

DAILY BUSINESS REVIEW

PROFILES IN LAW

You've Been Served: How Marko Cerenko Went From Tennis Champ to High-Stakes Miami Litigator

by Raychel Lean

Long before Miami lawyer Marko F. Cerenko passed the bar, he was running around a different kind of court, batting tennis balls back and forth as a professional player.

At his Georgia high school, Cerenko ranked seventh in the U.S. and first in the south region, which caught the attention of Duke University. By 2000, he was in senior year and captain of Duke's team, which won the Atlantic Coast Conference four years in a row. Cerenko ranked No. 2 in the country, and was voted to the ACC's top 50 tennis players of all time.

Graduation presented a crossroads for Cerenko: accept a

regular desk job offer or pursue tennis full time. So he packed his bags for Miami, where the U.S. Tennis Association had a training facility that meant he could practice year-round.

It was tough, according to Cerenko, since professional tennis players aren't guaranteed any money the way football or basketball players are. Aside from sponsorships for gear and equipment, it was Cerenko versus the world.

"Plane tickets, hotel rooms, coaches, it's very expensive and you're not making a lot of money, but it's an amazing experience," he said. "Obviously, you play to win, so every time you win you're excited and you're doing something you love."

At 21, he was creating his own schedule, traveling the world to compete in tournaments about 40 weeks a year and building a worldwide "fraternity of sorts" with other young players as he went.

"One week you might be in England, the next week you might be in Mexico, the next week you might be in Japan," he said. You're all over the place, and you get to meet a lot of different people."



J. ALBERT DIAZ

Marko F. Cerenko of Kluger, Kaplan, Silverman, Katzen & Levine ranked among the top players in the U.S. before finding a new way—through litigation—to satisfy his appetite for competition.

Then there were the lows. Without a team behind him, it could get lonely, in Cerenko's experience, especially if he had lost a few matches in a row.

MARKO F. CERENKO

Born: March 1979, Zagreb, Croatia

Spouse: Jenna Cerenko

Children: Mariana and Nikolas

Education: University of Miami School of Law, J.D., 2005; Duke University, B.A. in history, markets and management, 2001

Experience: Equity shareholder, Kluger, Kaplan, Silverman, Katzen & Levine, 2011-present; Vice president and general counsel, Zadar Holdings, 2007-2011; Associate, Fowler White Boggs Banker, 2005-2007

“For me, at least, a bad defeat stings more than your greatest victory, and you tend to kind of remember all your defeats more so than all your victories,” he said.

The sport can be brutal, and playing on all surfaces without an off-season can cause physical wear and tear, according to Cerenko, who after two years suffered a shoulder injury that threatened to set him back about six months if he went through rehab. So he made a choice.

“I always knew I was good, but I always knew I wasn’t going to be Top 50,” Cerenko said. “And I said, ‘I’ve done what I want to do.’ Could I have done maybe a little more? Sure, but I don’t want to spend 10 years doing that. I’d rather move on to the next step in my life, whatever that may be.”

It was hard for Cerenko to let go of the sport he had played almost every day since he was six, growing up in Zagreb, Croatia—though back then, it was part of Yugoslavia. At 11, Cerenko moved to Atlanta with his parents, both doctors. They were sponsored by Emory University, because Yugoslavia’s communist regime meant it wasn’t easy to leave.

A year later, the Balkan conflict broke out, stoked by tensions between Catholic Croatia, Muslim Bosnia and Orthodox Serbia, and eventually carving Yugoslavia into six different countries.

Cerenko arrived in the U.S. knowing only the basics of English—or “cat, dog, house,” as he puts it. So sport became a way to bridge the gap with his peers

while he learned the new language. He also speaks Croatian, German, Bosnian Serbian and Slovenian.

These days, when he goes back to Croatia for his annual family vacation, Cerenko said it’s wonderful to see how his home has become a tourist hot spot.

“But hopefully it won’t grow too much,” he said. “Part of the reason I love it is because it’s somewhat isolated and it has its own charm.”

COURTROOM COMPETITIONS

Cerenko had always planned to go into medicine, like his parents, but after tennis he gravitated to law school, where he found another way to feed his competitive side.

“Tennis, in many respects, is very similar to high-stakes litigation,” he said. “There’s no middle ground. You either win or you lose. And the things that make you a great tennis player: the hard work, the discipline, being prepared, being civil to your opponent, those same qualities make somebody a great litigator.”

Cerenko tries complex business and real estate cases as a shareholder at Kluger, Kaplan, Silverman, Katzen & Levine. One of his clients, high-end Sunny Isles restaurant Miami Juice Corp., would have closed down if it hadn’t prevailed against its landlord, which had sought eviction. In a three-day trial, Cerenko helped defend a lease that keeps Miami Juice and its 60 employees in place for at least another 20 years.

In 2018, Cerenko secured full control of a multimillion-dollar

residential condo at 300 Collins Ave., Miami Beach for one of its funding partners, PSB Collins LLC, after a fight with the developer over ownership of the project.

Cerenko and his firm’s founding partner Bruce Katzen are working on a lawsuit against Aventura nursing home Regents Park, alleging its staff defrauded patient Victor Ziskin, who had early onset dementia and has since died.

“They got a hold of his checkbook, and they’d have him sign a check in cash or to them individually,” Cerenko said. “Some of the checks started at \$100, then \$1,000, then \$5,000 and \$10,00. There was one check for \$120,000.”

Meanwhile Cerenko says he’s slowly getting back into tennis, between running, hiking, playing basketball and spending time with his wife and two children. His eldest, 3-year-old Mariana, already appears to have inherited her father’s competitive side.

Tennis taught Cerenko to always be more prepared than his opponent. But win or lose, it’s about learning from the result, the way he sees it.

“My coaches would always tell me, ‘When you lose, you lost for a reason, and you need to take away things from that loss so that you won’t lose again for the same reason,’” he said. “And it’s no different in law. If I lost in a certain case for X reason, I’m not going to let it happen again.”

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