

Behind the Bruins: Marko Ilic and Riccardo Trione lead Belmont men's tennis together



Belmont men's tennis' ascension to the top of the Horizon League standings has been hard to miss.

In their first year in the conference, the Bruins breezed past each one of their opponents in the regular season en route to a perfect 10-0 record in league play.

With an overall record of 20-5 and an unblemished conference slate, Belmont isn't done yet.

The top seeded Bruins have all eyes set on bringing home the Horizon League Championship trophy.

Doubles partners Marko Ilic and Riccardo Trione have headlined a talented Belmont squad all season.

Posting a 17-1 record in matches this season, the tandem eased past most of their competitors.

But they aren't headed into the conference tournament with big heads.

"We should not be scared. We're supposed to aim for the win," Ilic said. "But we shouldn't think that a win is going to come from the sky because we're predicted to be number one."

The team must take the court as hungry and eager competitors, Ilic said.

And they must rely on instinct and all the hard work they put in throughout the season, according to Trione.

“I think for everybody, getting in the tournament knowing that the last time you played, you are confident about yourself, it helps you to play great in a tournament,” Trione said. “We’re going to try to do the same thing that we’ve been doing so far, because it’s working, yet we are going to try and to be as complex as possible.”

No doubt, the Bruins will have a target on their back when they take the court in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

But they’re used to it.

The Seasoned Veteran

Ilic, a native of Zagreb, Croatia has been a member of the Belmont tennis program since the 2017-18 season.

He’s been through all of the “ra-ra” of the conference championships many times before.

But much like his on-court demeanor, the festivities don’t phase him.

Always spotted in his signature combination of a hat and wristbands, Ilic is ready for the championship season again.



Luckily for him, he has seen both sides of the spectrum before.

“I was lucky enough to win one time already with the team, in 2021,” speaking to his experience at the Ohio Valley Conference Championship two years ago. “It’s an amazing feeling.”

In his freshman season, Belmont fell 4-3 to Tennessee Tech University in the championship match.

“That was not fun,” Ilic said.

The loss sticks in his memory and is inspiring him to restore a winning feeling this time around.

Ilic is the winningest player in the history of Belmont men’s tennis. He doesn’t have much to prove.

Growing up as one of the top players in his country, Ilic used to seek accolades until the pandemic shifted his perspective.

“Once I got to a certain age and to a certain achievement, I asked myself ‘what else is there?’” Ilic said. “Once COVID hit, I shifted from seeking awards.”

Now he focuses on the things he can control.

“All I control is what type of effort I give and the little things,” Ilic added. “If it gets to those things, that’s what brings me happiness these days. With me, everything right now is team-first, and it took me some time to understand that.”

This season, Ilic earned his fourth first-team-all-conference accolade in his storied Belmont career.

Boasting an impressive 3.94 grade point average in the classroom as a member of Belmont’s Master of Business Administration Program, he also earned a spot on the Horizon League All-Academic Team.

He’s on a five-game winning streak in singles matches and has won 12 straight in doubles.

He has 72 singles victories and 83 tilts in his time while donning Bruin colors.

The final box to check will be the Horizon League Championship.

“We all want to win, but if we just wait around, someone else will take it from us,” Ilic said.

The New Kid on the Block

Trione, who hails from Bari, Italy, transferred to Belmont this season after beginning his career at the University of Arkansas.

When he made the transition, he had one clear goal in mind: to win.

With the Horizon League Championship quickly approaching, Trione is taking all of the opportunities to soak up the moment.

“One of the most important reasons why I came here is because I want to win and a team who can compete to win their conference,” Trione said. “This really means a lot for me.”

With 15 singles victories this year, Trione has emerged as a major force for the Bruins.

A soccer fan at heart, his only superstition is to represent with his home colors.



Although he’s still acclimating to the ins and outs of being a Bruin, he remains thankful for the great coaching he receives each day.

“When I first came here, I realized Mauricio is a completely different type of coach than I had in the past,” Trione said of the 2023 Horizon League Coach of the Year, Mauricio Antun. “He really cares about us, sometimes more off the court than on it, and that makes a huge difference for me.”

Trione has been eyeing an opportunity to compete for a title.

He now has the opportunity to do so in Ann Arbor.

Dynamic Duo

Ilic and Trione have been nothing short of dominant in doubles this season.

But the success didn't come easy. Originally, they weren't even partners.

"We were pretty much set on doubles, I was supposed to play with someone else, he was supposed to play with someone else, but we were really just messing around trying different combinations," Ilic said.

It wasn't until Antun made a suggestion that change happened.

"A few days before the first match, we played one set against the guys together and we played well," Ilic said. "I was like wow. This might work. He's complementing my game very well."

Antun asked Ilic if he was good with the combination.

His response?

"Yep. Put me with him. I think this will be good for the future," Ilic said.

"We saw early that our game style in doubles were very similar," Trione said. "We understood that for it to work, of course, we would need some practice. We knew we needed to know each other better. But I think we both agreed on what we should do."

Although the two clicked instantly, they experienced match struggles early on.

In their first match against Lee University, Ilic and Trione escaped with a narrow 7-6 victory.

That's what propelled the duo moving forward, Ilic said.

"We barely won that match and after it we sat down and asked each other what we can do better," Ilic said. "In our cultures, we are very direct, and we criticize each other but we never get defensive."

"Sometimes we miss, but we know that we're doing the right things, so we just keep going and learning because we know it's the right thing to do," Trione said.

The model of constructive criticism quickly spread throughout the entire team.

After tough losses against then No.23 ranked University of Louisville and the University of Mississippi, the Bruins invested in hard work.

And better results came fast.

Belmont went on to win 14 of its final 15 matches of the regular season, which included a perfect conference record.

During that stretch, Ilic and Trione emerged as one of the best doubles pairs in the nation, ranking as high as No.72 together in the Intercollegiate Tennis Association Rankings.

They also claimed Horizon League doubles team of the week honors five times throughout the season.

“We started to see like ‘hey we can play with these guys’, and we slowly started to trust each other more,” Ilic said.

In doubles, the duo hasn’t lost since their matchup with Louisville in February, although some of their matches remain unfinished because their teammates assisted in securing the doubles point.

Trione credits the teams’ success with its attention to detail.

“We gave a lot of emphasis to small stuff. We always thought little things were important to get good results on the court,” Trione said. “At the beginning, we all didn’t trust each other and focus on the little things but now we do, and things have gotten better and better every day.”

Aside from sharing a common idol in Roger Federer, and attending a local sushi buffet every Monday, Trione and Ilic share the same mentality as leaders of Belmont’s squad.



“I think we worked hard to build this team culture,” Ilic said. “I think that’s one of the reasons we found success, we play one match at a time and hope for the best,” We get

lucky sometimes, like there's no secret to doing this, it just kind of happens when things fall into place."

Winning has been a theme for the Bruins since March.

A big reason why Belmont has been on one accord for nearly two months is because of its perseverance as a team.

Every match doesn't go as planned.

But Trione makes sure to reinforce positivity each time out, no matter what court he is on.

He keeps the energy alive with a simple "let's go Bruins," chant during every match.

But there is one caveat.

Every Bruin must respond.

"He implemented this change came from Arkansas, and they whether willingly or not, they do this thing where when one person says, 'let's go' and then everyone else responds, you don't really have a choice," Ilic said.

The command took some time to adjust to, Ilic said.

Sometimes he would respond "let's go boys," instead. That is not acceptable.

Now, months later, everyone on the team knows the proper response and the exchange is a proven match staple.

"Sometimes conditions are not perfect, and things are not going our way, you can get in your head when you miss some easy shots you shouldn't miss," Ilic said. "In those moments you can either like go down and get discouraged or you can get the energy going by saying go it."

"We always manage to keep that energy," Ilic said.

After defeating Youngstown State University in their semifinal match, the Bruins will look to transfer their good fortune to the Horizon League Championship on Sunday when they face Tennessee Tech University.

With a win, Belmont will secure an NCAA Tournament berth.

"We don't like to be predictable, So we're change a lot, of course, for our best strategy. We're pretty good at that," Trione said referring to his mindset headed into doubles alongside Ilic.

His Italian roots will remain with him when he takes the court with hopes of leaving Ann Arbor with a trophy.

Ilic is confident in his team headed into the championship.

“There's no need for us to be afraid but then at the same time, we cannot get cocky or complacent,” he said.

When he takes the court in Michigan, he'll be echoing “Idemo Bruins” which means “Let's go Bruins” in Croatian.

He hopes that will be an acceptable response whenever Trione chants “Forza Bruins!” which translates to the same in Italian.

Hopefully the energy will be high enough so Belmont doesn't have to worry about a war chant as it looks to capture the Horizon League Championship.

NOTE: This article was updated for accuracy after Belmont men's tennis defeated Youngstown State University 4-1 on April 29.

This article was written by Landen Secrest. Photos by Caleigh Furyk and Ben Burton. April 2023. Belmont Vision Student Newspaper.