

The Chang Identity

Former French Open champion Michael Chang retired from the tour years ago, but his namesakes are still competing – and causing confusion – on court.

by Steven Cohen



A few gullible club members, even some returning tournament stalwarts, were buzzing in late May, wondering if *the* Michael Chang had entered the Pacific Coast Seniors at the Berkeley Tennis Club.

I decided to play along.

“Congratulations Michael,” I said, biting my tongue, the one already planted in my left cheek. “How’s life been treating you since retiring from the tour?” Chang was ready for the approach. He’s been hearing the silly shots since high school.

He lobbed back with a sly grin and a short chuckle, unfazed by my fool’s errand for even a split nanosecond. He recounts a ludicrous 2007 Internet debate about whether the other Michael Chang was playing 5.0 League matches, just four years after he retired from the pro ranks.

This Michael Chang — and there are 46 other ones in the United States Tennis Association database — is less than six months younger than his more famous namesake. He’s an optometrist from Anaheim with two young children.

He plays at or near the top of Open, Senior and NTRP 5.5 tennis tournaments. *The* Michael Chang plays a handful of tennis events with fellow Golden Boys of American tennis (Pete Sampras, Andre Agassi and Jim Courier), has one child with two-time NCAA singles champion Amber Liu, and helps run his family's Foundation. (See chart for more comparisons.)

Just shy of 25 years ago, the future tennis Hall of Famer became the youngest player to win a Grand Prix event in the U.S. in Sept. 1988 at The Transamerica Open, which, coincidentally, has firm roots at the Berkeley Tennis Club, where it was called the Pacific Coast Championships.

Many tennis fans will forget that one month before his first pro title, Chang became the youngest to win a main draw match at the 1987 U.S. Open. But few sports fans will forget the moment when the diminutive 17 year old came from two sets down to slay No. 1 and three-time champion Ivan Lendl in the semifinals of the 1989 French Open, en route to becoming the youngest player to win a Grand Slam final. Bay Area broadcaster Barry Tompkins, who was doing color for NBC, called Chang, "Rocky Balboa, Roy Hobbs and Kirk Gibson all wrapped up into one."

Twilight Zone

Nearly a quarter century later, the 'other' Michael Chang enters the Pacific Coast Seniors as the No. 1 40 year old in the country — his rookie year in the proverbial twilight leagues.

He takes an outer court at the Berkeley Tennis Club completely unnoticed, but his resemblance to *the* Michael Chang is noticeable: dimensions, wheels, consistency, western forehand, average serve, two-handed backhand and roughly a similar game plan.

Only this Chang looks like he's playing with about a third less speed, pace, agility and consistency than *the* Chang everyone noticed. He's also having one of those really off days we've all experienced. This Chang's NorCal tournament debut is spoiled by San Francisco's Nicolas Chasseray, a big-hitter who Michael somewhat routinely dismissed in January en route to winning The Babolat World Tennis Classic in Palm Springs.

The two Michaels once played the same junior tournament in Cerritos. It was 27 years ago and the younger 13-year-old lost in the second round in

Michael Chang (center) presents the trophy for winning the Michael Chang Tennis Classic to... Michael Chang (left).



the 14s while the older Michael took home the 18s trophy. The only other time the two Changs have shared tournament space has been at the Michael Chang Tennis Classic. Event organizer Chang has handed playing champion Chang trophies for capturing the NTRP 5.5 division three years in a row.

The Chang gangs have crossed paths, too. The families, who both emigrated from Taiwan, know each other and socialize on occasion. Their parents even play mixed doubles on Joe and Betty's private court in Coto De Caza. (Rumor has it that the Changs hold the lifetime edge.) Michael and his older brother David, an orthopedist and 4.5 player, once took lessons from papa Joe for about a year.

After lettering in tennis for four years at Whitney High School in Cerritos and being ranked as high as No. 80 in the juniors, Michael Chang stopped playing competitive tennis until he was 31. When he went to UC Berkeley in 1990, he didn't try out for, (nor would he have made), the same Cal team that Carl Chang starred on that year. In 2002–03 Chang played a lot of 5.5 and Open tournaments. But then he stopped until he was 37 in order to launch Precision Vision, his optometry practice. His best results have been in the last two years.

Conversely, *the* Michael Chang went full bore into tournament tennis from age seven until he retired at 31. In his book, *Holding Serve: Persevering On and Off the Court*, Chang conceded that he peaked in 1996, the year he reached his first Australian Open and U.S. Open finals and a

career-high No. 2 ranking after Flushing Meadows.

Chang will never be in the conversation of the greatest players ever. Tennis Channel has him at No. 60 among men and an even 100 among both sexes. But his stature is off the charts. Chang had outsize influence. He proved that court speed could be a weapon. He came to personify the heart and soul of the underdog in one match against Lendl. He helped pave the way for a decade-long American resurgence on the red clay when male U.S. players won four French Open titles and four runner-up trophies in the '90s. His French Open title inspired many Asian Americans to pick up tennis (even as he has left a dearth of dominant Asian players in his wake). And he set so many youngest-ever records that Chang makes everyone else seem ancient by comparison.

The other Chang has proven that putting career first does not mean you're over the hill in tennis.

Prediction

Despite their divergent tennis paths, it's still tempting to speculate how the late-blooming Michael might do against the more precocious Michael in a not-so-hypothetical matchup. Not well, according to Pacific Coast tournament director and Berkeley Tennis Club pro Lynne Rolley. She shot back with a quick double bagel: "6-0, 6-0."

No matter what the actual outcome might be, it won't settle the score. The lesson is not that senior tennis stinks. Nor is that former circuit pros live on such a distant galaxy from top-tier seniors. (By example, Southern Californian Jeff Tarango, who has been characterized as living on a far-away planet, reached a very respectable No. 42 ranking in the bigs, ranked No. 8 in 40s in his last year playing Senior 40s and will likely land in the top 3 in his first year playing 45s. Tarango continues to do very well in the same national tournaments as this Chang does.)

This Chang has done nothing to besmirch the good Chang name. It's just that Michael Chang is Michael Chang. No, not this Michael Chang. *The* Michael Chang. The Balboa, Hobbs, Gibson Chang who tennis types wanted to see play at the Pacific Coast Seniors in Berkeley.

There is only one Michael Chang. But there's still a little Michael Chang in us impostors.

SAME NAME, SIMILAR GAME, DIFFERENT PATHS

	Michael	Michael
Age	40 (7/15/72)	41 (2/22/72)
Hometown	Cerritos	Placentia
Residence	Anaheim	Mission Viejo
Parents	Michelle, Retired Pharmacist James, Economics Professor; Real Estate Developer	Betty, Retired Chemist, "home cooker" Joe, Retired Chemical Engineer; manages Michael's estate
Parental Mantra	"Study Hard"	"Play Hard"
High School	Whitney High School	Dropped out of San Dieguito High in 10th grade/GED
College	UC Berkeley Southern California College of Optometry	Biola University. Attends Talbot School of Theology
Occupation	Optometrist	Tennis Legend, Foundation Head, Motivational Speaker
Sibling/Doubles Partner	David Chang, 42	Carl Chang, 44
Primary Coach	Anthony Sena	Carl Chang
Game Plan	Counterpunch	Counterpunch, Return, Scramble
First Title	2002 5.5 tournament	1984 USTA Junior Hard Courts
Career Highlights	Won 8 SCTA Open tournaments starting at 37 years old Ranked high in three divisions: 5.5s, Open and Senior 40s	French Open 1989 Reached a career-high No. 2 in 1996 Multiple youngest-ever records
Most Memorable Loss	Nicolas Pietrangeli (ATP rank 287) in 2 nd Round Whittier Narrows Open	Beaten by Pete Sampras in 1996 US Open final