

US OPEN 2026

Michael Chang Is Finishing What He Started

He was an icon for Asian Americans of the '80s and '90s. In Learner Tien, he has found a protégé.

By Caira Conner, a freelance writer who covers sports and culture.

On June 5, 1989, the day after the Chinese government sent troops to slaughter demonstrators gathered at Tiananmen Square, a 17-year-old American teenager with a bowl cut defeated world No. 1 Ivan Lendl in the fourth round of the French Open. Lendl was a three-time Roland Garros champion and merciless power baseliner riding high off his maiden Australian Open victory earlier in the season. Michael Chang, his opponent, was months into the second year of his professional career and not yet old enough to vote. He was also visibly dehydrated throughout the match, cramping from the heat, and yelping in pain every time he was forced to lunge for a ball. By the fifth set, he famously relied on an underarm serve to give his body a break, much to Lendl's chagrin.

The most lasting visual of that week — and perhaps of that decade — is of a lone male, unarmed, wearing a white shirt and holding a pair of shopping bags as he stands squarely in front of a column of military tanks: an unidentified David to an encroaching steel Goliath. But the images of Chang's quick-snap desperation tactics have endured, too. And the events that unfolded in Tiananmen in the weeks and then hours before Chang walked on court — events that he watched on CNN with his mother in their hotel room every night — would irrevocably bind themselves to the outcome of his match with Lendl. The California son of Chinese parents, five-nine in his Reeboks, wept on the clay. He won the title six days later.

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Only once it was over, and the adrenaline had subsided, did it begin to dawn on Chang that the ultimate significance of his French Open triumph was not about him becoming the youngest male to win a Grand Slam title or being the

first American man to hold up the Coupe des Mousquetaires in 34 years. “It had to do with me being Chinese,” he told me over FaceTime in July.

His win, momentous as it may have been, didn’t usher in a golden age of Asian Americans in tennis. For the rest of his career, when he walked onto the court as an Asian American player, he was usually the only one. (He only played four other Asian Americans during his tenure as a competitor.) But 23 years after Chang called it quits at the U.S. Open, things have changed. Brandon Nakashima recently broke into the top 20 after a rollicking hard court summer swing, and many commentators and fans are abuzz about Michael Zheng, who has yet to crack the top 100 but just graduated from Columbia University and is gearing up for his U.S. Open main-draw debut. Most important for Chang, his protégé, Learner Tien, is on the verge of a major milestone.

At the start of 2025, Tien was No. 121 in the world. In November, he won his first title at the Moselle Open at the age of 19, the youngest American ATP champion since Andy Roddick in 2002. As of this writing, Tien is No. 15. He has never won a main-draw first-round match at the Open, and he enters the tournament with few points to defend. This means that if he makes it to the second week — a very reasonable goal for a player of his talent — he could crack the top ten for the first time. The last Asian American man to rank that high was Chang himself, in 1997.

The ’90s were a heyday for American men’s tennis. Of the dominant U.S. quartet — Chang, Andre Agassi, Jim Courier, Pete Sampras, all born within 18 months of each other — Chang was the first to break through with a major title. But he was also the only one not to win another. Chang’s résumé, in the end, was more muted than his compatriots’, and he stood out in other ways, too. He was a star without the flash and fizzle of a supernova, even when he was hitting balls near the Great Wall of China in a Reebok ad. (Chang was the first Asian American to sign a multimillion-dollar sneaker-endorsement deal.) He was measured, private, steadfastly Christian. He didn’t curse. He didn’t scream at the umps. He loved his parents. As a player, he was between two modes: crafty counterpuncher who absorbed his opponents’ pace and aggressive shotmaker who harnessed his extreme athleticism to pounce at the right time. His brain’s capacity for split-second decision-making came through in his feet, and his speed was almost unmatched. In 1991, Chang famously ousted his dispositional opposite, John McEnroe, in the third round of the U.S. Open, in a match that lasted until the wee hours of the morning. Thirty-five years later, it’s still a sore spot for McEnroe. (“John hates when they bring that match up during U.S. Open time,” Chang said, chuckling.) Chang played

his last professional match at the 2003 Open; he retired with 34 ATP titles, including seven Masters 1000s, having earned more than \$19 million in prize money (roughly \$40 million today).

Now 54 and a father of three, Chang answers questions with the same easy manner he displayed during his 16 years on tour, as he ran the gauntlet of a never-ending circuit of press conferences. If his whirlwind experience as one of the best tennis players on the planet ever went to his head, it isn't evident in our exchanges. His voice is placid enough to narrate a nature podcast; he uses emojis in his texts. Chang is, in manner and speech, essentially the grown-up dad version of the kid who defied every expectation to win a Grand Slam title 37 years ago, a kid who, when asked the next day about how he'd spent his victory night, simply nodded and said he had enjoyed a quiet celebratory dinner.

Tien, born two years after Chang retired, was aware of Chang growing up, but not enough to idolize him. "I knew the name. And I'd read his book when I was younger because it was just around my house," said Tien over the phone on a day between his matches at the Cincinnati Open. Tien's parents, Khuong Dan Tien and Huyen Tien, are ethnic Chinese immigrants who were born in Vietnam and resettled in California after the war, so it made sense that Chang was a known quantity in their home. "But I'd never really watched him play," Tien said. "Obviously, you always hear about the French Open, but I didn't know much beyond that."

Chang and Tien met briefly in early 2025 at an ATP 250 tournament in Hong Kong; pleasantries were exchanged, but it wasn't until Tien's agent, Mats Merkel, a former tennis coach himself, reached out to Chang that things started moving. "Good on my agent," said Tien in an episode of the *Nothing Major* podcast. "He's good at his job." Merkel told me that he texted Chang and then cold-called him afterward to make the pitch. "I said, 'He's a great kid, and we're looking to get him to the next level. He could really benefit from someone like you,'" Merkel said. Chang's response: "Okay, that's good to know." And, as Merkel and Chang kept talking, they came to realize that, as fate would have it, Chang and Tien lived only 20 minutes apart from each other. A couple of months into their partnership, Tien's mother found a picture she'd taken that Tien had no recollection of. Chang and Tien had in fact crossed paths in Southern California years before their Hong Kong meet. In the photo, the pair stand in front of a wall of racquets and sneaker boxes. Chang is squatted next to the young prodigy, who beams at the camera with baby teeth and a buzz cut. Tien's older sister, Justice, grins in the background.

In Tien's game, there are clear echoes of his coach. Tien is just below-average height on tour at five-eleven (though well above Chang's five-eight), a deft counterpuncher with exceptional speed and a high tennis IQ. He doesn't have a traditionally big serve. He has near-perfect touch. I saw his doggedness in person at this year's Wimbledon. He needed a fourth-set medical time-out during a second-round match against Márton Fucsovics and, even after the intervention, looked ready to vomit. Still, he lunged after every ball, kneeling down between points to steady himself and then try again. The white compound of the court lines rubbed off on his knee. It being England, rain loomed overhead. A child began chanting for his opponent. Tien refused to quit. When Fucsovics finally won, he roared, flexed, and kissed his bicep. Tien went to the hospital.

Tien is very cerebral, Chang says — a quality he appreciates, “because I'm the same way.” There are core spiritual tenets that bond them — joy, trust, radical acceptance — but there is also Chang's use of forensic kinesiology to bring out the best in his player. “He leaves no stone unturned in terms of however small of a thing it might be,” said Tien. “If it gives me even a 0.001 percent chance more of winning, he'll make it happen. And as I've worked with him, he's gone above and beyond just to make sure I have the best chance of succeeding.” Broadcast footage shows that Chang watches his student with the visible intensity of a father at his child's soccer game. Chang's actual son, 11-year-old Micah, is a frequent fixture at their practices and matches. He picks up balls for Dad (“He's my little sidekick”) and absorbs tactical strategy. According to Chang, Micah actually knows Tien's game pretty well. The two play video games together on the road.



Photo: Alexander Aguiar