

# There's nothing to dread on court

## Strode has new look, same game

BY ROB KEYS

ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

FAYETTEVILLE — Well, it wasn't the hair.

Arkansas' Blake Strode proved that much last week, advancing to the quarterfinals of the D'Novo Men's All-American Tennis Championships in Tulsa to earn a berth in next month's ITA National Intercollegiate Indoor Championships in Virginia.

Strode, a senior and the Razorbacks' No. 1 singles player the past two seasons, had become recognizable as much for his dreadlocks-style hairdo as his thunderous forehand shots.

"Those dreadlocks were kind of part of his personality," Coach Robert Cox said of the gregarious Strode, a Bodenhamer Fellow majoring in international economics and Spanish.

One day last May, though, Strode said he woke up and decided to lop off the locks, which hadn't been cut in seven years. Strode unveiled his new look — at least to Cox — while watching Arkansas women's player Aurelija Miseviciute play in an NCAA Championships semifinal match at Tulsa.

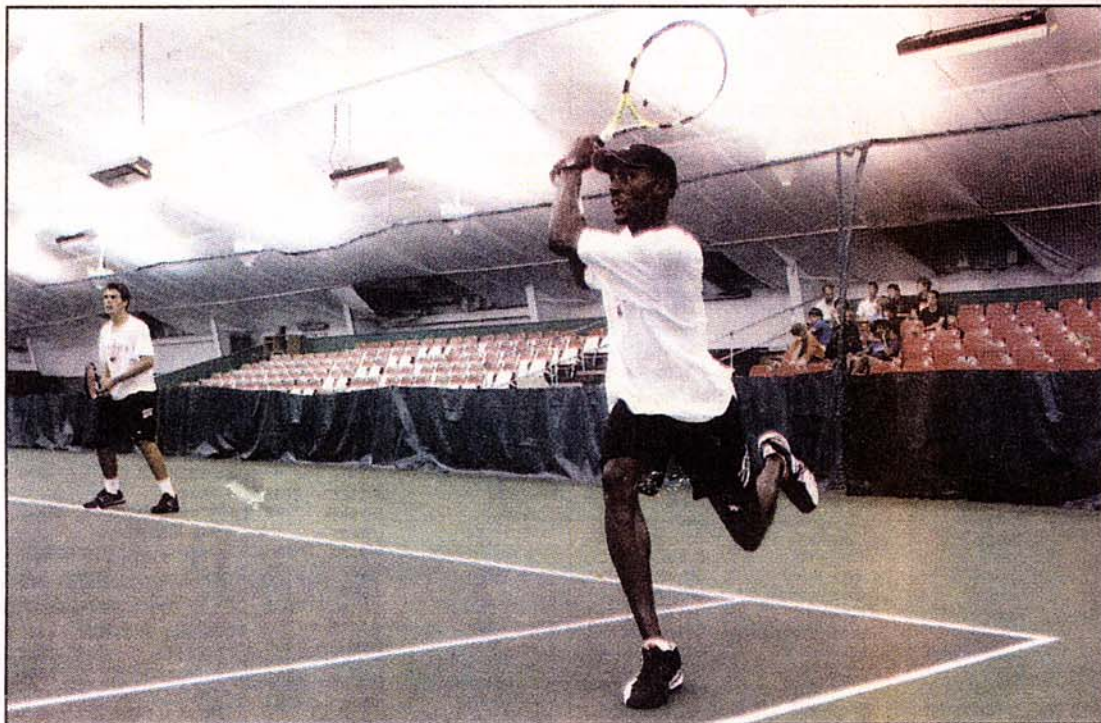
"I think the first thing he said was, 'What have you done?'" Strode said with a laugh.

If Strode's play last week is any indication, there was never any reason to worry about him losing any on-court strength, like the biblical Sampson. Strode, who was ranked 41st in the ITA's pre-season poll, defeated opponents ranked 40th, ninth and sixth before losing to eventual champion Michael Venus of LSU 6-4 in the third set.

Strode had competed in two other fall-season events, but he caught Cox somewhat by surprise with his showing last week.

"He had played OK in the other two events, but he kind of just beat everybody he was supposed to beat and then when he ran up against guys at his level or ranked higher, he didn't come through," Cox said. "So, it's good for him to start his senior season like this."

Now Strode will team with sophomore Matt Hogan in doubles competition at this week's



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JASON IVESTER

**Blake Strode of Arkansas** advanced to the quarterfinals of the D'Novo Men's All-American Tennis Championships in Tulsa last week by defeating three players ranked in the top 50.

### Blake Strode glance

**CLASS** Senior

**HEIGHT** 6-2

**WEIGHT** 175

**AGE** 21 (born July 9, 1987)

**HOMETOWN** St. Louis

**HIGH SCHOOL** Pattonville

**NOTEWORTHY** Earned a spot in next month's ITA National Intercollegiate Indoor Championships by advancing to the quarterfinals of the D'Novo Men's All-American Tennis Championships last week. ... Will play doubles with Matt Hogan at this week's ITA Central Regional Championships. ... Was a high-school All-American and Missouri state champion. ... Became the second player in Arkansas history to earn All-SEC honors as a freshman in 2006. ... Advanced to the second round of the NCAA Championships at the end of another All-SEC season as a sophomore in 2007. ... Was named SEC Co-Scholar Athlete of the Year last season.

ITA Central Regional Championships, which are being played at Arkansas' Billingsley Tennis Center and Dills Indoor Courts. The two must win this week's draw to advance to next month's ITA championship event.

"I've had a lot going on with tournaments and school just in the last couple of weeks. It kind of is a load off knowing that I've already qualified and I don't have to zone back into singles just yet," Strode said. "That's probably a good thing for me."

"But I definitely have something to play for. I want to go in doubles, too."

Strode, whose father, Lester, is the Chicago Cubs bullpen



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**Blake Strode (right)** and Matt Hogan will team up for Arkansas in doubles competition at the ITA Central Regional Championships at Arkansas' Billingsley Tennis Center and Dills Indoor Courts starting today.

### ITA Central Regional

**WHO** 70 players from 11 schools will compete in singles and doubles draws

**WHEN** Today-Monday

**WHERE** Billingsley Tennis Center and Dills Indoor Courts, Fayetteville

coach, showed promise as a freshman, then went 7-4 in SEC singles play as a sophomore. A handful of close losses last season left him with a 3-8 record, though, sparking a summer of intense work in fine-tuning his game.

"His biggest assets have always been that big forehand and his speed," Cox said. "He's very difficult to play because it's tough to get a free point on him."

So far this season, Cox said Strode is consistently hitting shots "deeper and heavier" and relying on a much improved serve.

"He's really popping it," Cox said. "He has a good a serve as anybody I've ever had."

Strode said the benefits of the improved serve were obvious last week.

"Especially on this level, your serve is hugely important," he said. "You can't beat these guys without serving well."

Strode has proved, though, he can beat them without his dreadlocks.

"I keep telling people it made me even faster, more aerodynamic," Strode said with a smile.