mail message a year from the tennis federation,

each a note inquiring about his availability for the Davis Cup. He also blamed the federation for the lack of publicity he received back home, noting that his father found out Brown had made Wimbledon only after his son called.

The low point came last Friday, when Brown said he received an e-mail message from the federation's president, congratulating him for his "wild-card entry into Wimbledon." In reality, Brown was ranked 101st at the time of the draw and gained direct entry after injury withdrawals. He called the message "a kick in the face."

Brown said he hoped for change in the future, but for now, Wimbledon beckons. Even his mother said it felt "unrealistic, like a dream." Brown — speaking, appropriately, on Father's Day — said it was a dream that would have died without his parents.

The camper remains in Germany, and Brown still uses it each time he returns, driving to practice, the movies or the supermarket. Even now, it serves as a reminder of where he came from.

"When I see that van, I think that everything is possible," Inge Brown said.

The Browns made their final payment on the camper earlier this year. The next week, fearful or otherwise, Dustin cracked the top 100.