

Wimbledon champ carried gift from confirmation sponsor to each match

RALEIGH, N.C (CNS) — Abbey Forbes, the 18-year-old winner of the junior girls doubles championship at Wimbledon, has kept an inspirational book in her tennis bag at recent competitions and for all seven Wimbledon matches.

The book, from her confirmation sponsor, Joan Monti, is a daily devotional called “Jesus Calling.”

The best-seller was well-known to Monti and her friends. But it was completely new to Forbes, who was baptized Catholic as a baby and was just confirmed and received her first Communion April 20 at St. Francis of Assisi Church in Raleigh.

“I decided that I was going to keep that book in my tennis bag,” Forbes said. “Every match. Every practice. I open it and I read the daily reading or confession. And I pray on it. It just keeps me connected to my faith while I am playing sports,” she told NC Catholics, magazine of the Diocese of Raleigh.

The book was with her at the French Open in late May and in July at Wimbledon.

“I was so nervous ... excited. I really wanted to win,” Forbes said about her feelings just before the final Wimbledon match with partner Savannah Broadus. “I was asking God for strength and grace and all of those things to be brought with me out onto the court ... and I asked him to be with me. That book is just my reminder.”

A year ago, she was focused on tennis training six hours a day, doing high school coursework online and acting as big sister to her two brothers. And then she decided to add something else to her life — spirituality.

That’s when she met Monti, 80, a retired nurse, widow and grandmother of seven.

The pair met at an introductory gathering in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults program for adults wanting to become full members of the Catholic Church.

As people socialized, Forbes mentioned the U.S. Open, which she had just competed

in as a junior. Monti, who played tennis and brought her tennis-playing daughter to tournaments, had recently returned from watching the U.S. Open with her son.

“Something just drew me to Joan. I like to say now that it was the spirit,” Forbes said. “I told our leader ... ‘Hey, can Joan be my sponsor?’ I found it really nice of her that she was able to talk to me about my sport, something I love so much.”

During the course, Forbes played in 10 tennis tournaments and sometimes joined the group through the FaceTime app on her phone when she couldn’t be there in person.

Through faith and sport, Forbes has learned to focus on prayer, which she said is something she first picked up by watching her mom.

Like many athletes, she notices how her performance may improve or suffer based on what’s happening in her life. As she attended RCIA and grew even closer to her grandfather who took the classes with her, she noticed her happiness and how that translated to success on the court.

She calls it “playing free.”

When her brother Luke, who has autism, was diagnosed with leukemia in May, she noticed that her fear about his diagnosis caused her tennis to struggle.

“Luke is my rock. I relied on God there because I wasn’t able to be home. I had to be in Paris that next week (after his diagnosis) and I felt like the only person I could trust was God. I really leaned on him. I still do because it’s still happening and it’s going to be a long process for him to get better,” Forbes said.

At home in Raleigh now, she shows the engraved Wimbledon trophy to those who ask to see it. It sits in a green wooden case lined with purple satin.

She is looking forward to her college experience, which will begin soon when she arrives at UCLA to study and play tennis. She has already visited the University Catholic Center and said it will become an important part of her life as she continues her faith journey.

Forbes had a celebratory lunch with Monti July 22 at a Raleigh pizza place, and then Monti watched her practice with a group at a public court.

As she watched Forbes take the court and begin hitting the tennis ball with intensity, Monti's eyes grew wide. "She's ... strong and fierce on the tennis court, and the other side of her is she's sweet and kind and not so fierce," she said.

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This story was written by Kate Turgeon Watson, editor of NC Catholics, magazine of the Diocese of Raleigh.

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