Interning at A Tennis Shrine: Schaffer Goes to Court with Top Pros

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It was a tip from a UB School of Law alumnus that led Joe Schafer ’18 to his summer legal internship with the U.S. Tennis Association, the sport’s national governing body.

But it was his groundstrokes that took him away from the desk and onto the court as a practice partner for some of the world’s top pros at the nation’s premier tennis tournament, the U.S. Open.

Schafer spent his 1L summer as part of the USTA’s six-attorney legal department. There, he says, “I got my hands dirty in so many ways,” including working on a slip-and-fall case filed by a player in last year’s Open, researching the power of sports governing bodies and the threat of antitrust liability, working on media agreements, even writing a memo on the Federal Aviation Administration’s new drone law (after a hobbyist’s errant drone disrupted play at the tournament last year).

“I felt like part of the team in many ways,” he says. “Leaving in August was really hard because I had so many great relationships with so many people.”

That included playing on the company softball team and playing intramural tennis at two courts a deep lob from the association’s White Plains, NY, offices. There Schafer was at home – he was a nationally ranked collegiate player at Davidson College – and his game drew notice.

“Um, yes,” he clears it with his boss and headed for the practice courts at the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center, nearby in Queens. There he really got his hands dirty – blistered, actually – trading serves and groundstrokes with the likes of Canada’s No. 2 player, Vasek Pospisil, and the hard-serving German women’s player Sabine Lisicki.

“These guys, they’ll sneeze at your 120 mph serve. They were just feathering it away. I felt like a punching bag out there.”