

# Meet the K-State Weilers from Austria

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**The Weilers stand near the Brooklyn Bridge in New York last summer. From left are Thomas, Adam, Anastasia and Alena.**

Courtesy photo

Wildcat fans, let me reintroduce you to Thomas Weiler, a long-time friend and former decathlete from K-State track and field.

Thomas competed under the coaching of Cliff Rovelto in the late 1990s and early 2000s. His wife, the former Alena Jecminkova from the Czech Republic, was a star on the K-State tennis team in the early 2000s.

Alena, also my good friend, was an excellent player with a mean serve and kill shot, and she also shined in doubles partnering with several teammates over her career in Manhattan, most notably with Andrea Cooper from Australia, the former Eva Novotna, whom I have previously interviewed for her assistance with a family from the Ukraine, Kathy Chuda and Petra Sedlmajerova, who were great players from that era as well.

Thomas and Alena are now married with two kids and reside in a small village just 15 minutes south of Vienna, Austria, called Hinterbrühl, with great bike trails in the forest starting just behind their home.

I have visited them a couple of times and even attended their wedding in Olomouc, Czech Republic, in 2004.

For this piece, we chatted about how they found each other in Manhattan, Kansas, and how they are still Wildcat fans and raising a potential K-State family halfway around the world in Central Europe. Unfortunately, we conducted this interview in virtual calls instead of meeting in person.

*Chapman: Thomas let's start with you; how did you end up at KSU?*

Weiler: I was 18 and in high school here in Austria and went to compete at the 1996 World Junior Championships in Sydney, Australia.

My friend from neighboring Hungary, Atilla Zsivocky, was older and also there competing. Coach (Cliff) Rovelto was there recruiting him for K-State. I also met the coach, and we were both at least interested in keeping in touch, but we didn't reconnect until a year later. After the European Juniors Championships in 1997 we had a conversation about the opportunity for me to go to the USA, go to college and compete in track. I had other scholarship offers from the US and of course the option to stay in Austria and go to university there, but, with great decathletes like Steve Fritz and Attila already being there, the Little Apple seemed like a great place for me to go. I took the required tests, passed, and decided to move to Manhattan and give K-State a try.

*Chapman: Alena, how about you?*

Jecminkova: I was in my third year of high school and was in Pardubice, hometown of Eva Novotna, at a big national tennis tournament. Coach Bietau was recruiting Kathy (Katerina Chuda) and Eva and when he contacted me, I told him I was not interested. The following year, after not playing for a while due to an injury, I was training for a comeback. I had heard good things from friends and others who were going to the US to play tennis and so I thought I might give it a try.

*Chapman: What were your first impressions of Manhattan?*

Weiler: I arrived late, in the second semester of 1998, so my first experience was a very cold day in January. I immediately thought that this was possibly a big mistake.

Jecminkova: We are used to cold weather in Austria and Czech Republic, but it was the wind that made it worse!

*Chapman: Alena, was your transition to Manhattan easier since there were several Czech players on the team and before you?*

Jecminkova: I definitely feel like that was an advantage. I also think it may have been a bit too comfortable in some respects, in that I probably didn't interact with more people outside of that Czech group. I think it must have been difficult for Coach Bietau, because it was easy for all of us to just speak in Czech a lot and the coach probably thought we were saying mean things about him or not focused on tennis, but we were actually just communicating as anyone would in English. Sometimes about tennis, sometimes just being silly. We would make him angry sometimes. I understand his frustration now looking back, but we were 18–20-year-old girls, what else should he have expected! (We all laugh).



**Alena Jecminkova (center) is flanked by her Kansas State tennis teammates, and their coaches Andres Gonzalez (left) and Steve Bietau (right).**

Courtesy photo

*Chapman: Alena, what was your best moment at KSU in tennis? Was it beating No. 5-ranked Michelle Dasso from Notre Dame in 2001?*

Jecminkova: Haha, that was a great moment, but there was a different one that I kind of felt bad about actually.

We were all sitting in Coach Bietau's office awaiting the seedings for the 2000 NCAA tournament because our number 1 player was Petra Sedlmajerova at the time and we were wanting to know where she would be playing, but instead of her name, they called my name instead. It was extremely exciting for me, but I felt bad for Petra.

*Chapman: You were the first Wildcat to get invited to NAAs three years in a row, 2000, 2001 and 2002!*

Jecminkova: Yes, but Petra did compete in the NCAA's later and after I left.

*Chapman: Thomas, what was your favorite KSU track and field moment?*

Weiler: It wasn't even on the track or in a meet, but rather on the bus ride to and from a meet at LSU. With 50 student athletes on a veeeery long bus trip, things can get pretty wild and funny. In fact, one of my teammates, high jumper Charles Burney, was leading the craziness, cracking jokes the whole time, something that would end up becoming his profession later on. But the best part of that trip was the crawfish (boil) cookout we had in Baton Rouge right after the track meet. They did not save on garlic, and it was so good and a delicious experience. That ride home on the bus though was one smelly noisy disaster! (Everyone laughed)

*Chapman: How did you two meet and what happened? I know both of you were at my house with the track and tennis teams and maybe together once for dinner, so I like to claim I was part of your introduction.*

Weiler: I will let you have that as your memory, but actually we met probably at the training table or at some event or place where all the athletes were at and just started talking.

Jecminkova: It was in Ahearn Fieldhouse in the training room and at international student parties. And one thing led to another... (Thomas and Alena both smiling big).

*Chapman: When did you know you would get married?*

Jecminkova: Thomas proposed to me in Manhattan City Park and after Thomas had finished his master's degree, we decided to move back to Austria together and start a new life after K-State.

*Chapman: How was your first few months living in Austria and adjusting to the new life, Alena?*

Jecminkova: I barely knew German as I had learned it only in high school and so I studied all day every day for the first few weeks. I took German classes. Even watching German soap operas and talk shows.

Weiler: Yes, we had always usually spoken English when together like now on this call, but we chose to speak only in German when we first moved back to Austria to help Alena adapt faster.



**Alena Weiler and her children Adam and Anastasia, together on the tennis court.**

Courtesy photo

*Chapman: Are your children both going to be K-State athletes?*

Jecminkova: Adam is a momma's boy and won't likely venture too far from home. He started playing soccer when he was little, then moved on to tennis where he became one of the best in his age group in Austria, and now he started practicing for track and field where he shows some talent also. Anastasia, on the other hand, is really adventurous. I would not be surprised if she would want to explore the world when she gets older.

Weiler: Adam's tennis is really good, and now he has started practicing and competing in track. Adam is now 15 and is already 6 ft tall! He is growing like me at this age.

Jecminkova: Yes, and Thomas is helping to coach at his track club.

Weiler: They found out about my past as a decathlete and now asked me to be a coach.

Jecminkova: Yes, and Adam is still good enough at tennis that he can have this skill for the rest of his life. Anastasia is 11 years old and plays tennis on a high level and also does gymnastics, ... or what is the way to say that? (Alena looks at Thomas)

Weiler: Rhythmic gymnastics, you know with the ball and ribbon on a stick.

*Chapman: Do you both follow K-State sports now?*

(Alena shakes her head, no)

Weiler: We don't follow the tennis team too much, maybe some track but definitely and mostly football and basketball. Or if someone we know posts something on social media.



**Attila Zsivocky, left, and Thomas Weiler, right, ghosting through Kansas State's Ahearn Fieldhouse during practice in 1998.**

Courtesy photo

*Chapman: Thomas, your thoughts on the retirement of Cliff?*

Weiler: Cliff leaves a great legacy! It is not just the name on the new indoor track in Manhattan, or the titles that his athletes won, nationally and internationally. He was a student of the sport, and an even better teacher. Many of his former athletes have gone on to become excellent coaches themselves and they frequently meet at international competitions with their athletes from various countries. Just to name a few decathletes from my time at K-State, who are now coaching on an elite level: Attila is now coaching excellent Hungarian athletes in Budapest, Josef Karas is an excellent coach in the Czech

Republic with long jumpers and decathletes, and Pat Pyle had excellent success with high jump coaching! In my view you do not just measure a great coach by the medals that he won with his athletes (which he definitely achieved), but also by transferring the right way to be a great athlete and further on, the right way to be a good coach. He was leading by example, and if you are around such good people like him long enough, it has a positive impact on you!

*Chapman: Do you plan to visit Manhattan again?*

Jecminkova: It's been so long, but we have talked about it. We all like to travel a lot, and during the last years we explored more of Europe, Africa, and Asia, and also visited New York a few times. We would like to return to Manhattan at some point with Adam and Anastasia to show them where we spent such an important part of our lives.

*Chapman: What are you doing now professionally?*

Weiler: I have always worked in finance, which was my degree. These days I am a Finance Director for DS Smith, which was recently acquired by US-based International Paper.

Jecminkova: I am with Austrian Airlines where I have been for over 20 years. After many years in passenger services at the Vienna airport I now work in the corporate office working on staff scheduling. I was ready for the change and am really happy.

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