

Ray Krueger

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# 45-LOVE

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My Yearlong Quest to Fulfill a Lifelong  
Dream in the Sport of Tennis



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By Ray Krueger

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# Chapter 1

Some people never find a purpose in life. I was lucky. It only took me 17 years to find a sport that would turn into my obsession.

But in a sport where parents hang balls over cribs so infants can develop hand-eye coordination, waiting 17 years to take up tennis seems hopelessly late.

For me, it could not come earlier.

My mother detested all sports. Perhaps it was lingering hatred of my abusive alcoholic father, who I was told was a semi-professional soccer player in Germany.

Whatever the reason, sports was her number 1 “waste of time.”

Of course, I could not get enough of it.

I went from memorizing the back of baseball cards to creating my own sports statistics for every sport imaginable.

At age 8, I developed a formula for ranking boxers, skiers, racehorses and track stars. Team sports had wins and losses. In my 8-year-old mind, the individual sports needed to be organized, and I was up to the task.

It didn't make a difference if the sport was real or showbiz, as my system even worked for pro wrestlers.

But the system, with graded points for beating the top players and reward points for winning titles seemed best designed for tennis.

I grew up with lots of free time to pursue my sports obsession, which grew into writing small stories about the games I would watch on TV.

I was a latchkey kid before the term was invented. My mother would work nights, so I would come home, lock the door and retreat into my world of sports, statistics, reading and writing.

My mother was not around to stop me. And even when she realized what I was doing, she probably thought it was better than me being on the streets.

Little did she know that I had no desire to leave the house.

My father took off when I was 11, and I knew he was out there somewhere. And I didn't want to run into him, or anybody who might know him.

I wouldn't have to worry, as I would never see or hear from him again.

But my sports obsession was always as an observer, never as a participant.

The kid who played youth baseball and CYO basketball would grow into the world's most sports obsessed wanna be journalist.

But that kid also grew to be 275 pounds by age 16.

The teasing of that fat kid, made me retreat even more into the sports world of my own creation.

I took a year off from school, claiming respiratory allergies as an ailment that kept me home. It was true, but exaggerated.

The real reason was my fear of the outside world, or rather the world outside of my own mind.

But I knew I would have to go to school eventually. So I decided to lose weight. Eating got me fat, so I decided not eating would get me skinny. So I stopped eating.

I spent a summer break eating three meals a week. Those meals consisted of trips to McDonald's. It worked. I lost 100 pounds in two months. I am the only person who ever used McDonald's to lose weight.

I put most of it back on.

I had failed.

But my world of sports statistics was still there. And if I could not lose weight by not eating, I would find solace in my world.

In the late 70s and early 80s, the subject of ranking in tennis was contentious as systems and formulas were debated at the highest levels of the sport.

But in my mind it was already decided. And since I had that part of the game figured out, I figured playing the game would be just as easy.

My first racket was a Dunlop Maxply, which I bought at Herman's Sporting Goods in Rego Park, Queens.

But getting on a court would have required an opponent, and that was too big a step out of my world.

So I headed to the wall. It wasn't a traditional tennis backboard, but one of those ubiquitous handball walls in New York City.

That is where all the aggression of my childhood situation finally could come out. I would bang that ball into the wall with such force that it would come back at me faster than I could set up for the next shot.

It was not so much a tennis stroke I was developing as the flailings of a madman.

I was a 275-pound teenager beating up a wall with a ball.

On my second day at the wall I smashed the watch on my left wrist with the follow through of my racket.

But in my mind I was ready to make my way onto the court.

But where? Juniper Valley Park had eight hard courts. But it was too intimidating to head out with the "real tennis players."

Luckily, my high school, Christ the King, was forming a tennis team. Knowing the kids in my high school were not exactly the tennis type I figured they would not be world beaters. Was I ever right.

Four kids came out for tennis, three short of the minimum to field a team.

We had a fat kid (me), a skinny kid, and a kid from the debating team. The fourth kid seemed to know how to play but quit after seeing how bad we were.

Gary, the kid from the debating team, was a friend, who I helped out with research for his debates.

The only thing that is more dorky than being on the debating team in high school is to be a researcher for the debating team.

We got a book about tennis and proceeded to paint a tennis court in the school parking lot.

It was perfectly proportional, except the service lines extended into the doubles alley.

Our coach, a first-year gym teacher, was no tennis expert, and his qualifications probably consisted of getting us the book. Take that back, I think Gary found the book.

Seeing us eagerly painting the lines, he proclaimed, “I am expecting some hardware from this team.”

All three of us were new to tennis, but since I had spent so much time banging against the wall, I was confident of my ability.

I volunteered to play number 1 singles. But I still had some stokes to learn, like the backhand. And the serve.

I went to the back of the court and unleashed a killer serve. It went right into the box and skidded under the racket of one of my teammates. It was the best serve I would ever hit in my entire life.

“Hardware,” my coach exclaimed.

My next few serves were also bullets, but nowhere near the box.

But not to worry. I earned my number one spot.

Our first match was at a clay court tennis bubble across the street from Shea Stadium. I had never seen a clay court, let alone played on one.

There was also the matter of being four players short of a team.

A plan was devised in the athletic department:

If a football player missed a workout or a class they would have to play a match for a tennis team.

The plan was devised to keep the football team in line more than help the tennis team, but it worked for both teams.

After all, what better way to keep a football player out of trouble than to have them have to join the wimpy tennis team if they got out of line.

But we didn’t care. It let us field a team, at least until a football player decided he liked being on the tennis team more than playing football and joined us full-time.

But, at least at first, we had enough players to compete.

I took the court in the number 1 singles spot. Then came the warm up, and I experienced a first: my opponent hit a ball to my backhand.

The wall had never done that!

What could I do? I just let it go.

The match started and balls kept coming to my nonexistent backhand. I tried running around it. At least as much as a 275-pound kid in too-tight shorts could

do.

Finally I just would set up on the left side of the court. That way I would have to get forehands. It worked.

But obviously it involved a lot of running. But for a fat kid I could move a little bit. Stopping was another matter.

After losing the first set 6-0, I was determined to get to every ball.

But that is where my lack of experience on clay would hurt me. I ran down a ball to my right and turned back around to try to run down the next shot. I tried to dive for the ball on my backhand. I missed it but slipped on the line as I tried to change directions. I went sliding across the lines, the nails holding down the lines ripping the skin along the right side of my body.

Half my body was a mess of red clay and blood. I also split my pants.

At that point I made the decision that would start me on the journey that would last a lifetime.

I got up, and decided I would never walk away from this game, no matter what.

I kept playing.

I took my beating, as did my teammates. We lost that day, and every day.

We never won a match all season. We never won a set. I am not sure if any of us even won a game. I know I didn't.

The football players would stop coming, and our team would be a patchwork of people we would pick up to play matches.

The number one team in the borough was St. Francis Prep. Not only did they have a full team, but they had a B team as well.

We were a player short. The coach of the other team knew how bad we were. So he let our coach play doubles for us. He still could not help us win a set.

I was still playing number 1 singles. But my opponent was a singles player from their B team, who they gave an easy match to so he could get experience.

By that time, I had developed a bit of a backhand, but it was even more inconsistent than my wild forehand.

But I was tired of losing. And it was safe to say I was scary on the court. I was 275 pounds, and moved like a truck without brakes. If anything got in my



way it wouldn't be pretty.

That theory was tested for the first time as I was playing on the third court at Juniper Valley Park, our home court. A garbage can was behind the court.

A ball was hit to my right and all that stood between me and the ball was that can. I decided if I couldn't hit the ball, I would take out the can. And that is what I did. Garbage flew everywhere. Bees came flying out.

A strange thing happened. Everyone watching, even players on the other team cheered. That was the first positive reinforcement I ever received from strangers.

If I wasn't hooked on this sport before, I was now.

I ran after every ball, crashing into fences, players on the next court, the net, everything. I still didn't win a game, but the crowd was drawn to that fat kid in the too-tight shorts.

The next match I would debut a new maneuver, falling over the net chasing a drop shot, and doing a full flip landing on the other side and bouncing back up again

That is when I came up with the term full-contact tennis.

My act was a big hit at Juniper, but our last match of the year was at the National Tennis Center, where the U.S. Open was played.

There I was, on Court 16 at the National Tennis Center, about to play the top player on the St. Francis Prep tennis team, Walter Giacometti.

Walter was the best player in Queens and would go on to the next year to be the only U.S. born player to play on the St. John's University tennis team.

The court at the National Tennis Center seemed huge to me. No way to crash into the fence here.

And no way I could even come close to do anything better than my usual 6-0, 6-0 loss. But I was determined to leave a piece of myself on the court. So I did like I did at the Shea Stadium indoor clay courts. I took a slide/dive on the hard court. Only this time it was intentional.

I came up with only a scrape along my side, but the skid on the court was eight inches long.

I had left my mark on WTC.

There was a rule at my high school: Every team received three awards at the year-end sports banquet.

But how do give three awards to a tennis team that went an entire season without winning a match.

They came up with a set of awards unique to our team: One guy got a trophy for attendance, another one got his for academic achievement (Gary) and I received the final award for “intensity and emotion.”

I knew what I could bring to the game.

Now I just needed to learn how to play.

# Chapter 2

So I went back to Juniper.

I showed up and sat on a bench near the courts. Eventually somebody would ask me to play. In those days, people weren't so scheduled and would just show up without an opponent. But I still would spend a lot of time on that park bench waiting for a game.

Soon I found out that the earlier I would get there the older the players were and the better chance I would have to be competitive.

I would be the fourth for doubles on a court with three 80-year olds. That would go from 6:30 in the morning until 11. Then the singles players would come. I would go with them for the rest of the afternoon. Then the people would come in after work and I went with them until dark.

I spent my summers there throughout college. That is where I was forced to learn topspin. There was something great about hitting something that doesn't hit back so every ball I hit as hard as I could.

Not having any coaching, I figured out if I gripped the racket with my palm over to the right I could keep the ball in the court and still swing hard. I developed a semi-Western forehand grip without any coaching, or any clue.

If I hit the ball with two hands on my backhand I could also keep the ball on the court and swing hard.

Since those days I had a semi-Western forehand and a two-handed backhand.

The serve and the volley would come later— much later. And would also leave periodically.

Juniper had some decent players, but more than anything else it had characters.

There was the one-armed man who held the ball and the racket while tossing his serve in one motion; there was the former paddleball player who switched hands so he did not have a backhand; the guy who would deal drugs from his racket bag (actually I think we had a few of those guys); the guy who smashed two and three rackets a day; Gary the garbage man, Crazy Joe, John the cop, Lenny the fisherman, Danny the smoker, the mailman with hemorrhoid problems and California Freddie.

California Freddie, who also worked for the Post Office, took on the roll as the coach of the group. I was never sure what his coaching credentials were other than that he was from California.

He also seemed to know a lot about technique and was a great first set player. He would tire in the second set. I don't think he ever played a third.

Eventually, I would move to New Jersey for work and leave Juniper behind. But Juniper found me more than 15 years later.

By then, I had become obsessed with being in the best shape I could be. I had learned from my cramping in my first tournament at Juniper.

I was a regular at the Saddlebrook Resort, which was home of the Harry Hopman Tennis Academy. Pros such as Martina Hingis, Pete Sampras, James Blake and Justine Henin were based at Saddlebrook. There was a highly regarded junior development academy. And an adult academy called "ultra intense" by Tennis Magazine.

The adult academy would go two and a half hours in the morning, two and a half hours in the afternoon and then, if you still wanted more tennis, they would offer you a match against one of the juniors. I of course, would always be up for everything. And I had come a long way from my days of 275 pounds.

I was 175 pounds and the only flab I had left was the leftover skin from my fat days.

It was at least 10 years since I had seen or talked to anyone from Juniper.

One warm day after nine hours of tennis I was dragging myself back to my room, which was on the other side of the resort. A car whizzed by. Then it stopped. And slowly backed up. Coming from a tough area of New York City,

and forgetting I was in a gated resort, I imagined the worst. I was thinking carjacking, even though I wasn't the one in the car.

The window came down. "Honk, if you love Juniper," a familiar voice called out. It was California Freddie. In the car with him was another man and a little girl.

"We just flew in," he said. "She is great. They are considering taking her here." He was right. Anna Tatishvili was great.

She showed up at Juniper with her father at age 8 already with an advanced game, after leaving Soviet Georgia.

Freddie became her de facto coach along with Alex Rodriguez, who had become the first real pro Juniper ever had, and had given me my first tennis lesson when I was in my late 20s right after I had cramped in the tournament.

But Freddie knew his limitations and was trying to give the girl the best shot at the big-time. They looked at Saddlebrook. They looked at the Bolleteiri Academy. They eventually chose the Chris Evert Academy.

But talented teenagers are common in tennis, and few of them ever make it.

Freddie believed in Anna. And I wanted to see her succeed. Or at least get the kind of chance I never had in the sport.

I kept in touch with Freddie as Anna made her way through the juniors, but the next time I saw her was in the U.S. Open junior championships. She was playing doubles with her partner, Caroline Wozniacki.

Then injuries put her back and I lost touch with Freddie.

Until an August day when my phone rang.

"We are a couple of matches from the show," Freddie yelled into the phone. Anna was in the qualifying tournament for the main draw of the U.S. Open. But she lost before making the main draw. The next year she lost again in the qualies.

Anna is still trying to make it on the women's tour. But she won rounds in the main draws of the French Open and Wimbledon in 2011. Her highest ranking is 82nd in the world.

My own ranking (and obsession with it) was already in high gear.

My late 20s and early 30s were spent entering every tournament. My life revolved around trying to create a career in journalism and getting a good tennis ranking. And a freelance lifestyle and underemployment only fueled my tennis lifestyle.

One year I entered 28 tournaments. But that didn't mean I played hundreds of tournament matches. I wasn't that good. I lost a lot of first round matches. Basically the only time I won a match was when I played a beginner or non-tournament player.

The ranking system turned me into my opponents' biggest fan. Because in those days your ranking was determined by who you beat and who you lost to. So if the person you beat would beat someone else you would get credit for that win. "Indirect" wins were what earned you your ranking.

Rankings were determined by ranking coordinators who would arrange index cards on a desk at the end of the year.

My highest ranking in the open division was 28th in the East. I think less than 40 players were ranked that year. And it wasn't getting any better. Every year a new crop of kids came into the open division. Even though my game was developing I still didn't have a reliable serve or volley and I could not compete with them.

I had only one hope — age group tournaments. I started looking forward to the 35 and overs.

But work was getting in the way.

I had taken my first real full-time job, at the Jersey Journal as an associate sports editor. I loved the excitement of journalism more than tennis. My tennis felt like my job while my job was where I had my fun. I was called a workaholic, but I loved my work so much that the term seemed demeaning and incorrect.

Somehow I still managed to play tennis almost every day. I shoveled courts to play in the winter as I didn't make enough money to pay for indoor court time. Winter tournaments were a great deal. It cost \$25 an hour for indoor court time back then and it would cost \$25 to enter a tournament, which would guarantee at least one two-hour match and sometimes more.

My work/tennis obsession led to one failed relationship after another, but I didn't really care. One girlfriend convinced me to see a psychologist to discuss my problems. We talked weekly about the stress I was feeling about my work schedule getting in the way of the tournaments I would need to play to earn a ranking.

By the time I got on the court I was so nervous I could hardly play. I put so much into preparations and adjusting my schedule that the thought of actually being on the court was paralyzing.

The thought process went something like this: You arrange your entire life to play in this tournament so you better do well or your life is a waste. And if you don't do well that makes the next tournament even more important. And so on.

In addition, I just wasn't very good. I didn't have a volley and my serve would always undermine my game. I entered a 35 and over tournament in Brooklyn and my first round opponent was none other than Walter Giacometti.

Well, at least I am guaranteed a good practice partner for as long as I can stay out there. No pressure for this one. I broke him in the first game and held my serve in the second. And then I broke him in the third. Wow. I was beating the top player in New York City tennis! It just took me 20 years to catch up to him. This is how I planned it.

All I had to do was keep what I was doing. Double fault. OK, no big deal. Double fault. Keep it together you idiot. Double fault. You are blowing the chance for your biggest win in tennis! Double fault.

I have never been a person to throw rackets and can not fully explain what happened next.

All I remember is HEARING a cracking sound. My racket was sitting under the net. I do not remember throwing it. And it is not time that has dulled my memory. I walked to the net not knowing how my racket had traveled there and how it had become a mangled mess. I was shaking. I was no longer angry at myself for either hitting four consecutive double faults or for smashing my racket. I was scared at not remembering throwing my racket. I had trouble catching my breath as I got another racket.

“Are you OK?” Giacometti asked. “Yes,” I said, lying. I didn’t win another game.

I warily told the story to the shrink, fearing I may be institutionalized for my moment of involuntary temporary insanity. He just laughed and told me not to worry about it. I wasn’t sure if that was more a commentary about my game (even though he had never seen me play) or my mental state.

So I moved onto the next tournament, trying not to think about what I had done. I could not stop thinking about my serve. I moved to an abbreviated backswing to lessen the moving parts. It seemed to work a little. It didn’t help me hit aces, but it did help me avoid the double faults.

And take away the double faults and I wasn’t that bad at this point. I was in shape. And I could run fast and forever. And the hotter it was the better I felt. Better yet, that was getting to be my reputation on the Eastern circuit.

Year after year you run into a lot of the same players at these tournaments and eventually you get a reputation. And mine was born when Ron Rebhuhn, a tournament director who runs monthly events in New York was asked what type of player I was by another tournament player. “He is a wall!” he screamed.

But I still wasn’t winning so many matches, especially against good players. But I wasn’t giving up.

I was playing one of Rebhuhn’s events, the North Shore 35s in Bayside, Queens. It was hot and humid and on slow Har-Tru courts.

I faced Todd Jablonsky in the first round. He was a good all-court player who whenever he would get tight would serve and volley. I lived off my return. But I had faced him three times, losing each time. He was in shape, and warmed up by doing a complete split before the match, which was intimidating as hell, but I was determined to not beat myself. I would make it into a grind. I won the first set 6-1, as he tried to be too aggressive from the backcourt. He adjusted his game and won the second set 6-3.

Now the fun was about to start. I loved playing Todd because it was such a great test of tennis and it was not in his DNA to cheat. There wasn’t a nicer guy on or off the court.



He was serving and volleying and I was running down his first volleys and hitting winners. When I served we got into 10 to 15 stroke rallies. It was on one of those rallies where I got into one of the strangest arguments ever on a tennis court. He hit a ball that looked like it just hit the back edge of the baseline. I was about to call it out but realized it was good. From across the court he insisted his shot was out. I said it was good. He said it “felt out.” I told him it looked good. I realized the preposterousness of the situation. We were both arguing against ourselves. Finally, I had enough. “The ball was in and if you keep disagreeing with me I am coming across the net to kick your ass,” I said. He started laughing. I wasn’t sure if he was laughing at the bizarre nature of our argument or the thought of me actually taking him in a fight, but he yielded to my call and we went on.

Nevertheless, the argument loosened me up and I took the next set 6-3.

It was a small tournament, so I was in the semifinal. My opponent: Walter Giacometti.

It was the first time I had seen him since my temporary insanity racket smash. I was determined to make it a match. The fact that it was 95 degrees and humid and Walter was not as slim as he was in high school only made me more determined.

I got off to a great start, holding my serve the entire set and winning 7-5 in an hour-long battle. I stayed on serve the second set and ended up in a tiebreaker. I took a 4-1 lead, when it started to pour rain.

After a two and a half hour rain delay we were out there again and it was relatively cold and windy. And I immediately hit my first two double faults of the match as I was getting close to closing it out. I lost the tiebreaker, 7-5.

I was furious, but more at the weather turning on me than my own mistakes. That may not be logical, but in my case it probably made it easier for me to hold it together. After the rain, the courts were playing even slower and we both were exceedingly cautious leading to even longer points. He wasn’t appearing to tire, but my friend was coming back.

The sun re-emerged. It went from 95 degrees to 65 degrees and was heading back to 85 degrees. He started getting tired. I just kept retrieving. There were a

couple of more double faults in key points, but I kept it together long enough to win 6-4.

“He got a lot better,” Giacometti graciously told Rebhuhn as we gave in our scores. I don’t now how long we had been on court but from the time I arrived early to the courts to warm up until the time I left I had been at those Bayside courts for 12 hours.

And I would be coming back to play the final tomorrow.

My opponent would be Ken Wagner, a skinny player I had played and lost easily to a couple of times indoors in winter tournaments. But these were my conditions. I remembered him mentioning some health issues that made him leery of playing in the heat when we had taken the subway home together from a tournament the previous winter. I would have to try to make him suffer.

It was a great match. A lot of players in the tournament and club members who had been around stopped and sat on a small hill behind the courts to watch. I felt like a real tennis player. The crowd did not make me feel nervous, but rather gave me energy. I went up 4-2 in the first set. The points were long and competitive. And I was enjoying the battle, something I had always done in practice, but never in tournaments.

I was serving at 40-30 when we had another long rally. He hit a ball a couple inches long. As soon as I called it out he started screaming how the ball was in and how he wasn’t going to let me get away with cheating. I was stunned. I told him the ball was two inches out and he could come over to my side of the net (a major no-no) if he wanted to see the mark. I was angry. He just walked to the bench and sat down. The people watching the match from the hill on the other side behind the court glared at me as if I was a cheater.

I sat next to him on the bench and said calmly, “The ball was out. There is a clear mark behind the baseline and there is no other mark around there to confuse it with.”

He whispered, “I know the ball was out,” with a smile in his voice. I was knocked off guard. I immediately thought it was a show to get the spectators on his side. Or maybe he was trying to rattle me, which he did. Or maybe.... I sat

there and tried to figure it out as he got up and went to the other side. I lost the set 7-5, hardly realizing what was happening.

Did he intentionally do a number on me? I never saw him again.

I reached the top 10 in the 35s in the East more by will than by ability. Play enough tournaments you will eventually get a win that means something. By then the index cards had been replaced by computers and an even bigger change was coming: Points per round.

# Chapter 3

In an attempt to get players to play more tournaments the United States Tennis Association decided to go from a results-based formula to a formula based on the round players reached in tournaments.

The system was first used in National tournaments. And just so happened I was about to turn 40 and take a serious shot at getting a national ranking.

The points available would be weighted. Winning a National tournament would be worth 1,000 points, Category II tournaments would be worth 500 points, a Sectional championship worth 250 and a regular local tournament would be worth 125. And each round won would get you a proportional amount of points. At nationals there would also be a lot of points available for winning back draw tournaments.

The back draw is where you would go after you lose in the main tournament. If you were eliminated anywhere short of the semis you would go into the back draw. The winner of the back draw would get the fifth most points in the event. Making the semis of the back draw would give you the equivalent of finishing in the top eight in the tournament, a whopping 320 points.

The problem for most of the players is they didn't know the change had been made to point per round. Or they hadn't spent the time to parse out all the ramifications.

I had. And carefully planned out my schedule.

There are national championships in four divisions: Indoors, Hard, Grass and Clay. Since the hard court championships were in California and traditionally drew a field of monsters I skipped that one, but played all the rest and many more sectionals and locals.

My first big tournament that year was the National Indoors in Park City Utah in early April.

I had never played before at extreme altitude and did everything I could to prepare. Iron pills, and lots of cardio. I arrived three days early. I was as ready as anybody could be who did not know what they were getting into.

My first practice session was an adventure. I stood at the service line and tried to feed my partner for a game of mini tennis. The ball flew into the back wall on a fly. My partner, who had just flown in from Florida and was also unfamiliar with the altitude just looked at me and laughed. Even though we were using the high altitude balls it still took a lot of getting used to. The ball flew, and bounced very high.

I made a discovery. Every ball needed to be hit with extreme topspin just to keep the ball on the court, and the high bounce would give your opponent trouble.

The big servers had a huge advantage, as long as they could keep the ball in the court. But fitness would be at a premium. I sat down after a half hour of hitting and was dizzy. But that was it. I was able to go back out and shake it off. That was the only time I felt effects from the altitude. Other players either weren't in as good of shape or couldn't deal with the conditions. They struggled breathing.

My first round match was against a local who beat me 6-1, 6-1. I was off to the back draw. I would need a win to come home with any points.

My opponent in the back draw was a guy I had practiced with a couple of years earlier at a tournament in Florida.

"I am not playing against you in this altitude," he said. "I will have a heart attack." He decided to default the back draw match to concentrate on the doubles. I wanted to play, but was glad to have the win — and the points.

It was also cool to "earn" a win on my reputation for being in shape: a reputational default.

My next match was against a big serve and volleyer. I would have to hold my serve and hope to get a break somewhere along the line. Luckily, the altitude was helping my serve. And my opponent, like many big servers did not have a great

return. We went to a first set tiebreaker, before I was able to hit some passing shots to take the set. I won the second set 6-4 as my opponent tired. More points.

My opponent in the next round just didn't show up. He left after losing in the main draw and doubles. I was in the semifinals of the back draw and had 320 points. Even though I would lose my next match 6-1, 6-1, I had earned enough points to be in the top ten in the country in the points race in the over 40 national rankings.

I came home and had moderate success in local tournaments. But the weather was getting warmer and I was hoping my results would get better.

I entered an Eastern Sectional in June. I made it through my first two matches relatively easily and faced someone in the final I did not know, Rob Rios.

But I certainly knew of him. He rarely played tournaments but when he did his results were very impressive. He also ran the tennis facility where one of my co-workers played in Connecticut.

My old worries about getting the time off I needed to play tournaments had not ended. If anything they had gotten worse. Everything was based on a complicated system mixing seniority and first come, first served.

I needed to win this match to justify this obsession to the people I worked with on my job.

And I did. I played over my head and prevailed. But it wasn't really a Sectional. The tournament was only a local but because the Eastern computers had a glitch it counted as a Sectional championship for ranking points.

It was worth 250 points.

My next "major" was the National grass courts in Providence, R.I.

I have had a love-hate relationship with grass. My first year playing the National grass court 35s I lost 6-0, 6-0 in the first round. I was so desperate I tried to serve and volley for the first time in a real match. The first point I employed that strategy the return went between my legs. The second time I heard a thud as I went to hit the volley. I missed the shot but realized I had hit my shin with the racket when I saw a lump rise to the size of a golf ball.

The next year, aided by a very fortunate draw I won two rounds and made the round of 16.

This time I lost in the first round 6-0, 6-1. I went back to the back draw, where my return helped me beat a local 6-3, 6-1. My next match was against Chris Canfield, who is built like a fullback and hits the ball as hard. I won the first set 6-3, before he got his range and won the second set 6-3. He finished me off with a 10-4 win in the super tiebreaker that they played instead of the third set. It was very hot, and if we would have had a full set I might have pulled it out. Canfield said he would have been in trouble if we had played a regular third set. Still I earned 160 points.

The year was setting up to be very good. I had some more decent results in local tournaments. The final ranking would be determined by the best-of-five point results for the year so I was in good shape. But I still needed another large point output from a Sectional championship.

Knowing that, I faced Brian Lutz in the final of the Upper Manhattan Championship at the indoor hard courts at Columbia University. The cushioned courts were not outrageously fast like other indoor hard courts. They were cushioned, which takes the skid out of the ball.

More importantly, the courts are not air conditioned. I could try to toast my opponent.

Lutz, who operates [Tennistip.com](http://Tennistip.com), is a teaching pro with flawless strokes. I would have to wear him down. I got off to a fast start and took the first set 6-4, before his superior game took over the second set 6-1. But he appeared to tire in the heat of the third set so I was able to prevail 6-4, and win another 250 points.

My last major of the year was the jewel of the schedule, the National clay courts in Savannah, Ga. The tournament is run like a professional tour event with amazing hospitality, a beautiful setting and scores of local residents coming out to see the matches. All the players raved about the event.

I almost didn't find out what the fuss was about. I decided to drive to Savannah. Airport connections seemed complicated and an advantage of driving is being able to drive home and not being a slave to the airline schedules and penalty fees. But as I reached South Carolina, a buzzer went off in my 1990 Volkswagen. Maybe it needed oil. I stopped in a gas station. They couldn't

figure out the buzzer. And the car was working so I kept driving. But the car just didn't feel right. Still, I made it to Savannah.

At my first match a woman came to the court and asked if I needed anything: Towels? Gatorade? Wow. Now I know how the pros feel. I won my first round match.

My second round match was a nice lesson. I lost to Olivier Loren, a former tour player from France. It was 6-0, 6-0. But it was a lot of fun. I ran down so many balls and made him hit so many winners to get a point that a crowd had gathered cheering for me as I put on a show of retrieving. He won the match, but I got the cheers. I lost my consolation match 6-3, 6-0, and then had to get back in my car and drive home. The buzzer was still blaring.

I was afraid to stop for anything but gas and drove the entire length home to NY over the next 16 hours. The car got me home, but the buzzer was still blaring. I got home, and went out to practice the next day. I had to stop after 15 minutes as my heart was racing and hands shaking. I went to a neurologist I felt so bad.

I visited my regular mechanic and he reached under the hood and turned off the buzzer. The neurologist said there was nothing wrong with me. The diagnosis: stress by buzzer, and maybe stress by points chasing.

My last tournament of the year was the last Sectional, this time indoors where I wouldn't have the benefit of the heat. My quarterfinal opponent: Walter Giacometti. I won 6-4 in the third to get my 132 points.

I would finish the year with 1,264 points and end up 13th in the country. But I knew it was a sham. Most of the other players did not know the system or at least have the opportunity to play the system like I had. And I had earned Sectional points for winning a tournament that should have been counted as a local. So I could not be all that proud of my accomplishment.

I only played the Eastern circuit tournaments the next few years and got as high as Top 5 in the East in the 40s, as I continued to think about my Top 15 ranking the year I played nationals.

I would have to go on the national circuit again when I turned 45. Just to see whether I could match the ranking in the 40s. Only this time my results would,



for better or worse, be more legitimate.

# Chapter 4

And while my tennis life was looking up as I turned 45 my real life was getting messy. I had just been married, bought and renovated an apartment, and moved in on November 9.

On November 12 the call came. My department at the New York Times was being eliminated, or at least me and 28 of the co-workers in my department were being eliminated.

Our jobs were being shipped off to Gainesville, Fla.

I would likely be unemployed in a few months. It was like finding out you only had a few months to live. I felt like I had let down my new wife, her family and myself.

All I had left was tennis, which might soon be my profession. I always told people that if things got bad I could always give lessons in the park. And now the prospects of teaching backhands to 90-year-old women became a viable option. Or at least writing about tennis.

I started chronicling my experiences in the game.

Aside from my wife tennis was the only thing I had left.

# Chapter 5

Tennis seems to draw the Type A Master of the Universe Type.

My first tournament in the 45s was a local non-Sectional tournament. The lowest of the low on the points scale. But it meshed well with my work schedule, and most importantly was at Randalls Island, which didn't seem to draw the top players. So the potential for easy points was there, and nothing draws me to a tournament more than the prospects of easy points.

I checked the names of the players. No monsters entered as of a day before the deadline.

But I checked the names anyway. Most had no record of playing any USTA tournaments. So I ran them through Google. There was limited information for all — except one.

Jeff Zucker was the name.

There was a Jeff Zucker who was in charge of NBC Universal. He couldn't be playing in a nothing 45 and over tournament. So I did some more research. Turns out the NBC Zucker played No. 1 singles for his high school in Miami and still had spirited tennis matches out in the Hamptons. My God, I was going to be playing a tennis match with one of the most powerful men in media.

It was not lost on this soon to be unemployed editor that there might be a professional opportunity in this first round match.

But hold on. It is not like he is going to recognize the guy grunting on the other side of the court is the most brilliant media mind (next to him, of course).

But I sure wanted him to know what I could do on a tennis court.

So I put on my Saddlebrook t-shirt with its “Work Hard, Play Harder” message on the back (subtle I know).

I arrived two hours early, which is typical of me, especially when I am not familiar with a facility.

Randalls Island had just opened a new tennis facility and it was quite a complex. Ten clay courts. Ten hard courts. And an upstairs viewing area.

As I walked in it felt like I was at the wrong tournament. They were running a boys 12 and under on the clay and a girls 12 and under on the hard. Kids were running around everywhere. The tournament sign-in area was in a converted classroom with two ping pong tables and dozens of kids.

I heard the tournament director call out for a Zucker in the 12 and under boys tournament. His son?

Well, since I saw a picture of Zucker and didn't see him around the young Zucker taking the court, maybe there was no relation. I had known another Zucker in my life. Harvey Zucker was the sports editor when I was with the Jersey Journal, so I tried to put it out of my mind.

My match was set for 9 p.m. I killed time watching the junior matches, reading, and looking for any sign of Jeff Zucker.

Just as 9 o'clock rolled around I saw him. Already in shorts he marched into the ping-pong room. He marched out again. He looked upset. He disappeared and then reappeared. Then he marched out of the room again. Was he stressed out because he was five minutes late? There are tournament directors who will default you for that so it wasn't outlandish. But this tournament director seemed pretty cool and was so busy dealing with the junior brigade to worry about one of the 45 year old guys showing up a couple minutes late.

Soon the tournament director emerged.

He said my opponent was defaulting!

He explained that Zucker left his rackets there and they weren't strung so he decided not to play. Huh? He didn't have a racket? One of the Masters of Media didn't have a racket? And he couldn't just get one in the pro shop? Wow.

The tournament director explained that there was a mixup in the pro shop and apparently the rackets never got strung.

I looked around for Zucker. I was going to let him use one of my rackets. Now I really wanted to play him!

Sure he would be at a disadvantage, but hey, when would I get this chance again. But I couldn't find him and the tournament director approached me to offer a practice match against one the guys in the 35 and over draw who also got a default.

I was shocked. And I figured, what would I do if I were in Zucker's shoes? I would raise hell at my rackets not being strung. But then I would decide to borrow one and play anyway.

Hey, then I had an excuse if I lost, right?

Well, I was right. Just as I was about to start hitting with the other guy, the tournament director came running up to me. Zucker had changed his mind. The match was on again.

I met him, shook his hand and we headed out to Court 20. But not before taking a detour. He looked through the door of another bubble to see if a different court was available. Hmmm. What could that be about?

I said I was following him because this was my first time there. He said he was a member. I told him I had just moved to the Upper West Side and wasn't familiar with the club. He asked me where I had lived. I told him New Jersey, the Bronx and since I just got married and my wife wanted to be in Manhattan I had just moved to the Upper West Side,

He said "congratulations" on just getting married.

I told him I appreciated him playing because I had heard about his racket problems and I was glad I was getting a chance to play and not getting a default. He sort of smiled and said "I'm glad."

The warm up wasn't that intense. It looked like he was trying not to move around too much. Was he carrying an injury? I had read in one of his profiles that he had one knee surgery and needed to get another one. I had also read that he had won a battle with cancer so I had a lot of respect for him being out there. But what was I getting here?

He had the sweetest forehand you would ever see. Perfect form. Looked effortless. Had much more power than the effort he seemed to put in. But he just sort of poked/sliced his backhand so maybe that was the weakness. Then we took

volleys. Almost all of his volleys went long. He looked at his racket and mumbled his way back to baseline.

His serve was sweet effortless as well. But it wasn't breaking any highway laws (well under the speed limit). Maybe he would crank it up in the match.

He didn't. That was all there was. A beautiful swing but no MPH. His second serve was so bad it was good. It had to be about 20 mph.

And he barely showed up for the first set. He didn't run for balls he might have chased down. He looked distracted. He spent time looking over at the next court. He mumbled about his racket. But he did hit the occasional forehand winner or set-up shot that got him a couple of games. But I won 6-2.

His serve was driving me crazy. It was like I was dozing off waiting for a bus.

In the second set my own lack of footwork would catch up to me. We exchanged hold service games and he was up 3-2 when I got the yips on my own serve. 15-40.

I was going to have to do this the hard way. Just get every ball back. Make him work. Make him hit more than one winner on every point. I battled back to deuce but he had four more break points. He overplayed his forehand and made errors. I ran down another bunch of potential winners and he would overplay his forehand for an error again.

His forehand service return was an automatic winner. But I was having so many problems with my serve that just getting it in the box was a challenge.

Finally I ran down one of his forehands and chipped a lob over his head to get the advantage.

He could have called it out and I would have no evidence to argue, but he was honest. Throughout the match that was the case. I know it sounds strange to compliment someone on not cheating, but anybody who has played tournament tennis knows how common cheating (called hooking) is.

Finally I got the hold.

But I could do nothing against his serve. My nerves were flying. He is using a strange racket! And I can't lose to this non-tournament playing media exec. Hey,

he may be the president of NBC and I may be a soon to be unemployed editor, but this is something I work at!

We would exchange holds. 5-5.

Finally I was able to get him wide on the backhand to open up his forehand side. I was able to hit some winners. I was able to get him to fly a few more forehands long. 6-5. But I would have to hold. But he wanted out. I don't know if it was physical or mental. But he was toast. He flew some balls wide and long, and I took the second set and the match.

I went back into work/life mode. He went into formal tennis player who loses mode.

I have learned in the past that the traditional "nice match" said by the winning player at the handshake is a dangerous thing to say. Many a time I heard the comeback "I didn't play nice. I sucked!" and then have to listen to all the reasons they lost, which always seemed a bit insulting.

So I created my own tradition saying after a win, "Nice battling with you."

He responded with something they tell juniors to say.

"Good luck in the next round."

He grabbed the offending rackets and started to walk off the court.

I didn't want him to leave like that.

"You know, we could do each other's game good to practice together," I said.

He said, "I am never going to play here again."

I jumped back "We could play anywhere."

He turned back, sort of shrugged and shook his head no. I couldn't tell if he was embarrassed about losing, angry at losing or angry at me for asking. He was polite. I couldn't call him a jerk if I wanted to. But he wasn't exactly friendly either.

I gathered my stuff and headed to the locker room. Maybe he would be in there and calm down enough to realize I was giving him an opportunity at a rematch. Where he would have his rackets and be able to pick the situation that would be most advantageous to him.

But as I went to the locker room I could see him exiting the building. He was still wearing the same wet, sweaty clothes. Shorts. It was 20 degrees outside. But

that didn't stop him.

A car was running and waiting for him in the no parking zone. He got in, and was off.

Oh well. At least I beat a Master of Media.

I went to the ping pong room to report my score. The kids were all gone. As I approached I overheard the tournament director telling someone "We still have Zucker out there."

I gave him the score.

He apologized to me for the default/non default weirdness and said that Zucker had "problems" with the club. He then said he was the president of NBC. "I know," I said.

He then explained that after Zucker un-defaulted he was hit by another challenge. He was playing his tournament match next to his son's tournament match.

"It was my only open court," the tournament director said.

But Zucker's son had won.

Our match was the same weekend as the Conan O'Brien quitting NBC controversy was happening.

Zucker had kept looking at his phone at the changeover and I knew why. The media world was wondering what would happen in the saga of Leno, Conan and Zucker. And I was on a court with the star of that controversy.

A couple of days later I was at my desk editing a column from Maureen Dowd. It was about Zucker and how he had ruined NBC.

I called up the primary editor, who was a friend of mine and a fellow tennis follower.

Do you know what Zucker was doing when all this was going down last Friday night? He was playing in a tournament with me.

"Let me tell Maureen," he said. She ended up adding it to her column, about as he was losing his network's star he was playing in a local tennis tournament. Her kicker: He lost in the first round.

A year later, Zucker was the one looking for work.



# Chapter 6

After beating Zucker I faced the number 1 seed, Jon Kalina. Kalina plays in every tournament so he has a decent ranking. But he doesn't have a lot of weapons so I took him out. After an easy semifinal, the next guy I faced was Mike Schnably in the finals, who I did not know. He drove in from Pennsylvania, which is pretty amazing for a local tournament. He beat me 6-3, 6-4.

On the next court was Ed Schroback, who was winning the 55 and over tournament.

His son Nick represents one of my proudest accomplishments in tennis.

After I moved to New Jersey from Queens I established an entirely new set of practice partners. One of them was Ed Schroback, a tennis coach who was based in Secaucus.

I had an age advantage and usually beat him pretty easily.

One day he asked if I might play against his son Nick.

"I don't know what to do with him," he said. "He just doesn't seem to try all that hard. Maybe seeing all the work you put in if you work with him he will come around."

I expected a sullen, lazy kid. Instead I found a thoughtful and dedicated kid. He just wasn't dedicated to tennis. He wanted to talk to ask me about the criteria for front page stories in the New York Times. He carried around biographies of U.S. presidents.

"My dad wants me to be a tennis pro," Nick said. "I want to concentrate on school."

This is different, I thought.

He had a good serve and volley game, but it really was just a game to him.

That made me wonder, why was such a serious kid ("I want to be president someday,") wasting his time with a game.

"My father wants me to play," he said. "And I hope it can get me into a good school."

OK, that gave me something to work with. Getting into a better school. He said Tufts was his goal. But even though his grades were good, he wasn't sure his SAT scores were good enough for Tufts.

We started to play together a lot. He would get close, but could never get a set off me. He had a better game, but I could always outlast him. We would play four, five sets at a time.

He was getting closer and closer. We would only play in the summer because the schedule wouldn't work out when he was in high school.

Then one time in the winter we played indoors on a fast court. His serve and volley game gave him his first win in a set. But I still managed to win the match.

But something had changed. He was happy with winning a set, but upset at losing the match. He EXPECTED to win.

A month or so later I got a call from his father. Nick had pulled off a big upset in the semifinals of a junior tournament and was also the underdog in the final that he had to play that same day.

"I told him that playing two matches in one day is nothing compared to playing all day long in the heat with Ray," Ed said. "He won the tournament."

And the coach of the Tufts tennis team was paying attention. Nick was accepted into Tufts and played tennis that first year. His father thanked me for helping him getting into Tufts.

Nick then quit the team, played squash or racquetball and concentrated on his studies. He got involved in ROTC and spent part of one summer riding a bicycle from the Seattle to Maine.

We still played occasionally in the summer when he told me that he was committed to the military.

"I want to be president and I think it is important for a president who will send troops to war to have experience in the military," he said.

It wasn't bravado or posturing. I could tell that is what he believed.

He joined the officer training program in the Marines. He thrived as leader of his platoon. He was given great responsibilities and showed great dedication and leadership.

He and his men were scheduled to go to Afghanistan, but were diverted to help with aid to Haiti after the earthquake. Then he was transferred to a mission that Ed described as so secret that Nick would not tell him the destination.

With what was going on in Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan I imagined the worst. Ed expressed confidence that no matter where he was in the world, Nick would have the ability to survive.

Reading all the horrible stories I would read nightly at the Times I was more than concerned. Then I finally heard the news from his father.

Nick was being transferred to an elite unit that helps guard the president in Washington and he hoped to play with me next summer.

# Chapter 7

My first National tournament of the year would be at the clay courts in Fort Lauderdale the last week in April.

Clay suits my “no-serve, run like hell” strategy well, but after a long winter of only playing twice a week all the gym work in the world could not get me in the kind of shape I wanted to be.

My last couple of weeks were even worse as work blew up and I was working 14-hour days as people were let go. I was only able to play once, and that was on hard courts in the final week before leaving for Fort Lauderdale.

I arrived on a Saturday afternoon, with my first round match scheduled for Monday. I was able to get a good hour and a half hit in late Saturday night.

My match was scheduled for 1 p.m. so I came out the same time to practice on Sunday.

I always try to acclimate my body for match time 24 hours before show time.

This time it wasn't just for my body. I was afraid of the sun and the wind. I had only practiced once outdoors in the five months leading into the match. And it wasn't pretty. Not having a roof to frame my toss threw my entire service rhythm off. And it didn't take much to do that.

I didn't want my serve to undermine me at a National.

But on Sunday it was cloudy, so serving was easy. I knew it wasn't going to be easy in the tournament.

Rain pushed my match back to Tuesday at 1 p.m.

Since my hit on Sunday was only 15 minutes with a local club member who was a 3.0 player, I did not feel ready at all.

My opponent would be the 13th seed, Mark Frist, from Jacksonville. It was not a good draw. He had reached the final of the 40 and over clay courts in Savannah five months earlier.

I sought out people for a scouting report. Unlike most of the players, Frisk was a bit of an unknown.

I ran into Troy Goers, a really good player who had beaten me at a tournament in Florida 10 years ago. I had run into him at other tournaments over the years.

Goers, from Roswell, Ga., is one of those people who you could run into once every five years and it feels like yesterday.

There is one subject that comes up whenever tennis players get together. It is not work, family or even tennis. It is injuries.

Goers described how back troubles had knocked him out of national tournaments for a couple of years.

I told him my story of overcoming three herniated discs when I was 32, combining chiropractic, yoga, weight training and conditioning to be in the best shape of my life at 45, with no back pain in years.

As I said that I realized I had set myself up for re-injuring my back. But I also told myself that is the kind of negative thoughts and emotions that can only add unneeded stress to my life.

The warm up went well. He didn't have any overpowering weapons.

Maybe I would be able to grind myself into a 3 ½ hour war with him.

The first three games were on serve.

Then it was my turn to serve into the sun. The ball disappeared. The angle of the sun was such it was impossible to serve. I was broken. He held again to make it 4-1.

Every serving phobia I had developed in nearly 30 years in the game came rushing back into my head.

I couldn't serve from the non-sun side as well. 6-1.

I had one thing going for me. Frisk was not playing as well as he could. He also was having trouble serving into the sun. And he was spraying his forehand.

I worked his forehand and was able to get it to 3-3 as we were both broken while serving into the sun.

Then my nerves got into my serve again. Two double faults and I was broken. He held again as all my running and grunting could not overcome his cross-court backhand angles. I was trailing 30-love when I chased down a drop shot.

Frisk threw up a lob over my backhand side. My favorite shot has always been the leaping backhand overhead, called the toughest shot in tennis that I always found very easy.

I knew the ball would be out of reach but I leaped and stretched full out anyway. When I landed I had hit nothing but air and felt a mini-spasm in the my back.

It was a familiar feeling. I had tweaked a disk. How bad, I did not know.

I lost 6-3.

That was it. I was out of the main draw, but not the tournament.

That is because of the back draw. So I headed out to see who I would face in the first round of the back draw.

The match had started the same time as mine, but they were in the middle of the second set.

They would split. And they would go to 6-4 in the third.

I watched and spoke to a man who was also watching. He knew why I was watching.

He had seen me play, perhaps doing some scouting. The player who he was with would lose in 3 hour 45 minutes.

My back draw match was scheduled for 8:30 the next morning.

For someone who works late nights, the idea of playing a match at 8:30 was deadly. My body was still on work time. And my back was spasming.

I iced, loaded up on anti-inflammatories and hoped my opponent would be in worse shape than me.

From a tennis point of view I thought I could take him. He was steady, but not overpowering. Normally I would love the idea of grinding someone into the ground. But my back...

Then the phone call came. He had defaulted.

But I would still have to play my next match at 11:30. That opponent also had a tough match, splitting two sets before losing the third set 6-1.

I woke up and could hardly move. Putting on my socks was nearly impossible.

Oh well. Might as well give it a try. Maybe my back would loosen up during the match.

I was there early. Eating the free bananas and bagels outside the tournament office. I waited. Lots of players showed up for their matches, but not my guy. Another default.

I couldn't believe my luck. And I was also hit with a wave of guilt. All these players were working their butts off and I was getting all these ranking points for free.

I checked to see who I would be playing. It was the winner of a match going on. I headed out there.

Jeff Snow, a guy from Long Island was playing against someone I did not know, and could tell wouldn't beat him.

I also had never beaten Snow, and even lost to him 6-0, 6-0 in a match several years earlier.

But I thought I had made enough progress to where I could take him on a good day.

I decided I needed to test my back. The court next to them was open so I decided to hit some serves. My back didn't feel any better, but didn't feel any worse.

A guy who was in the doubles draw came along and asked if I wanted to hit. We played for a about an hour. Again, no better, no worse.

And I was winning the drills against him.

I went back to my room for more icing and more anti-inflammatories.

And secretly I hoped Snow wouldn't show. And then I felt guilty for thinking that.

After all, my main reason for doing this was to prove that my national ranking in the 40s was no fluke.

I was eager to play before the match that morning, even though it was at 8:30.

But match time came and went and he wasn't there. I was disappointed. It was time for me to get off the default gravy train, and at least I was playing a known quantity.

But five minutes later he showed up.

We went out to play.

Snow has a unique style in that he has a one-handed backhand and two-handed forehand. I had never seen anyone with that combination and he ran around his forehand to hit his backhand, which was his best shot. He also had a very nice serve.

We started the match.

My back loosened up. I was ready.

My only concern was my serve, which had constantly failed me in situations like this.

I broke him. He broke me. I broke him. He broke me.

I was serving well, but he was returning better.

And I was getting frustrated. I was going for too many big shots instead of just playing a steady baseline game.

Finally he held. I lost the first set 6-3.

I tried to be more steady, but still felt like he was outhitting me. We went to 4-4 with neither one of us holding. I was breaking the serve of a guy who was serving better than me, but I could not hold even though I was serving well.

I started to go for too much on the return and he was up 30-0. A drop shot I ran down but hit into the top of the net made it 40-0.

But I got smart. I grinded out two long points to make it 40-30. But then I went for too much. I ran around a forehand that I tried to pull down the line that hit the top of the tape. He had held.

I could not hold my serve on the other end as my frustration caused me to make two errors while I was serving.

I was out of the tournament. I had played well in spots, but not smart enough to pull through.

It was time to get back to training.



The thing about national tournaments is that there are good players around to practice with after you are eliminated.

So I played a practice match with the guy I had hit with the day before.

This time he blitzed me 6-1, 6-2, as my serving problems returned.

The next day I played another practice match against another player who also got me 6-1, 6-2.

I wasn't upset at losing but the scores against good players who were not the top in the country made me wonder.

How could I beat players at home like Terry McLaughlin, a good national level player in the 50s and lose so badly here.

My confidence was shot.

And my reaction, as usual, was the reverse of a normal player/person. I wanted to play more.

As I looked around for another opponent after my latest defeat an old guy who was a member of the club approached me. He asked me if I wanted to play some more.

I told him yes. He said he had this great kid for me to play against. The kid was 11 and a half.

But he was good. I had seen him playing against another guy the day before and he had all the strokes and even could volley, which most kids that age could not do. I agreed.

If I couldn't do anything against the 45 and overs, maybe I should give a shot to the 12 and unders.

We started playing and I immediately began spraying the ball all over the courts. He broke me. Then he held. My heart sank and nerves rose. Losing was not an option here.

Actually losing another game was not an option.

So I pulled out the power game. Hit everything hard, don't go for outright winners right away, and see if the kid could take the pace. He got back a lot of hard shots, but he couldn't take the pounding. I won 6-2, 6-0.

But now my left hamstring was bothering me.

But I still made a match to play against the kid for the next day. I was flying out at night and wanted to get as much tennis as I could before I would leave.

The match went as expected. I won the first set 6-1. Then the old guy came to the court. He asked me if he could coach the kid as we were playing. Not only did not bother me, but I considered it a compliment.

The kid took the lead 3-2 in the second set. The old guy would tell him not to hit with me. To just exchange moon balls until he could get a shot to put away. The kid had listened.

I realized I was in trouble. I had to go from exchanging moon balls to blasting him off the court. I did. Barely. I survived.

Turned out the old guy was Lenny Solomon, the father of Harold Solomon who had crafted him into a top 10 world ranked player in the '70s.

He critiqued my game. He said I had to be more aggressive off my forehand and follow it to net.

Harold Solomon had been the master of the fifty-stroke-a-point defensive game.

When his father tells you need to be more aggressive, it probably means you need to listen.

I was going home with a lot to think about.

# Chapter 8

But first I had to make sure my minor injuries were not major ones. They weren't. But that was not always the case. Once a girlfriend had told me, "I feel like there are three people in this relationship: Me, you and your back." It was not an exaggeration.

For many years my back had a mind of its own, and it did not have a pleasant personality. I was in my late 20s when I was playing early morning winter tennis in an unheated bubble and heard something pop in my back as I was practicing my first overhead.

It was fine until I stopped playing that afternoon. And then it stiffened up. The next day it turned to pain. I did the only thing I could think of. I played through it for years.

The lower back issue was joined by an upper back issue years later. A neck issue would join that a couple of years after that. I was a mess.

I was finally forced to stop playing after taking my job in Jersey City and having to commute three hours earlier to avoid the traffic driving from Queens. I did not touch a racket for a year and a half. The sciatica that had made my left leg weak and heavy would constantly remind me of its presence.

Then one day it all went away. I was driving to Jersey City when I decided that instead of killing two hours sitting at a pet store looking at the puppies I would drive to the Lincoln Park tennis courts. It didn't make a difference that it was 30 degrees. I just wanted to see the people playing. I secretly hoped that even without my equipment somebody would ask me to play.

On the fourth day that is exactly what happened. A guy who I had seen playing on the other days sat alone on the bench and I jumped out of my car and

asked if he needed someone to hit with it. He did. And he lent me a racket.

There was never someone who felt so alive and energetic. Especially for someone who was wearing a parka.

I promised to come back and hit with him the next day. This time I had my stuff and was ready to roll. I was back, so to speak.

That lasted about an hour. My back started feeling that old stiffness. I stopped playing again for another few months and sank into an athletic depression.

The summer came and I was determined to come back. Miraculously, I had not gained weight as I starved myself. So I not only wanted to return to the game, I also wanted to eat again.

I scouted out options. The doctor I had sought out months earlier had told me just to stop playing tennis forever to get my back better so I had no faith in traditional medicine. It was the kind of advice my mother gave me so I was even more determined to ignore it.

My girlfriend at the time also was having back problems that were helped by a chiropractor so I decided to give it a try. He said the X-rays showed I had three herniated discs. But he also said if I saw him regularly for six weeks I would be back in top form. I entered a tournament two weeks later.

It was September and I wanted to get back into action before the weather got too cold. And it was the Bayonne Jewish Community Center Tennis Championships at courts that were two blocks away from my apartment. It was unsanctioned and most of the people in the tournament I had recognized as not being very good. And most important was the two blocks away part.

The match was at 8 a.m. on a Sunday morning. I set my clock for 7:30 but amazingly woke up earlier and turned off the alarm so my girlfriend could keep sleeping.

My first match was against a name I did not recognize. And when I saw my opponent I could see why. He was a kid with one racket who was obviously a beginner. I could tell because he put his racket down on the bench and it still had the plastic on the handle.

He could not return a ball in the warm up, and realizing that he didn't know whether there was a five or ten minute warm-up rule I asked him if he would

want to start. I told him he could serve.

He put the extra balls in front of his feet on the baseline and served without a warm up. I didn't have time to tell him that it wasn't a good idea to have the extra balls by his feet. He double faulted. But did not move to the other side to serve. I guess he was playing "first one in."

I tried not to laugh. On the fifth try he got one in. I hit it back toward his backhand. He launched his next shot over the fence, not the fence behind me, but the fence to his left. Wow. This was going to be a fast day. I told him at the changeover that it wasn't a good idea to keep the balls at his feet when he was serving and he should keep them in his pockets.

"But I don't have any pockets," he said.

I didn't respond. I was shocked. And I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Then I noticed he was playing with the racket with plastic on the grip! He hadn't taken the plastic off! I thought this might be the best opportunity I would ever get for a golden set but before long I did lose three points on three double faults so that dream died.

When it was over I shook his hand and told him that he really needed to take the plastic off of his handle.

"But I thought that was to protect it," he said. I just shook my head and walked away thinking of how my great aunt used to keep her sofa encased in plastic.

I let him keep the balls. He was thrilled. I think he probably used those balls for months.

I walked home and crawled back into to bed. The clock said 8:21. I fell back asleep. Soon my girlfriend was screaming. "You missed your match. It is 9 o'clock, you probably got defaulted!"

I told her no, I just played and one the shortest matches in history.

If all my matches were that easy I would have nothing to worry about with my back. I made it into the final to play against the city pusher.

In tennis a pusher is not a drug dealer, but something just as low, a guy who just pushed the ball back, gives you no pace to work with and just waits for you

to make a mistake. It is “contra-tennis,” as Roger Federer once derisively called it after losing to David Nalbandian several times in a row.

This guy could not be compared to Nalbandian in any way. He was short and stubby (translation: he was shorter and stubbier than me).

But he got every ball back. And it was cold and windy out. The tournament, which was only played on Sunday, because of rainouts was finishing at the end of October.

And my back was on my mind. Even though I physically was better mentally I was still very tentative. Every time I reached for a ball I thought about whether my back would rebel. If the weather wasn't making my back stiff my attitude was.

I lost a long and painful match.

And my journey with my back had begun. I went back to the chiropractor. I discovered weight training, yoga and to my great terror: nutrition. But not right away.

My lower back felt better, but the neck would periodically go out in incredibly painful and grotesque ways. I would wake up with my head tilted to the left in a bizarre angle. And the pain was the worst I would ever have.

One Sunday we had tickets to the finals of the women's year end tournament at Madison Square Garden and I woke up that day with my head sideways. I could not go and spent the day in bed with my neck wrapped in ice packs.

I would even play matches this way.

I had to play one tournament in an unheated bubble in January on the worst surface imaginable: Omniturf. Omniturf has the worst aspects of grass and clay and none of the best. And you could trip over the seams.

But I learned something about tennis that day. Keeping your head straight is vitally important. I won the match against a decent player, but the pain next day was terrible. I took the old pain killers from dental surgery I had years earlier to get through my next match, which I definitely did not win. But at least I did not default. I may have lost plenty of matches but at least I never had quit to that point. No matter what.

# Chapter 9

I took Solomon's words to heart. I had always been open to suggestions, and had tried everything. But playing an attacking game was something new.

I played against my friend Ed Aversa. If Ed played more tournaments he would be a top-ranked player in the East. He consistently beat me, with it usually being close.

He was a left-handed version of me, running everything down and never getting tired. But most of his strokes were just a little bit better than mine.

And this time when we played he was hot. He won the first two games and I was being outplayed. Blown off the court!

I had to do something. I need to come up with a plan. The plan was "ah screw it"

I started hitting every ball as hard as I could. He did the same. It was great tennis. He was up 7-6, 4-4, when he had to quit to go back to work. We were out there for two and a half hours and neither one of us was taking it easy.

The next day I played against Alan Edelstein, a guy with a big forehand, who always played me close. I blasted him. We had to play on the hard courts because the clay courts were flooded, so my new strategy seemed to be working.

But as good as things seemed to going on the court, "real life" was getting even more in the way.

The job had taken on a life of its own. As the 28 people in my department saw their jobs outsourced to Gainesville I swung into a different role.

Gradually my co-workers disappeared and I was called on to monitor their replacements.

Management was keeping a couple of us to run the Gainesville operation from New York.

My job was not only still there for me for now, but it was more demanding than ever.

Trying to play a national tennis schedule became harder than it was when I first did it five years ago.

But my boss insisted I not give up anything because of the job. But I realized how lucky I was to have it and didn't want to do anything to put it in danger.

With that I entered the Midwest Clay Court Championships in May.

Since I needed to come back from the tournament as soon as I could I decided to drive to Carmel, Ind. Flying would have made more sense, except the airlines had made it impossible to rebook flights so driving for 12 hours was the best option.

The first round was supposed to be on a Thursday, so I planned on leaving Wednesday morning. Ten hours of driving later I was in a hotel in London, Ohio.

Because of road construction in Carmel, those last two hours became four hours of driving around the Indianapolis area.

Note to municipalities: If a road is closed, a detour sign would be helpful.

Finally, after two hours of circling Carmel, I came upon a sign for City Hall, where I asked for directions.

I got to the courts, and found a practice partner, Steve Willouby, a top 40-and-over national player, who was in from California. And looking to get a practice in on clay.

But there weren't any courts immediately available. And then it started to rain. I went to the hotel and heard from my wife that the cable and Internet were down at home.

My cable box would have to be replaced, which meant I would lose all the mixed martial arts programs I had taped for another project I was working on.

And I was sick. Allergies that had been dormant since I was a child were in full bloom.



I was miserable, tired and because of work, weather and partner cancellations hadn't played tennis since the previous Sunday. And was about to play in a Category II National Tournament.

I faced a local guy in the first round, which was also the quarterfinals.

In the warm-ups, he seemed to have good strokes, but I couldn't tell if he was in shape or not.

When the match started I just tried to get the ball back and work the points.

He started making errors. By the fourth stroke of every point he would stop moving his feet and make an error.

I lost four points in winning the first set 6-0. All four points came on my own unforced errors. I was thinking gold for the second set.

A golden set is not losing a point in a set. I had never been a part of a golden set — on either end.

I had a few practice matches where I played against people levels below me where I had come close. But a golden set is hard to do no matter how bad an opponent might be.

To get a golden set you have to know you are going for one. And once you start going for one the pressure of being perfect is stifling.

I won the first two games in eight points. But the points were getting longer as I just tried to hit the ball up the center and nowhere near the lines.

The rallies, which were four and five strokes became eight and nine strokes.

I won the third game – at least I thought I did. I started changing ends when my opponent said it was only 30-0.

I was sure I had won the game. But what was I going to do, ARGUE?

So I went back and served again. I won the next two points.

But the pressure was getting to me. My shots were falling shorter and he was starting to come to net, forcing me to hit passing shots.

At 0-30, he hit a net chord. I scrambled forward to my left and barely reached it. My only option was to flick a slice backhand crosscourt over the low part of the net. If he had stepped forward and cut off the angle he would have had an easy volley into the open court. But he did not. He thought it would go wide, but the wind knocked it down and it caught the edge of the line. He called it good. If

ever I would have understood getting hooked on a call this was it. But he was honest.

That same game we had another long point. I got frustrated and tried to hit a heavy topspin ball deep.

It looked like it was going to go long, but it bounced in front of him, and he did not swing at it. It must have been long, but he just shook his head and said it was good. That was the second generous call he had given me.

I closed out the game when he made a forehand error. 4-0.

Even though it was 6-0, 4-0, it did not feel like a quick match. One thing, he was a very deliberate player. The other was the length of the points.

It was my turn to serve. My first serve was long. Oh lord, not now! A lifetime of a million serving issues entered my mind.

I barely got my second serve over the net, but I did. Another long point. After about 10 strokes he hit one long.

I was determined to just get the first serve in from now on. It worked. The points were long, and I did some scrambling, but I just put every ball back into the center of the court. 5-0.

We crossed at the net and I handed him the balls. I wondered if he knew that he had not won a point the entire set. Did he know about the term “golden set?”

Then I started feeling guilty. Before we started playing he told me he had driven two hours to get to the tournament. It wasn't the 14 hours I had driven, but still.

Then I had a twinge of compassion. If I lost a golden set to anyone it would probably crush me and maybe even chase me away from the game.

I thought, could I get a point from Federer if we played a set?

God, I think too much during these matches. And that is when I was crushing a guy. Imagine how bad it is when I am losing!

It is amazing what crossed my mind in those split seconds. Obviously, my mind was racing at Indy.

I think the first point lasted about 10 strokes before he sprayed a backhand wide. It seemed much longer.

The next point started with him hitting the ball harder and deeper, knocking me back on my heels. I was in full scramble mode for three straight shots. Then he started taking my lead and just hitting back to the center. I did the same. We had passed the 20-stroke mark when my shots started getting shorter and I was back in scramble mode. One shot took me especially wide to my forehand. I barely got it back, but it landed well inside the service line. And he was standing right there. He pokes a forehand to the open court. I scrambled, just getting my racket on it, and throwing a slice lob over his head

He ran back, but slowed as the ball was going to land. I thought it must be out. But he signaled it was good.

I had gotten enough air under it for it to drop in. 0-30.

I immediately thought: Just get your return over the net!

My legs felt like they were bolted into the ground I was so nervous.

The first serve was long. The second serve was also long. What a reprieve.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I felt a strange feeling of calm.

Then total panic set in. I had a match point for a golden set. If I blew it now, it would be the ultimate choke.

His first serve was a fault, but I knew he wouldn't double fault. His next serve was in the box to my forehand. I looped a forehand deep to his forehand. It bounced high and he slammed a crosscourt forehand into the bottom of the net.

It was over. I could not celebrate because it would have been distasteful, but I could not hide my relief.

I shook his hand and told him thank you. I told him that it was great to get out on the court after all my driving the last couple of days.

He complimented me on my steadiness. He seemed like a quiet, nice man.

But I was still hesitant to ask him. Did you know I won every point in that set?

He didn't answer. Instead he started talking about how nervous he got in tournaments. He didn't know.

That is when I realized what he was doing wrong. His strokes were good, but he stopped moving his feet as he began his swing.

Nerves. I can understand it. We talked some more after we left the court. We talked about our wives, and how we both had a pair of kittens.

He told me he was diabetic and how he took up the game in college, and had recently gotten serious about the game to lose weight. I felt like I was looking at myself. Except I initially became dedicated to this game in my twenties. He just became dedicated in his 40s.

# Chapter 10

Sometimes the most memorable part of a tournament is what happens after it is over.

After my golden set victory I played in the semifinals against Timothy Brady, a local pro who had always done well in this local event. He won 6-1, 6-3, but then the real excitement began for me.

My golden set seemed like ancient history as I thought about my potential next match and getting back home.

Being a points and rankings chaser, there were third place points to think about.

Sometimes those points are free and easy because players want to get home and don't stick around for third place matches. I always would clear my schedule and plan to stay longer than the next guy just to get whatever points could be had.

But my job had gone from bad to worse. People were let go every few weeks as if it was some surreal reality show. And I wanted to stay as long as possible monitoring Gainesville and hoping something in another department would open up. My days off had changed to being Friday and Saturday. And even though my immediate boss said I should take off that Sunday I knew there was nobody to take my place. And if I did not come into work it would look to upper management like I wasn't dedicated to my new role. So I had to get back to my job by Sunday afternoon no matter what.

So I sat and waited for the other semifinal to end. My hope was the guy who lost would say he was not coming back for the third place match. Then I would get the default and be able to take off for home.

As the match dragged on, all I could think of was the 12-hour drive home. I did the math. If it ends by 1 p.m., I could be home by 1 a.m. Finally, it ended at 1:15. Andrew Thurstone, the loser, came off the court. The tournament director asked him about the third place match and said it was scheduled for Sunday, when I knew I couldn't play. He said it was a problem. My heart beat a little faster—Third place points in a Category II National!

Then he turned to me and asked, "Can we play today instead?"

I stumbled as if I was trying to slide on a clay court line in high school.

If I say no, I risk a default if he is willing to stay on Sunday. If I say yes at least I have a fighting chance. But if I say no I still might get a default. I would never know what would have happened. And the whole point of playing nationals this year was to prove that my top 15 finish nationally in the 40s was legitimate.

So I said yes.

But then he said he still had a doubles match to play before he could play our match. And he needed to get some food before that. Oh Lord. I was living a nightmare. It would at least be 4 p.m. before I got on the court.

I went to try to find a place in the club to rest. I knew I would have to drive all night and figured I needed to get some sleep.

I found a couch in the lounge, took off my shoes and started to doze off until....

A little kid and his mother came in. He was whining about wanting a soda. His mother did not have any change. The whining continued. Finally the woman found change. Small change. She slowly fed the machine with each coin clanking more than the last. Finally, they had the soda, finally the whining stopped and finally they left.

I started to doze again until...

Three girls whose ages may have been anywhere from 10 to 12 came in. They weren't screaming. They were screeching. It was like a personal attack on my nerves. But if I were to say anything I would be the bad guy so I said nothing.

But my blood was boiling. All I could think was if you don't know how to act in a public place you shouldn't be allowed in a public place. The same thing goes through my mind when being forced to be around CERTAIN children and some adults on airplanes.

So I went outside. I sat down on the grass. But I don't think I have ever fallen asleep outdoors. Ever. City boy.

Growing up in Queens I had never been camping.

So resting was out of the question. I went out to look at the doubles match and root for its completion.

I was the ultimate front runner, rooting for whoever was ahead,. Finally the match ended at 4:45. Oh Lord.

There was another thing. I had checked out my possible opponents in the computer the night before and Thurstone had better results against common opponents. I probably should have taken my chances and said I could only play Sunday.

So I was not only angry at not being able to rest, but feeling like an idiot for my decision.

It is OK to go on the court hating yourself. And it is OK to go on the court hating the world. But doing both at the same time takes a special talent (McEnroe) to still be successful. And I am not what you would call a special talent.

Logic would dictate that the situation was actually set up pretty well for me. Here I am a grind-it-out player going against a guy who has had a lot of tennis in him.

But logic had left me when those kids wouldn't let me sleep. Thurstone hit the ball hard, and I was loving banging it out with him. Big shots, lots of attempted winners. He made most of his. I missed most of mine. I lost the first set 6-2.

It was 2-1 in the second set when he motioned he had a problem to his brother/doubles partner. It was a blister. He handed him some tape through the fence. I knew what I had to do, just keep the points going.

That lasted a game. Then I was back to my insanity of hitting hard, going for winners. I lost 6-2, 6-1.

“Thanks for playing me today,” he said. “I really appreciate it.”

It was almost 7 p.m. I went straight to my car to get on the road. I had already stashed food and drinks for the ride.

I got through the local Indianapolis roads just fine but when I reached the main highway it was a dead stop. I called my wife. I was almost in tears.

You should stop and stay the night in some hotel along the road she told me. I would love to if I could I told her. But I would only have a couple of hours to sleep and getting up would not have been possible. So I drove, when I finally started to move again.

It wasn't that bad until I reached Pennsylvania and the skies opened up. End of the world thunderstorms on unfamiliar winding roads. I could hardly see. And I was starting to get tired. Very tired. The only radio station I could pick up was an all-night sports talk station railing about the Pirates.

The visibility got worse as the downpour turned to drizzle and fog. Oh lord, the only thing to do was try to follow a car in front of you because otherwise you were driving into a dark grey hole.

I may die for my job after all.

I made it through Pennsylvania.

In New Jersey, I started getting foggy. I had not had caffeine in over 10 years, but I took out the first can of Red Bull. I was desperate. My eyes were closing. I made it another half hour.

Then I started having what could be best described as hallucinations. I kept seeing animals running across the road that weren't there. And I had to go to the bathroom.

I tried to pull off and find a bathroom. I found a deli. But the door to the bathroom was locked. I got in the car again, and looked for another store. When I found it the relief seemed to wake me up just enough to get to NYC. My wife talked to me on the phone long enough to get me home. It may have been the only time talking on a cell phone while driving enhanced safety.

I took a short nap and was at work three hours later.



# Chapter 11

With nationals behind me for now, I would have to spend the next few months fighting for points on the Eastern circuit. Fight is sometimes an appropriate word in local tournaments.

I once ended a tournament in Brooklyn by giving testimony.

My match was fairly routine, a straight set win over a nice player who asked me to play a third set just for practice after the match was over. What was happening on the next court was not routine.

I was familiar with both players. I had lost to both in the past. One was a gregarious friendly guy who I never quite trusted because he always seemed a little too friendly. Yet I had never had a problem with him. He had told me he had been a minor league hockey player who became a born-again Christian. He once tried to get a tournament match time changed because it conflicted with his Sunday morning church service.

The other guy was very frustrating to play. He stalled in between points. He was iffy on line calls. His entire game seemed to be distracting you from your game. When I played him he announced how he had his dog waiting for him locked up in his car. And it was 85 degrees. When I expressed alarm he shot back.

“I left the windows cracked.”

I was done before that match even started. Stall until your dog dies: A great match strategy.

It was impossible not to notice what was going on in “Friendly guy” vs. “The Staller.”

They were arguing about calls. The tournament director was out there to call the lines. I had spoken to her minutes earlier and she told me how this was the first event she was running. Poor woman. She told me how she was hoping things went smoothly. But she was prepared, saying she had the phone numbers of the top officials of the section because they were all together at a convention out of town.

I remember thinking how I never played a tournament where the director had to call the office for advice.

Friendly and Staller split the first two sets. The rules in age group tennis allow for a ten minute break between the second and third sets. Staller disappeared from the court. And didn't come back for 20 minutes. Then there was the argument over who served first and on what side.

They played a little bit, and argued a little bit.

Soon Staller announced he was taking a bathroom break. And did not return. Finally Friendly said he was taking a bathroom break as well.

They did not come back. The tournament director sat there looking nervous.

Suddenly Friendly emerged back in the bubble.

"He attacked me," Friendly said. I would never see Staller again.

This is where the story gets murky.

Some folks in the club claimed Friendly went into the bathroom and must have locked the door behind him because when they heard screams and commotion coming from inside they could not get in.

Staller claimed Friendly locked the door and attacked him. Friendly claimed the door was stuck, which was not as far-fetched as it seemed because the clubhouse did not have heat and the temperatures were in the 20s, wink, wink.

He claimed Staller bumped into him in the cramped bathroom and he punched him in self defense.

The result was unquestioned. Staller had broken glasses and a ripped shirt.

I heard both sides when the person in charge of discipline called me for my testimony of what I saw and did not see.

They were both defaulted in the tournament. And their potential opponent got a default into the finals. They were both suspended.

The reaction of players who knew something about the participants involved was pretty much unanimous.

“He shouldn’t have hit him,” they said. “But I am glad he did.”

I had my own close call.

It started with a phone call from a friend and regular practice partner.

“Ray, you are not going to believe what happened to me. It is the craziest thing I have seen at a tournament.”

To protect the guilty, I will call him Ken Rosewall.

He told the story of playing in an unsanctioned local tournament. He was winning the match easily and in the second set his opponent said he was quick serving him. Rosewall said it was supposed to be server’s pace and if there was a problem they should get the referee.

The referee agreed with Rosewall.

But at a changeover, his opponent grabbed the balls, ran to the service line and served while Rosewall was still on his chair. He then said it was the same thing Rosewall was doing to him. The referee defaulted him.

He went berserk. He would not stop going after the tournament director and my friend. Cops were called. Days later, Rosewall said he heard Berserker went to the tournament director’s house and a restraining order was filed.

A month later I was playing in the semifinal of a local tournament against a guy I had never heard of.

I didn’t have any problems with his calls, but he was playing very slow. He did something I had never seen on a court before. He would serve with one ball and if he missed his first serve he would walk back to the fence to pick up another ball for his second serve. He would towel off at the back fence where he kept the other ball, and then hit his second serve.

Well, we are supposed to play at server’s pace...

I looked over to the tournament director. He wasn’t there. He had to leave and his girlfriend was handling the desk.

I decided to stay calm. My opponent didn’t have any weapons, and just ran down everything. That is my style and I was confident I could outlast him. He

seemed to be the brooding sort, not talking before the match, not looking me in the eye.

But as I started winning he finally blew. Screaming, yelling, hitting the balls into the fence. After every point. Some of the worst behavior I had ever seen. I kept calm. He was self-destructing. But it was uncomfortable and scary. He was directing his anger at me. “You have nothing,” he was screaming at me. And now he was looking at me straight in the eye.

It was rage trash-talking. He wasn’t saying how he was going to beat me, but saying how much I sucked. I had never seen that before. He was losing and the more he was losing the more abusive he became. I just took it, but I was boiling.

The match had gone over an hour before I won the first set. I was more exhausted from holding myself back from responding to the abuse than I was the match.

Then at a changeover he walked past me, glared at me and with full force kicked my tennis bag.

My anger boiled over.

“You can do all you want out here, but you can’t kick my bag,” I screamed. He didn’t say a word, just looking at me his eyes getting wider and his chest poking out like he was preparing for a fight. The silence bothered me so I said, “I have glasses in my bag.” I didn’t break anything,” he screamed. I kept walking to the other side of the court. “That doesn’t make a difference,” I screamed back.

I looked over at the tournament director’s girlfriend. She was angry as well, although I thought it was for her boyfriend leaving her to be in the middle of this situation. Hearing the commotion in the first set, a bunch of people had gathered to watch. The match was in an urban park and the locals who may have never cared about tennis wanted to see what the ruckus was about.

They seemed to both welcome my going back at him and be afraid about what might happen next. I was in a car crash and I wasn’t driving.

The crowd watching, and my outburst, only seemed to make my opponent’s behavior worse. I started to wonder if he might have a weapon in his bag. But I was so enraged myself that I didn’t care. I wasn’t married at the time and at that point was willing to die on that court.

I won the next game.

Then my opponent took all three balls and launched them, one at a time, over the fence as far as he could. He sat down in the center of the court at the serving T, as if it was a 1960s sit in.

I walked over to the fence where the tournament director's girlfriend was sitting on the other side.

"What do I do now?" I asked.

She did not respond, just got up and walked in the direction of where he balls might have landed. She eventually came back with balls, even though I wasn't sure they were the ones we were using. I didn't care. About 15 minutes had gone by and I was beyond furious. If he couldn't get defaulted for that there was no way she was going to do anything. I imagined her thinking that she didn't want the rage being directed to me to be directed at her.

My opponent was still sitting in the same spot at the service line.

I took the balls and went back to serve. To my surprise, he got up and went back to return.

The pattern continued. Long points with me winning most of them and outbursts after every point where he told me how much I had nothing. I would cross over on the other side of the court so I was never closer than 20 feet away from him. I was afraid he was going to take a swing at me if I got within five feet

Finally I closed it out.

Now came the hard part. I would have to come to the net to shake his hand. I know if I didn't go to shake his hand that may send him over the edge even more. But I was scared if I put my hand out he would sucker punch me.

So I thought I might say something to defuse the situation.

So I timed my steps. I got within 10 steps when I decided, well, he did fight hard, and maybe if I compliment him on that I can get out of this situation without any more problems.

"I said, "You sure fought hard out there," as I put out my hand. He shook it as he yelled. "I should have been seeded in this tournament and not faced you in the semifinals." Huh?

“I am 16th in the East,” he continued. I had a flashback to my working life and said, just to be factually correct: “You couldn’t be 16th in the East. My friend Ken Rosewall was 16th in the East. ‘

It was a Lucille Ball, “slowly I turn moment” moment.

His eyes became flares. “KEN ROSEWALL IS YOUR FRIEND? THAT IS THE GUY WHO GOT ME ARRESTED!!!”

I realized at that point, it was Berserker.

I quickly grabbed my bag with a dent in the side of it. But Berserker was in hot pursuit. “I should have kicked his ass when I had the opportunity!” I was in a full sprint at this point. “And if you weren’t running away I would kick yours too.”

I was on the other side of the fence at this point.

I asked the tournament director what time the final would be. She tells me and says, “Thank you for your patience.”

Luckily, Berserker was still on the other side of the fence, but he was leaning right against it screaming about how he was going to get me. I heard him scream something about what he would do to me in a rematch.

I had heard enough, and from the safety of the other side of the fence I screamed back, “You wouldn’t have a chance.” I hustled to my car.

The last thing I heard from him was how I have to learn to be a better winner.

# Chapter 12

I love to grind my opponents into the ground like I did with the Berserker (without the outbursts). It was something I discovered when I started playing tournaments.

Years ago, I was destroyed by one of the top guys in the East in a 35 and over indoor winter tournament. He was scheduled to play me again in another tournament that summer.

Well, at least it is 95 degrees I told myself. My back won't get stiff. I had been battling back issues all the way back then and figured I would get a good, if short workout against a top player.

He was not a "good winner."

After he beat me in the winter he went on about how he was a top player in college and was the best player in the country in his age group, but didn't have time to play nationals. "Making too much money in real estate, you know."

He was a good serve and volleyer. But I was determined to make him suffer.

He showed up in his fancy sports car with his dismissive attitude.

"I have a party to go to after this," he told the tournament director. "I need to get out there as soon as possible."

It was a half hour before our scheduled match time, but I said I was ready. I should have made him wait. But in those days, the rankings were decided by a human beings and a default win would do me no good. But for psychological reasons alone, I should have made him stew, but I wasn't thinking that way.

I wanted physical torture, not mind games.

I lost the first set, 6-1, but it wasn't easy for him. I was returning well and hitting passing shots off his serve. On my serve I was extending points,

extending games.

I noticed a change in the second set. He started staying back. I don't know if it was fatigue or my passing shots but he was in my world now.

I got up a break, 2-1. I played a very long game but held to make it 3-1. His turn to serve brought more long points.

We went back and forth, corner to corner. Angle to angle. I took him wide to his backhand, and had an open court for the put away. He did not come back.

He REALLY did not come back. The next court was open and he had walked across that court and ended up on a bench between that court and the next one.

He wasn't getting up. He just sat there. I walked over to him. I didn't saying anything to him, but he whispered "I'm done." His face was red and his eyes cloudy.

I asked "Are you sure?" He did not respond. I couldn't tell if he was being dismissive or about to pass out. I walked over to the fence and told the tournament director he said he was done. The tournament director came up to him and asked him if he was OK. He didn't answer. He told him he needed to get inside. "I just want to sit here," he finally said.

I got the feeling now we were pissing him off. The tournament director told him he had to leave the court because he needed to put a match on there. He slowly walked off the court, leaving his stuff behind. I grabbed it and brought it to the clubhouse.

We need to get some wet towels the tournament director told me. We went to the bathroom. But when we returned he was gone. I didn't see his name turn up on a tournament draw sheet for 10 years.

I have made three opponents throw up in tournaments and numerous others cramp. I love the fact that the fat guy who couldn't run a mile around my high school to pass gym class could wear down a lifelong athlete -- especially one that was a jerk.

My physical creation started with major back trouble that knocked me out of the game for a year and a half when I was in my early 30s. I went to a chiropractor who helped my back. But he told me I had to train like an athlete. I



discovered the gym and nutrition. But there was still one thing hanging over my head: winter.

I would shovel off courts when possible but when the elements were too brutal I just wouldn't play. I did some boxing. And I entered tournaments to get the cheaper indoor court time.

But I wanted the most intense training I could get.

That is when I discovered Saddlebrook.

Tennis Magazine had given ratings to tennis camps and it was rated ultra-intense. No camp even rated "intense."

I got a large retro pay settlement of a union contract from the Jersey Journal and took half of it and went for 11 days at the Saddlebrook camp.

At the time, the longest package they had for the adult tennis program was for five days. If you lasted the five days you got a certificate.

Because of fog, it took me 12 hours to get from New York to Florida. I checked in and without going to my room I headed to the courts. The desk said they had a couple of lighted courts at the back of the complex. I followed the lights and was at tennis Mecca. There were no players, but I grabbed a couple of stray balls and started hitting serves.

The next day I showed up for my first session. It was 7:45 in the morning, impossibly early for a guy who has spent his life working nights.

That is when I met Randy Brooke. He worked with the advanced adult players. He watched me warming up.

You have back problems?" he asked. "Yes, you couldn't imagine," I said.

"We'll fix those."

He described how I was bending from the waist instead of bending from the knees. He bowed like a pelican, which made me smile. "Wait until we do the video." I thought that explained why I was the only tennis player I knew without knee pain. I had never bent them.

When we saw the video, there it was. I was a pelican.

In my first group was an athletic looking guy from Brazil and a small very thin guy from Japan. I had never worked so hard physically: Two and a half

hours in the morning and two and a half hours in the afternoon and then matches after that with juniors who lived there and trained in the tennis program.

I was cramping, the guy from Brazil would run to the nearby bathroom to throw up. The Japanese guy just kept going. But one afternoon I noticed tears coming from his eyes after a drill.

Randy's court was Court 10, the one closest to the bathroom. The one with bleachers. The one near the road. He would explain that he was always there so people would see his students and how he was working them and decide to take a lesson. It would work.

Randy was a tennis teaching showman, a gruff Vietnam vet with a heart of gold, loads of stories and a charming sense of humor that made women of a certain age swarm around him.

He was the perfect coach for me. He fed my obsession. Running into fences drew his delighted approval. Grunting was not only OK with him, he taught it and explained its usefulness. I felt totally free on the court.

When I talked about being told I have three herniated discs, he would respond that he only had two discs that weren't herniated from being a helicopter pilot shot down in Vietnam.

I just wanted to work harder for this great man and great coach. Growing up without a father, I ate up his support and guidance.

After my 11 days were up, I had to find a way to come back, but it seemed financially impossible. The only way was to save and buy a condo there, which I did.

Over the years, I have been back over 30 times. Randy is retired, but his legacy lives on. He started calling me "Mad Dog" and it stuck. I asked how he came up with the nickname.

"When I was in Vietnam there was this little guy who was a tough little SOB who would never stop fighting. He ended up being an MIA. You remind me of him."

He gave me a picture of the real Mad Dog that I carried in my tennis bag.

It is the greatest compliment I have ever received in the game.

# Chapter 13

Red clay suits my game. At least you would think it does. It is slower than the green Har-Tru I practice on in Leonia, NJ. And a slower court means longer points which suits my grind-it-out style.

But there has always been one problem. I grew up on fast hard courts with low bouncing balls.

One of the things Randy would work with me on was handling high balls. I held my elbow too low and would end up catching the high balls too late and lose consistency. I worked all I could on court with technique. I even spent time in the gym practicing swinging at high balls with light weights.

My next tournament in the 45s was a Sectional championship on red clay in New Jersey.

My first round match was scheduled for 4 p.m. against a guy I had never lost to. If I beat him my next match was supposed to be against James Clark right after that match.

Clark was seeded and had a bye in the first round. But two matches in one day was how I liked it. A match to get warmed up on red clay. And fatigue was something I did not worry about.

I had never played Clark before so I got on the computer. Saw who he had played. Made a few phone calls. Got the scouting report. Real steady. Not much of a serve. Jeez, sound familiar?

I arrived at the club an hour before my match. It was practically deserted. I had some food. I was prepared for a long day. I waited. And waited. No opponent. He calls to default. Hmmm. That changes things. No warm up match.

And I sit for another three hours until Clark arrives and the tournament director has a court available.

We finally get on the court at 6:30.

It is cold, cloudy, and I am stiff from sitting.

And Clark is steady. Painfully so. Points are going 15, 20 strokes. His serve has so much clearance over the net it acts like a loopy forehand. Solomon's words are floating through my head.

I know I can outwit this guy. So I start going for my shots. And it all starts to unravel. He runs down my big shots on the slow red clay. I miss shots. The final result is 6-3, 6-1. The two sets last two hours, but I got beaten at my own game.

My planet was knocked out of its orbit. I got lost driving home.

What next?

I called one of my practice partners and set up a game for the next day. But my heart wasn't in it. The next morning I was heading off to the courts when my wife called. She was dealing with a rough day in the office.

And she was acting like nothing had changed. I was going to play tennis. And she wasn't. More importantly, she couldn't. Not because she was at work, but because she was injured and having trouble walking.

Tennis had given me my wife.

I had been through many relationships over the years. Even lived with people. And I had taught a lot of women to play tennis as a part of that. But until age 40 I had essentially been alone, if not physically, certainly emotionally.

I had been doing the computer dating thing for a couple of years and was basically ready to give up. I loved women, but I had two major strikes against me at the time. I lived in New Jersey and worked nights.

New York City women, even if they lived outside the city, only wanted a guy who lived in the city. Working nights was an even bigger issue.

Match.com wasn't working for me. But I still had some time left on my subscription.

I typed in tennis. Two women came up. One was a tennis teacher. The other was a tennis player. I didn't believe in sending messages to multiple women at

the same time and I don't know why I chose the tennis player over the tennis teacher, but I did.

The woman was Elizabeth Skaflestad.

My profile said I was a nationally ranked tennis player in the 40 and overs. I was fourth at the time because we were four months into the year and I had already played tournaments while the top guys had not yet played any.

She checked me out to see if my profile was legit. It was, even though my ranking was just a calendar glitch. Our first date was a meeting at the restaurant in Central Park on a weeknight I had taken off because I was expecting to play a tournament that night before losing in the round before.

Turned out she was also legit.

Liz was practically raised at the Park Lake Tennis Club in Mountain Lakes, N.J., one of the few girls in their junior program. She helped take care of the courts and her first job was stringing rackets.

Her older brother Clyde was a top junior player who ended up playing at South Carolina and giving a shot at the satellite circuit. Liz played in the junior college nationals. She could hit her forehand as hard as any man.

But she walked away from the sport after having a coach say she couldn't drink water on the court.

She played a little bit but was carrying a lot of old injuries, including a torn ACL, when we met. We had played social mixed doubles at Roosevelt Island on some of our first dates. It was great fun. We never lost a set.

We made a great team. She would stand to the side and let me do all the running. Our opponents would get tired of watching me chase down balls, and figuring this sweet little Boo-Boo at the net couldn't really play, so they would finally hit it to her. She would put away easy winners.

But it wasn't like a tournament, or even about competition. We worked well on the court together.

But one time one of our opponents went over the line.

I could tell when the guy came out on the court that things were a little bit unusual. He hit every ball in the warm up as hard as he could. He was

whispering directions at his wife. She just nodded and did not look happy. He did not respond to friendly chatter.

It started early. Liz was at the net. I was at the back (our usual formation, even when we did not intend it to be). The Intimidator, actually a skinny guy with a mustache fired a return of serve directly at Liz's head. She ducked and it went 10 feet long.

I looked at her. She looked at me. OK, maybe an accident I thought. A couple of points went by before he fired another ball directly at her body. She stepped aside and volleyed it for a winner. But I was livid.

I walked toward the net. Liz just turned around and whispered "Don't do anything."

Usually in this league I would have to be very careful. A lot of the women were weak and were not even savvy enough to get out of the way when their partner threw up a lob that would lead to an easy overhead. So I was real careful not to go all out, especially on overheads.

The Intimidator's wife was one of these weaker female players so I was all the more incensed by his behavior. He was putting his own wife in danger because a lot of players would follow his aggression by doing the same to his partner.

Or maybe he was counting on nobody going as low as he was. I know I wasn't about to target her.

But I was going to target him. In my mind the score was irrelevant. I was just trying to hit a target.

But I couldn't do it. And Liz wasn't happy that I was ruining her fun, social game. I pulled myself back.

Then it happened again. He whizzed another ball past Liz's head. That was it. This wasn't tennis now. This was man to man I was going to go across the net to kick his ass. Liz stopped me before I could get there.

"I will take care of it," she whispered. I was in a blind rage, but I listened.

On the next point she got one of those easy overheads and smacked it with all her force into the guy's stomach.

He glared at her. I moved toward the net.

“Oh sorry,” Liz said.

He didn’t try to hit her again.

Our mixed doubles “success” had me thinking tournaments, but she wanted no part of it. She just wanted to play socially, a term I had a hard time understanding.

She also just loved to bang the ball.

One day we went out to Leonia. I had a hopper filled with balls. The plan was to feed her groundstrokes.

She couldn’t move much, but boy could she hit. I would stand at the net and hit volleys back at her.

Next to my serve, my volley had always been a major challenge, but against Liz I could work on my volley by just hitting it straight back to her.

It was a great day. It was 90 degrees and humid. And Liz was ripping the ball, with great little adjustment steps as she set up to the ball.

I was a duck in a shooting gallery, doing all I could to get the ball back to her. She was hitting them to my forehand, to my backhand. I was diving in every direction. One came directly at me. All I could do was fight it off.

Instinct told me to angle it for a winner. But in that split second I remembered I was trying to hit it to her. I ended up splitting the difference. It wasn’t to her and it wasn’t so far away that she would let it go. She took three quick steps and on the fourth step....

Disappeared. The ball never came back, and she was on the ground. She was grabbing the hamstring on her good leg, and crying.

It was warm so I thought it was a bad cramp, and even if it wasn’t she was crying so much I was afraid of her going into shock.

I carried her to the clubhouse. She told me it was not a cramp. I kept insisting to her that maybe it wasn’t that bad. Now it was my own guilt I was trying to convince.

I find this great woman and I break her on the tennis court.

One of the other club players comes into the clubhouse. He wasn’t there to offer help or sympathy. He wanted to ask if we could play doubles.

“She just got hurt,” I said. “Maybe she will feel better in a little while,” he said. “Maybe it is a cramp.”

Oh Lord.

It turned out to be a near complete tear of the hamstring.

Four years later, she is still battling leg and back issues and has barely held a racket.

But our wedding was with everyone wearing white, and the Federer-Sampras match from Wimbledon playing on a continuous loop.



# Chapter 14

Liz had become my inspiration.

For all my hours on the court, in the gym and on the yoga mat, nothing compares to the kind of physical torture she endures in an attempt to get healthy again. She endures a physical therapist who beats the crap out of her and regular sessions in the gym to try to get back into the kind of shape she needs to be to get her knee reconstructed.

Sometimes she just lays in bed crying in physical pain and emotional desperation to get back to health.

It requires more heart and effort from her to spend 20 minutes in the gym than it takes me in 20 hours.

Seeing that makes it easy to forget a bad loss.

My next tournament was another Eastern Sectional championship, this time on Long Island.

Life was seriously getting in the way of my tennis game.

Most of my co-workers in my department were gone, and it was looking like they were going to keep me. So my boss and I were going to be responsible for supervising the New York Times newswire from New York with most of the copy editing being done in Gainesville, Florida.

But there were lots of problems with that arrangement and for the first time in my life I could say my job was exhausting. And all the months of thinking I would be unemployed had made me battle weary. And unemployment was still not totally out of the picture.

Also, since moving to Manhattan with my new wife the previous November I had transportation issues. She needed the car for work most days and I couldn't

complain because I was able to walk to work.

So all my practice sessions at Leonia would involve a subway and bus trip each way.

But this would be the first tournament outside of New York City I would ever have to play using public transportation.

I carefully planned out my route. I would take a subway to Penn Station and then two separate Long Island Rail Road trains to get Roslyn. And then a long walk to the club.

I left two hours earlier than I needed to for my first round match. I hit the subway and the Long Island Rail Road trains perfectly on schedule and got off in Roslyn with two hours to make what I figured to be a 20-minute walk.

All I needed to do was have someone point me in the right direction. I asked and got directions to start me on the main road in the right direction.

There was a little grocery store there and I considered stopping for water. But since I was already weighed down with all my tennis gear I figured I was all right.

I walked for 15 minutes and came up to the interlaced cul-de-sacs where the club was located.

I had been to the club before but always approached from a different direction by car. I had the map that was online for the club but it did not label the streets inside the community.

One street turned back around and back to the main road. Another road went left when the map said it should be going straight. I asked a worker coming out of a restaurant. He didn't speak English. Another couple did not know.

I called up the club. The tournament director answered. He said he could not help. That the guy in charge of the club made the map and he had never walked to the club.

I was there, but I was lost. And it was hot. I was lugging my gear up and around hills, and I had no water. Above all else, I really had to go to the bathroom. And I was getting close to my match time so I was afraid of being defaulted.

I decided to take the road that was to the left that the map said was straight. It worked!

I arrived drenched in sweat, with my kidneys hurting, thirsty and a nervous wreck. Time to play a match!

My opponent was a guy whose record seemed to indicate he was beatable, but not easy.

I was worried.

The match started easily enough. My opponent couldn't keep a ball on the court. I took a 3-0 lead. But then he started combining big forehands with forehand drop shots to start coming back. OK, I thought to myself, just hit to his backhand and you will be OK. But my balls kept going shorter and shorter and he started running around it. Before I know it we were at 4-4. And my legs were feeling like lead.

It was not as much fatigue as nerves. I was choking. But I changed my strategy to the Four Winners philosophy: To beat me he would have to hit at least four winners to win a game. Back and forth we went. The points were long and I ran down a lot of drop shots, but I prevailed, 7-5.

Phew. I relaxed.

The next thing I knew I was trailing 2-0 in the second set. Back to the Four Winners philosophy. I prevailed 6-3. Two hours and 15 minutes. But I was happy. I overcame the second worst experience getting to a tournament.

My worst experience was in the one of the first tournaments I ever played, when I was in my 20s.

I was staying with a girlfriend in Brooklyn and had to get to a tournament at Cunningham Park in Queens. Normally it was a 45-minute trip, but this time it took me two hours because of pothole repair crews (yes, they do fix them sometimes) on the Belt Parkway.

I arrived just in time and when I tried to fill up my water bottle it broke, so I had to play without water. The match was starting the third set tiebreaker when two men walked onto the court. They said they had the court.

"But this is a tournament," I screamed. My opponent was just as confused.

I gave my racket to my girlfriend and went looking for the tournament director. "Hit with him, don't give up the court," I told her.

The tournament director was nowhere to be found. The kid running the desk had no idea a tournament was going on and said that the guys had signed up for the court. I tried calling the tournament director on the phone number of the entry form. The phone at the desk rang.

By now my opponent had joined me at the desk. He was calmer than I was but we were not leaving. The kid at the desk called the club manager at home. He said we should be given the next available court. The next available court was two hours later.

We sat. And I stewed. My opponent seemed intimidated by it all and didn't say much. Finally, we got on court. It was in the second bubble in a temporary structure. And it was much faster than the first court. And it was freezing.

But I was determined. I wanted to raise holy hell with the USTA, and if I didn't win the match it would just seem like I was a sore loser.

I don't remember how I won that tiebreaker on a very fast court, with no serve and no volley back in those days, but I did.

I went home and called the tournament director at the number listed in the tournament book, which years later I would edit as I volunteered to help with local tournament scheduling.

No answer. I left a message with my match score. And a question of what time the next day I would play my next match. No call back. How can I show up for a match when I don't know what time it is? I would have called the local USTA office, except it was a Sunday.

So I assumed I was defaulted by a tournament director who had abandoned his own tournament. I heard of players defaulting. But this might have been the first time a tournament director defaulted.

I got a phone call late Sunday night. It was the tournament director. He said he had an emergency and that my next match would be the following weekend. And there would be a change of venue. We would be moving from hard courts in Queens to clay courts on Long Island. He said there was a problem with the facility at Cunningham. Wow. I wonder what that could have been?

That was it. I was about to explode. But first he needed to tell me one other thing. My opponent?

He was my opponent.

If I thought I was motivated for that tiebreaker, I was even more motivated for this match. If I lost this match I would be unable to complain because of the sour grapes aspect. And right now being able to complain about this tournament was far more important than winning.

I was heartened after he arrived a couple of seconds after his stomach.

The first set was tough, but I managed to prevail, 7-5. His stalling did not help him in the second set as I won, 6-1. It was over and I finally could tell him what I thought about his tournament and how I was going to complain to USTA officials.

“Well, you can complain right now,” he said introducing me to a woman in the lounge he said was his girlfriend. “She is in charge of tournaments.”

I never saw either one of them again.

# Chapter 15

Tennis can make strange bedfellows. Your toughest opponents can be your best practice partners and once you reach a certain level the only players who can give you a game are the ones competing in the same events.

So there is a mutual respect among competitors who you hang out with when away from home for tournaments and play doubles with. You warm up with them before your matches.

After my win the in the first round on Long Island my opponent in the quarters offered to drive me to the train station. But when we got on the court for our match my goal would be the same as Mr. T. in Rocky III: Pain.

He was a tall athletic player. His strokes were a bit mechanical, but solid.

The points were fun. The tournament director the day before had outlined how to play him in front of everyone, including both of us. “Your backhand is very solid,” he said. “I would make you run.”

“Just tell everybody how to play me,” my opponent would say.

I listened. I stayed away from the backhand. I made him run.

It got me a 6-2 loss in the first set. I tried playing high to his backhand in the second set. The points got longer. I broke him to go to 2-2. I held to go up 3-2.

He called an injury timeout. He was stretching out his calf. I had a chance against a guy who in terms of previous results should beat me.

A million things went through my mind. Mostly how reaching the semifinals of a Sectional would really help me in terms of ranking points. I got tentative. Too defensive. He held. And he was fighting through the pain. He held. It was my turn to serve. I was not going to be tentative. My serve did not let me down.

But I started going for too much off the ground. After several deuces he broke me.

But I broke back to make it 4-4. Then it was time for my serve to let me down. A key double fault caused me to be broken again. He saw light at the end of the tunnel and put me away.

Oh God. What a match. I was right there with him. He said that if I took the second set he would have defaulted. I was disappointed. But I was also hopeful. I came very close to beating a very good player who a few years ago would have wiped the court with me.

All the work I had put in over the last few years on the practice court had paid off. I just needed to get back to the practice court. But it wasn't so easy anymore.

My all-purpose practice partner at Leonia was no longer available.

If ever I couldn't get a game I would just give Johnny a call.

He couldn't move an inch on the court but he would stand in one spot as I fired balls at him, and most of the time they came right back at me.

We would also do it occasionally during the winter at the Fort Lee Racquet Club.

One winter day we had finished a two-hour nonstop indoor sparring session when Johnny's usual raucous tone turned introspective.

"I don't feel right," he said. "I am going to die soon."

I was shocked. He had just absorbed two hours of the best I had to offer. His face and bald head were red, but they were always red.

"What does the doctor have to say about it?"

"I haven't seen a doctor in 30 years," he said.

"Well maybe you should," I responded.

"No," he said. "I am not going to live like that."

I sort of understood what he meant.

A doctor might tell him he shouldn't be playing. And that would be worse than death for Johnny.

When that summer rolled around Johnny was back on the Leonia courts with me, day after day in 90-degree heat.

I loved the workouts in the heat, but occasionally it would be too much for Johnny. When he stopped trash talking I knew he had enough. I would get him out of the sun, make sure he got some fluids in him.

The Friday before the Wimbledon finals we had one of our longer, more intense sessions. We planned to do it again the following Monday.

It didn't happen. Johnny died that Saturday. He was found by his sister with his TV on for the Wimbledon women's finals.

I wrote about Johnny on the New York Times tennis blog:

## At These Local Courts, 'Roger' Always Won

By RAY KRUEGER

Tennis greatness was on display at Wimbledon this past weekend. It was also on display at the courts in northern New Jersey.

That is where John Capuzzi would be on a court every day. In the winter it would be at the Fort Lee Racquet Club, where he was a dedicated early bird. In the summer it would be at the Leonia Tennis Club, where Capuzzi, 64, worked as the caretaker.

Capuzzi was not a world-ranked player. But he was one of those people who gave life to the sport, the kind of person who forms the first links of the chain in local parks and at the local clubs that lead to Wimbledon.

Capuzzi would brush the Leonia courts every summer morning and then he would play. It didn't make a difference if you were a junior just starting out or a 44-year-old senior tournament player, like me, looking for a workout, "the Duke" would want to hit with you. And coach you.

Although he probably never earned a cent coaching, Johnny was everyone's coach, preaching following through on groundstrokes and moving forward on the volley.

The volley was his great talent, and he would spend hours standing at the net hitting perfect volleys and screaming at his sparring partner to "hit it harder." A



great shot was never his goal. To him hitting a great volley was “normal,” as he would tell you in his version of tennis trash talk.

But what made him truly happy was to be hit by a groundstroke after running his opponent corner to corner.

Nobody has ever received more joy being smashed by a tennis ball.

And nobody would revel more in the details of the game. It wasn't unusual to see the Duke all alone on the Leonia courts trying to mimic Marion Bartoli's unique service motion.

*“I have to figure this out,” he would say, before taking his customary position at the net for another two-hour hitting session.*

On the rare times he would venture to the baseline, the perfect groundstroke was his goal. If nobody was on the neighboring courts, the Duke would scream “Roger” when he would hit a great one-handed backhand. All that his victim (me) could do was to scream “Nadal” in running it down.

On Saturday at 7 a.m., Capuzzi swept the Leonia courts and played as he always did. He went home and watched Wimbledon on television. And then sometime on Saturday afternoon the Duke died.

Capuzzi did not live to see his favorite player break the record for Grand Slam titles on Sunday.

But he knew that when “Roger” and “Nadal” would go at it every day at the Leonia courts, “Roger” won those rallies every time.

# Chapter 16

With Johnny gone, my practice partners ranged from 13-year-olds to 65-year-olds, all dedicated players.

They were:

— Ed Aversa, a 48-year-old dentist who a few years earlier won the NJ State 35 and over championship.

— Terry McLaughlin, a 50-year-old teaching pro, who a couple of years earlier was the number 1 ranked player in the East in the 45 and overs,

— Alan Edelstein, a 49-year-old magazine editor and filmmaker with a solid baseline game

— Joshua Halpern, a 16-year-old tournament player

— Will Persson, a 14-year-old tournament player

— A bunch of other players of varying shapes, sizes, ages and ability levels.

I rotated them as I got ready to play my next tournament, a Sectional in Upper Ridgewood, NJ. A small draw meant I was starting in the quarterfinals. But my first opponent: Clark.

My wife didn't need the car so that solved the problem of getting to the tournament, which was not near the train station.

Since my potential opponent in the next round was the top-ranked player who I had little success against, I wasn't worried that I couldn't have the car the next day.

I was determined to match Clark in a low-risk grinding match and was expecting what could be a five-hour-match in 90-degree heat.

The match was scheduled for 5 p.m. I was there at 3:30. Clark called to say he would be arriving a couple of minutes late.

We finally got out at 5:20.

The points were long, but as they went on my trying to stay calm was translating too much to my feet. Hit and wait had replaced hit and move.

I lost one game, then another, then another.

It was 6-0, 2-0, when the fire started. Total rage. I started hitting the ball harder. My strategy didn't change in terms of not trying to hit winners. What changed was the way I was hitting the ball. I finally won a game, then another. And another. The points were getting longer and the match was getting very entertaining. His pace had picked up through using my pace

People were watching from outside the clubhouse, which was on a hill.

His game picked up. Every game went to deuce. He won a game. I won a game. We were on serve, but the serve wasn't important.

I broke him to go up 6-5. I was serving for the set. My adrenaline was pumping so much I did not even think of my serve letting me down. At 15-all I served an ace to the backhand. On set point I played high to his backhand. He hit a looper to my backhand. I stepped around it and ripped it. It came back toward my forehand. I ripped it cross-court. He was able to barely reach it but his shot floated 10 feet wide.

He dejectedly walked to the side and went to get new balls. I changed my shirt, my bandana and had a Pedialite.

I was flying emotionally. I thought of a tournament match I once played that I won after trailing 6-0, 5-0, 40-15. I also thought of a match I once played that I had lost after leading 6-0, 5-0.

He came out and played his worst game of the match and I broke him on four straight points. I held easily. This match was mine. I was mentally in the clubhouse.

Unfortunately my feet went asleep again. I played my worst game, worse than the eight straight games I lost.

He held. He had life. And the points were long again.

And it was getting dark.

We had our longest game, but I prevailed. But the tournament director was walking out to the court.

The thing I would call the emotion I was feeling now was fear. The fear of having to somehow find a way to come back the next day to play only a few more games. And also of losing my advantage of having worn him down (maybe).

He said he thought it was too dark to play but he would leave the decision up to us.

“I want to keep playing,” I said quickly. “OK,” Clark said. I wasn’t surprised. He lived far away from the tournament site.

But my fear did not dissipate. My heart and mind were both racing:

“I must finish this match. I must make this happen.”

I started going for winners. The more I missed the more I went for. The match was over in 10 minutes. The final score: 6-0, 5-7, 6-3.

It had taken me three hours, twenty minutes and it was almost totally dark. I sat in the car and cried.

I called my wife and told her how sorry I was to have embarrassed her.

I asked her to forgive me

I called Ed. I told him what happened. “You lost a three-hour match in this weather?” Yes. “You!?”

I told him I would be available to practice tomorrow.

# Chapter 17

The demons were visiting. My next tournament was going to be the National grass court 45s in Philadelphia in three weeks.

But every possible tennis phobia was shuffling inside my head. My serve. Am I in as good of shape as I think I am? What if I run into an opponent who cheats? It is a lot easier to cheat on grass than on clay because you can't point to a mark on grass. Heck, sometimes on grass the lines are washed out and hard to see.

Tennis is a strange game in terms of the lines. The object is to hit the ball on the lines or close to them. That isn't the case for football, baseball or any other sport.

Tennis had taught me trust.

First you have to trust your opponent to show up. Then you have to trust them not to cheat on calls.

Not coming from a family background that fostered much trust made this an especially important leap for me.

I was fortunate starting out. My original tennis buddies in high school never cheated. Nor did my practice partners at Juniper.

I was especially careful with my own calls. Growing up playing exclusively on hard courts I never had the benefit of looking at a mark, so I developed my own rule.

A ball not only had to be out to call it out. There had to be distance between the ball and the line for me to call it out. I had to see green.

I was never cheated by anyone at Juniper, but I do remember the first time thinking about line calls entered my life.

I was playing against John the Cop, who was one of my regular partners when I was first starting to take the game seriously.

He hit a ball long by two or three inches. I called it out.

He screams “Can’t you give me those calls?”

I was infuriated. “I have given you those calls,” I screamed back.

My reaction must have been so loud, and so out of character that play stopped on the two courts to the right of me and the two courts to the left.

It’s OK, Ray,” I heard from somebody to the right of me. “Yeah, it’s OK,” I heard to the left.

My opponent was no stranger to arguments, but I could hear shock in his voice. “I’m sorry,” he said.

But at that point I became as fearful of giving bad calls as getting them. So when I started playing on clay I always felt more at ease. “Marks,” can be proof. At least most of the time.

But not 100 percent proof.

A tournament director once told me he had a player who was a horrible cheater, even on clay. He would point to other marks, sometimes as much as six inches away to prove his calls were correct.

The tournament director said he once overruled this player 12 times in a match, an amazing number. After the match the player told him that he was wrong on his overrules twice. So he basically admitted to cheating ten times in a match.

Some tournament directors will refuse to come out to call lines. “Settle it yourself” is their attitude. The National tournaments usually have roving linemen so you can get help.

But they are not always paying attention to your match.

The first time I think I was ever cheated was a 35 and over National hard court tournament I played in Arizona.

Here I was new to nationals and way over my head. My first round match was against a guy with a 120 mph serve and little else. We were on the stadium court, surrounded by bleachers.

Neither one of us was seeded, but with all these great players on other courts everybody was watching us. I was happy to make it a close match, but was in over my head, and ended up losing.

I ended up talking to one of the other players after the matches.

“We were all rooting for you,” he said. “That guy is the worst cheater out here. He was hooking you on every call on the baseline.” I had no idea.

Later in the tournament I watched him play doubles and found out they were right. He was cheating. His opponents called the lineswoman. He responded by launching his serves at the net guy. A linesman joined the lineswoman to prevent a brawl from breaking out. Wow.

That was the only time I saw a linesperson call for reinforcements.

The first, and only time, I ever called a linesman was at a 35 and over Sectional championship at the National Tennis Center a short time after the Arizona tournament.

It was in the first set of an early round match. I called a ball long that was a couple of inches out. My opponent just stared at me. I thought to myself, this is going to be a problem. The next ball I hit close to the baseline was called out.

I did not hesitate. I was as upset at my call being questioned by implication as when he cheated me. I ran off the court and went to the tournament desk to ask for the linesman.

“I don’t know where he is,” she said. I started looking around the courts when I saw him walking to the desk.

“I need you,” I said. “I will be right there,” he said.

I went back to the court.

“I am getting us some help,” I told my opponent, who looked angry.

First rule of cheaters: They are the first to accuse somebody else of cheating.

The linesman showed up, and my opponent could not keep a ball on the court. His game was destroyed. I just had to get the ball back. I won the first set easily.

The second set started and the linesman started looking toward other courts.

“Please don’t go,” I whispered to him.

He stayed. Then he took it to another level.

“Foot fault!” he screamed after my opponent’s first serve. “Foot fault!”

I actually felt bad. I didn’t get a linesman just so I could win. All I wanted was a fair chance.

I passed the linesman on a changeover. “Please don’t do that again,” I said. “I have to,” he responded. In another 15 minutes the match was over.

“I didn’t get him to call foot faults,” I told my opponent. He didn’t respond.

He is another player I wouldn’t see for another 10 years.



# Chapter 18

It is always strange playing a grass tournament.

Since very few people play on grass everybody is a bit leery, even the serve and volleyers. I prepared by trying to play as much serve and volley in practice as I could.

My volley had improved enough over the years to where I actually enjoyed coming to the net. Well, actually I enjoyed being at net. Making the transition to coming to net was still not natural. I simply did not have an instinct to know when to come up; either I decided to go up or stay back and when I practiced I just decided to go up.

The tournament was in Philadelphia and my wife was going to come with me for the first few days before the actual tournament started. So I would practice on the grass for part of the day and spend the rest of the day with her.

We did the total tourist thing, going on a sightseeing bus and things like that.

We drove down and before the tournament started I drove her back and drove back to the tournament. I thought the three hour drive would be do-able and I was considering not staying at a hotel.

That idea was quickly abandoned after my first time driving back after driving her home.

Even though my style is more suited for clay courts I have always been comfortable on fast courts because of the lower bounce and being able to use my opponents pace.

It was a 64-player draw and I was lucky not to be facing a seeded player in the first round. Actually, I could not find much information about my opponent, who was from Maryland.

The Germantown Cricket Club was the main site of the tournament, an old club with all-white clothing rules, a classic dining room and classy feel that made me feel strangely out of place.

Still, the grass courts were chewed up. And it was hot. So spots played like clay courts and there was no such thing as a predictable bounce.

As we were taking the court I noticed a particular rough patch on the forehand side of the far court from the clubhouse. I knew where to hit it.

Sometimes my opponent would completely miss the ball because of the bounces. But he was no pushover. He served and volleyed and I tried to hit passing shots. When I was serving I did not serve and volley but I did end up hitting volleys from midcourt in spite of myself.

I won the first set 6-1, but the games were not quick. I was anticipating his shots well and hit a couple of volleys that amazed myself because I anticipated so well.

I went up 5-0 in the second set when I whiffed after a ball hit the rough patch. Then he hit another shot in the same spot. Oh no. I am in trouble now. My mind started racing. I started choking. Soon it was 5-2.

I went back to the side of the net without the rough patch. I aimed for it. But he had figured it out and was taking away that shot by coming forward. I would have to hit passing shot winners. But he was making the first volley and I was forced to hit a second passing shot.

He successfully made it 30-all when I sailed a passing shot long. Oh Lord.

A service winner got me back to deuce. The next point was a blur of him coming to net, me hitting a lob, him hitting an overhead, and then me throwing up another lob. He missed the second overhead.

He slumped over the net in exhaustion. He was spent. I hit my biggest serve to his forehand. He hit it twenty feet long. I had the much needed ranking points.

My next match would be against the ninth seed, Willie Alumbaugh, who is a very bad matchup for me. He does everything I do well a little bit better. I lost 6-0, 6-1.

But I still had the back draw, where there are a lot of ranking points to pick up. The consolation round was over at the Merion Cricket Club, which seemed

two steps up from Germantown in terms of high-end, as amazing that might seem.

The courts were immaculate. Not a bad spot on them. It was like a putting green. We were the third match of the day on our court and I could not find an imperfection.

My opponent was a teaching pro from the Cincinnati area, who lost to one of the top guys in the main draw. I figured my chances were not good.

Against Willie I mostly tried to stay with him in the back of the court. For this match, figuring I had little chance, I was going to serve and volley.

It did not go well. First set, 6-0.

We were having long games on his serve, but he was winning easily on my serve. I was getting to the first volley well enough but not doing enough with it to avoid a passing shot on the next ball.

It was 4-1 in the second set when I gave up on the serve and volley. It was not out of strategy, but more out of frustration. Still I lost the next game to make it 5-1. But that is when we had our longest point of the match. At 30-40, match point, I hit a one-handed topspin backhand that he volleyed cross court. I ran it down and hit a down-the-line forehand winner that eluded his dive. After two more deuces I would eventually win the game.

The points all of a sudden were longer. No longer nervous, my successful passing shots had driven him off the net. I survived another match point and another. I survived six match points and we were at 5-4.

We had another long point that I won with another impossible forehand winner. It was 5-5.

“Put this guy away,” my opponent screamed to himself.

I was up 6-5 when I realized that I could win this thing. But I was serving. I decided to try a serve and volley. I hit a perfect volley that he could only push wide. I served and volleyed again and blew the volley. I did it again and he hit a perfect passing shot I could not handle. Double fault.

I was so angry at myself for changing things up and went back to my staying back. But I hit a down the line backhand on a passing shot that hit the top of the net. We were going to a tiebreaker.

I was confused. Was he really going to keep coming forward? Did I just blow my best opportunity?

Strangely, I wasn't nervous. Maybe it was because I still felt like I was going to lose. Maybe it was because the match wasn't going to be determined by what I was doing as much as it was by what he was going to do and whether he could close it out.

The tennis was great. He would come to net and I would hit great passing shots or he would hit great volleys. I was up 7-6 in the tiebreaker on my serve. He hit a service return that pushed me out of position enough to where his next shot caused me to pop up a lob that he put away.

But a passing shot gave me a 8-7 lead and another set point. Back and forth we went, corner to corner.

Finally, he chipped a backhand down the line and came to net. I hit a great forehand cross court. He volleyed it back to my forehand. I powered a forehand down the line that I thought was a winner when he laid out in a full dive, barely getting his frame on the ball. The ball spun up, perched itself on the net and dropped over. I attempted my own dive but could not reach it. I just lost a set point on a mishit that was also a net chord.

We were at 8-all and I was even more sure I would lose. He hit an unreturnable serve to go up 9-8. I sprayed a forehand long to end the match.

# Chapter 19

I saw Willie with his wife after the match. He had also just lost. We just exchanged sad glances and didn't say a word. It was one of the few times he didn't have a smile on his face.

Willie and his wife were fixtures at most of the national tournaments I played. His wife, who runs tournaments, loves the game as much as he does, even though I have never seen her on a court.

I once asked her if she ever got bored traveling to all these tournaments just to watch. "No, I love it," she said with a smile.

I first met Willie at a tournament in Kansas City ten years earlier, during one of the first times I had taken a flight to play in a tournament. It was an eventful trip.

I thought I was ready. I was traveling alone and found a hotel on a hill a half mile up from the courts, which were in the center of town. A walk to the courts, lots of places to eat and access to laundry facilities, the triple crown for a tournament traveler.

And the weather was great. Hot and humid. My first round opponent was a local so maybe I had a chance at advancing.

But it wasn't to be. The match was long, but he was just too good, especially on hard courts. I had gone all this distance for one match. I had tried to pick up a doubles partner but I was the odd man out. I sat near the courts and watched the matches.

Oh well. Maybe this all isn't worth it, I thought.

Just then one of the tournament workers asked if I was Ray Krueger. I said yes. She said my consolation match was in 15 minutes. The tournament did not

have a full feed-in back draw consolation tournament, but did have a first-round losers consolation tournament. There were very few points on the line, but at least I would get a chance to play some more.

My opponent was another local, and not as good as the guy I played in the main draw. He wasn't terrible but if I took the points beyond the seventh or ninth stroke he would make errors. I won the first set, 6-2.

But I wasn't feeling right. I felt fuzzy mentally. And my head had a dull pounding. Still I got out to a 3-1 lead in the second set. Then it started. My forearm started to feel stiff. I was serving when the stiffness became a knot. I could hardly lift my arm. I double faulted. I started losing every point as my arm lost all of its power. My legs also started to get heavy.

But I was prepared. After my cramps in Juniper all those years ago I had always carried a cramping emergency kit.

Packets of salt. Stale Kansas City hotel bagels. And Gu.

Gu is carbohydrate jell that cyclists use. I stayed calm, and put the salt on the bagels and drank as much water as I could. And I sucked up the Gu. I then spread the Gu on the bagels. I would be fine I told myself.

I took it easy and basically threw the set. I would be better for a fresh start in the third set, I told myself. I wasn't. At least my legs didn't start cramping. But my arm didn't get any better.

I was still serving overhand and my opponent did not seem to notice my struggling. He was going for his shots and still making errors. So I kept eating and drinking and just pushing the ball back. We exchanged service breaks the first seven games. I was up 4-3. I was determined to not let the cramps beat me. This was not going to be a replay of that tournament at Juniper.

I was going to let it all hang out to try to hold serve.

My first serve isn't big under the best of conditions, but I went for it all in my delivery. It went 10 feet long. And my forearm felt like it exploded. No more of that. I lobbed in the second serve. The return went long. The second point I lobbed in my first serve. The return went into the bottom of the net, but I could hardly lift my arm. I double faulted. I managed to win a long point to go up 40-15 on a five-shot rally. Well, it felt long.

But surely my opponent knew I was hurting. He had to stop making errors. Our next point was even longer. It was 12 or 13 strokes corner to corner. Finally I set up a forehand cross-court winner. I let loose. The shot was a winner but the results were excruciating. My hand was cramping!

And my calves also started cramping at that moment. My whole body was about to seize up.

I held the racket in my left hand as my right hand had spasmed into a fist. I was up 5-3, but had to figure out a way to open my hand to hold the racket. Forget that I was having trouble walking. I didn't need to run to receive serve. But I did need to be able to grip the racket.

I got to the back fence and hooked my fingers in it and pulled to straighten them out. A woman watching the match on the other side of the fence had a look of horror on her face. I was confused yet focused. My hand stayed open long enough for me to slip the racket in it before it closed up again.

But since I was holding the racket tightly I had to make a decision: Forehand or backhand grip. Since he was playing toward my backhand and my left arm was practically the only body part not cramping I chose backhand.

And he served to my backhand! My return was not a winner, but good enough to where he couldn't get it back. 0-15.

The same thing happened in the second point. 0-30.

The third point went to my forehand. Ace. 15-30.

The fourth point again went to my backhand. I was able to return it, but barely. Then he just kept hitting the ball down the center. I hit backhands, each one pushing me further into the forehand court. I was in the forehand doubles alley when he finally went for a shot down the line into the open court. And missed! I was at match point.

He served again to my forehand and got the ace even though I did try to hit a two-handed forehand return. That was a first for me.

I stood near the center of the court to return serve on the add side. This was it. I knew this would be my last chance. There was no way I would get another match point.

He served wide. I barely reached it somehow taking two quick steps on my cramping legs. His next shot was down the line to my forehand. I had no choice. I sprinted to my right and managed to change my grip for a lunging topspin forehand. I did it. I got the ball. But I could not stop. He had a clear put away for a winner to the open court. But he hit it ten feet long as I crashed into the fence. I held myself on the fence to avoid going down, sort of like a sweaty Spiderman.

The match was over. He walked over to me and shook my hand. "Great job," he said. "Was your wrist hurting you?"

"I was cramping," is all I could say.

The woman who was behind the fence asked if I wanted a Gatorade. I said yes. But by then my stomach was cramping as well and I was hunched over. I grabbed my bag and tried to get off the court. I couldn't lift it. One of the players coming on the court lifted it for me and put it on my shoulder.

I blacked out for a second but caught myself before I hit the ground. I noticed I was shivering and my lips felt like they were bleeding.

I went to the little clubhouse and started eating. Everything they had. They didn't have much. They had these prefab steak sandwiches. I had their last three. I would have to get back to the hotel. Which was a half mile away. Uphill. Carrying my bag.

My leg cramps had gone back to being stiffness, but my arm was still spasming and my stomach was also going into mini spasms. But my mental state was what was worrying me. I went from being fuzzy to feeling like I was under water with the world and me seeming to be moving in slow motion. It took me a few seconds to comprehend conversations. But I was still alert enough to realize that was a problem.

It probably wasn't smart for me to be alone, but that was what I was as I slowly walked up that hill. It being a weekend in the center of town the streets were deserted.

I was miserable. Why was I doing this? I felt so lonely. It took me a half hour but I reached the hotel. And ordered room service. Seven times. I wish I still had the bill. The guy delivering the room service must have wondered how many



people were in the room and why they didn't make just one order. But each time I thought just one more meal and I would feel OK. I didn't.

The cramps had gone away, replaced by horrible stiffness. But I was still mentally fuzzy and couldn't do a thing except sit there and wait for the next meal. I couldn't even turn on the television to watch the U.S. Open, which was going on.

Finally the seventh room service order was a steak and a baked potato. It hit the spot, or something. I felt a wave of awareness wash over my brain. The first thing I did was turn on the television. Jennifer Capriati was playing Elena Dementieva. Dementieva was throwing in speed limit serves (55 mph) to Capriati's forehand and Capriati still couldn't win the points. Funny, I could see how that might happen.

The next day my opponent was Willie Alumbaugh. I didn't know him then, and looking back wonder who could have beaten him in the first round.

I felt OK as I walked to the tournament desk and met Willie. Two women were ahead of us waiting to be assigned to a court.

"Can I have a court in the shade?" one woman asked. "I have a skin condition." No, I can't do that," the tournament director explained firmly. "We have a limited number of courts and this is a tournament." She walked away.

Willie and I instantly had the same thought. He said it first.

"If our court is in the shade you can give it to her," he said. I agreed.

"No, she always comes up with stuff like that," he said.

The women ended up, like us, in the full sunlight. They started just ahead of us on the next court. We were warming up when the Complainer was at it again. "You aren't giving me a chance to get set," she said. "I am just trying to stay within the 30-second rule. And it is supposed to be at server's pace," the other woman responded.

A couple of points later they were at it again.

"That ball wasn't out," the Complainer said. "Yes it was."

They were just getting going.

More arguments about calls. More charges of quick play, stalling, excessive grunting, everything.

And it was all done in a semi-polite tone. Well, at least there was no cursing or threats of physical violence that might be happening if two men were involved. Two attractive women who looked to be in their mid-thirties were going at it after every point.

Me and Willie would just look at each other and smile during the changeovers as the women's conversation, while still having an air of civility, got more personal.

This scene seemed normal to the Complainer. But the other woman was clearly running out of patience.

"I didn't come here to listen to your complaints," the other woman said.

"Complaints?" the Complainer asked. "I took time away from my kids to play here with you today."

"Well, I took time away from my husband and kids to play here with you today." That seemed to hit a nerve.

"My husband only left me when I got sick for a year," the Complainer said.

"I was sick for two years," the other woman answered.

There was obviously more here than met the ear.

Both me and Willie tried to look away from the next court as we stifled our laughter as we looked at each other during a changeover.

The Complainer eventually walked off the court and went straight to her car without stopping at the tournament desk.

I could hear the other woman screaming "I am so sick of her!" at the tournament desk.

Willie beat me 6-2, 6-1. I felt fine going on the court but felt 20 percent less power, 20 percent less speed and 20 percent less alertness than I usually had.

We sat at the court and laughed at what we had seen next to us.

When we reported our score at the tournament desk I said how amazing it was to see what was happening on the next court.

"Oh, she does that all the time." the tournament director said. "It was nice to see somebody give it back to her."

# Chapter 20

The U.S. Open has always been where my worlds collide. Having been a sportswriter before becoming an editor, and being a tennis player, the U.S. Open, in the borough I grew up in, was a place I would run into people who had been part of my many lives.

But until 2007 I had never officially covered it.

That changed when I was one of the founding editors of the New York Times' U.S. Open tennis blog. I would work eight hours at the Open and then return to Manhattan for my regular job. That made for 16-hour days for two weeks. I loved every second of it. The next year I took my vacation days and spent 16 hours a day at the Open. Loved every second of it even more.

This year I was skipping the U.S. Open completely. I was too busy playing in my own tournaments and could not think of work outside the travails of my own department.

Philadelphia was the first week of U.S. Open. I stopped back at home and then headed up to Albany for another Eastern Sectional championship.

I had never traveled so far for a Sectional. But I desperately needed to reach a semifinal of a Sectional to get the ranking points.

Maybe the opposition would be easier up there I thought. Maybe I will get a good seeding. I didn't get seeded, and the four guys who were seeded deserved to be.

There were 16 players in the draw. My first round match was against a player I had never heard of. He had funky strokes, and on slow red clay, the ball seemed to take years to get to me.

I wanted to get out of there as soon as possible, and figured I would barrel through. I lost the first set, 7-5.

My emotions ran from rage at losing to what I thought was an inferior player, to panic that I traveled so far to lose in the first round, to frustration at not getting the points I needed.

And people were watching the match and rooting against me, which only made me madder.

I had to turn the match into a cage fight and try to be the last man standing. No more going for winners. I would just hit every ball up the middle and let the winner be determined by who had the better strokes and was in the better shape. The points got longer. But he wasn't giving up. The games got longer.

I won the next set 6-0, but the score was deceiving. He started to try to come to net. I ran down some overheads and won the third set, 6-1. Wow. It was such a stressful match.

My next match was the one I wanted, the one I needed. I had to have the 125 points if I wanted to end up in the top 20 in the country.

My opponent had a style I had never seen before. I had seen players who were total net-rushers, although nowadays they are rare. I had also gone against players who favored their backhands. This is the first time I had faced a net rusher who preferred the ball to his backhand.

And checking his record on the computer before I got on the court I saw he was no slouch, beating some of the top players in upstate New York.

It was going to be a rough day.

I checked out of the hotel in the morning, with my match not supposed to start until the late afternoon. The hotel I was staying in did not have wireless Internet in the lobby so I got in my car. I moved it to the back of the hotel where my room was. I logged in. I was able to log in. But the signal was too weak to get anything done.

So I drove to the University of Albany's lot and tried pulling near the closed buildings. No Internet.

I drove again. Finally pulled into a lot near another hotel. Success. I was able to work as I listened to the Mets game on the radio (had one of my Rotisserie

pitchers going).

I was talking with my wife on the phone as it started to rain. Pour actually. My heart sank. Another night in Albany without playing my match. Lovely.

But in 45 seconds it stopped. Looked like my match would get in.

I drove to the courts. They were playing.

I ate my salt bagel and got ready.

The match started slowly as I figured out my opponent's style. I was going to have to hit a lot of passing shots. He was great at the net and I would have to hit multiple passing shots to win points.

And every one of his approach shots were low. Good thing I like low balls. And I had done all that work in the gym. Still my thighs were screaming by the middle of the first set.

The games were close. I took a 5-4 lead. He made it 5-5. And his personality was annoying me. Screaming how lucky I was when my passing shots would hit the line. And even though it was not psychotic like the Berserker, I didn't feel like it was in a good-natured manner either. At least he is not cheating me, I thought.

I kept playing to his forehand. He would not hit approaches on his forehand so I could extend the points. He made some errors. I went up 6-5. He hit a double fault. He made an error trying to approach on a forehand. I hit the top of the net on a passing shot after letting a shot get to his backhand. He won a long point after an overhead.

The next point was also long. I ran down an overhead. His forehand volley sailed wide. He banged his racket on the red clay. He served. All I could do was get the ball back and it went to his backhand. He approached cross-court to my backhand, I dug the ball out and hit a low passing shot. He sliced a volley back low to my backhand, wrong footing me. I half volleyed a perfect down the line passing shot. It hit his frame and then the side fence. I had won the set. He slammed his racket into his bag.

Usually after winning a tough set there is a letdown that can cost you the next game.

But my intensity did not falter. Then at 2-2 the wind picked up. And it started to drizzle. I went up 3-2. My opponent walked to his chair and put his racket in his bag. I just went back out.

“It’s raining,” he screamed at the tournament director, who was watching another match. “The balls are getting wet.”

“Keep playing,” the tournament director said.

He grumbled to himself. The drizzle stopped.

I won the next game. I wanted him out of my life. But he was good. He broke me back and held after some amazing volleys.

We were back on serve, and the play raised a level. We ended up in a tiebreaker. But he was on fire, diving at volleys, hitting winners. He took the tiebreaker, 7-4.

But I was ready. He couldn’t keep playing at this level. Well, he could technically, but the energy he was expending had to be taking its toll. And I was hoping for a letdown.

I decided to try to just work his forehand and try to keep the points on the baseline. I took the first game. The second was a six-deuce war. I wrong footed him and he went down. He gave me the finger and screamed, “You are so lucky,” for probably the seventh time. Or maybe he was giving the finger to himself, or the court for causing him to slip. I came close to answering him, but just turned back around and went back to the baseline. I closed out the game with my biggest forehand for a cross-court winner.

I was enraged. But I was working hard to keep my emotions in check. I needed this next game and another half volley passing shot gave me the next game point. I was on a roll. It was 3-0, and he started going for wild shots.

The final set was 6-1. Wow. And whew. I shook his hand. I was glad he didn’t say anything to me because I could think of nothing good to say to him.

I packed up and checked back into the hotel.

The next day, I felt fine physically, but could not get myself back to level I needed to be mentally to play a superior player. I lost 6-0, 6-4. But had accomplished my goal in Albany: A semifinal.

I was finally going home happy.

# Chapter 21

My last National tournament of the year would be in Salt Lake City, Utah, at altitude.

Playing at altitude is something I have done very rarely, but thoroughly love.

Maybe it is because I am not affected by the thin air, while my opponents sometimes are. Maybe it is because the thin air helps the speed of my serve. Maybe it is because the speed of the court lets me play more half volleys.

Five years ago, I had my best result at a national, making the semifinals of the feed-in consolation round in the National Indoor 40s, with the help of my reputational default.

But before I went to Utah, I had one more Eastern Sectional championship to play.

It was again at Long Island, where I had my nightmare of almost bursting a kidney getting lost while walking to the club.

This time I would have my car.

I got to the club an hour and a half early, which was about my average.

And waited. And waited.

Fifteen minutes after the match was supposed to start and my opponent had not arrived.

“He called to say he was on his way,” the tournament director said.

Usually, after 15 minutes late a player will get defaulted but this tournament director has said he doesn’t believe in defaults. And I don’t either for a guy stuck in traffic who comes in a few minutes after the default time.

So I waited. A half hour went by. And waited. 45 minutes went by. And waited.

An hour went by.

I had enough. I asked the tournament director what was happening. He said the guy called and to be patient.

“You are experiencing the ecstasy of waiting,” he said.

He was serious. I was disgusted.

All I could think of is my wife was hoping I would get home in time to have dinner with her and how I had a million work projects on my agenda and I was sitting at a tennis club waiting for somebody to show up.

Yeah, it was the ecstasy of disappointing the woman I love on one of the few nights we both were not scheduled to work.

After one hour, 10 minutes my opponent shows up.

I did not know him, but had looked up his results and they were similar to mine, maybe a little better.

But I resented him before the match even started. Part of me wanted to destroy him and another part didn't think he deserved to be on the court.

And I was experiencing a little bit of flight or fight response to the situation. And my heart said flight.

Things happen, and there can be excuses for being late for a tournament match. But an hour and 10 minutes?

Lack of respect for the game. Lack of respect for your opponent.

But he was a good player. And I could not settle into my game.

I was also wondering if it was all worth it. Even if I won the match I would have to beat Jeff Snow to reach the semifinals, which I would need to do to get the points that would help me with national rankings.

He was up 4-2 when it started to rain. Wearing glasses, the rain gives me a lot of problems.

And if we were to stop we would have to come back the next day, which was a Monday and would cause me problems because I would have to drive to play my match on Long Island in the morning and then have to drive back to Manhattan to get to work. That is if we could play in the morning.

“I will do whatever you want,” my opponent said to me. “Play or stop. They are both OK with me.”



“I want to play,” I shot back. His offer just made me more upset at the situation. I wanted to scream out “We wouldn’t have this problem if you had been on time!”

But I did not.

He won the first set 6-4.

I fired my racket across the court into the fence.

“Warning!” the tournament director screamed.

“Thanks!” I screamed back twice as loud.

The manager of the club said that we should go down to the far court if we wanted to keep playing because that court could take more water and we could keep playing.

It was pouring now. And the court was like ice. All that we did was hit the ball down the middle and try to keep our footing.

He was up 3-1 when the club manager said we had to stop. We were destroying the court.

We agreed to play the next morning. But I went to my car knowing I wasn’t coming back.

I called the tournament director 15 minutes before the match was supposed to start so I knew my opponent had to make a trip out there for nothing. Like I had.

I was defaulted.

# Chapter 22

It was the first time I was ever defaulted from a match. All the injuries and obstacles I had overcome without defaulting and this sport had finally pushed me over the edge.

But I knew it was not just the sport. It was the uncertainty and stress of work and the crushing desperation of feeling I was letting my wife down at every turn.

But I had to put it out of my mind and prepare for Utah. My preparations were not ideal.

It was looking like the Times was serious about keeping me as one of two people in New York to supervise the editors in Gainesville, deal with clients and generally protect the brand.

But replacing 28 people was proving to be harder than anyone had thought. And being one of the few survivors had taken a heavy toll on me emotionally.

And it was looking like I would have to make a trip down to Gainesville. And it would be the week before I was to play in Salt Lake.

I had my regular practice partners set up at home, but I would have to line up some folks in Gainesville, just so I would have some practice and could preserve my fitness for the Utah altitude.

After my week in Gainesville, and my last practice session, which consisted of me hitting against a guy I saw at a local park, I flew home.

I did laundry, re-packed, and the next morning I was on my way to Utah.

It was snowing.

The tournament, which is usually in Park City, was in Salt Lake. But it was in the perfect location. The club was a mile's walk from a hotel, which was next to

a mall with a Whole Foods and lots of other stores. No need for a car. No need to eat out. Just work and tennis.

My first morning I ventured to the club. I was a couple of days early, which is one of the secrets of getting used to the altitude.

I felt it on the walk over, but once I started hitting I was fine. Incredibly fast courts. They use the pressurized balls to counter the altitude but they still fly. Topspin becomes even more important to keep the ball in the court.

I hit against one of the local pros. Then another. Played a practice set. I felt great. I did not draw a seed in the first round so I was hopeful I could last at least a round.

The next day some of the tournament players were in. I hit with them.

I felt so good that I was able to fool around with my latest toy, the Nadal-like follow through on the forehand.

It had become my obsession to learn, with the follow-through over the head. I was like a kid again, learning something Johnny had urged me to try.

I was holding my own against national level players and even able to practice a new shot on very fast courts. This is when tennis is fun I thought.

Then I heard a crack and could not see three feet in front of me.

My follow through had not gone over my head but into it and the racket had hit my glasses. The frames were on the ground mangled. One of the lenses had rolled ten feet away. It was in one piece, but I panicked and my heart sank simultaneously. I did not have a backup pair. My tournament was probably over before it started.

My only hope was to try to get them repaired. But I was in a strange city, Salt Lake, on a Sunday in one of the most religious cities in the country. Oh, and also I could not see.

I gathered up my stuff. My match was in 24 hours. And my only hope was to try to find some way to get them repaired.

I remembered seeing an eyeglass place in the mall near the hotel, when I could see.

I ran out of the club and started walking toward the hotel. It was good that I did not have a car because I could not have driven. I really could not see more

than three feet in front of me.

I passed Troy Goers on the way out. I did not recognize him.

“What’s going on?” Troy asked as I walked past him. He had never seen me without glasses.

I told him what happened and how I thought I was going to have to default before the tournament even started. He wished me luck. I told him that there was a guy inside the bubble who needed a practice partner.

I followed the path I knew back to the hotel. It was OK until I hit a major intersection. I needed to ask an old woman to help me cross the street.

Once I was in the mall area I had to ask another woman where the eyeglass place was. It was an odd conversation.

“Miss, can you tell me where the eyeglass place is here? I know I saw one the other day.”

“It is right over here, the big white building right in front of you.”

Thanks.

Was this fate’s punishment for defaulting a match I didn’t need to?

I was amazed that it was open. But I still couldn’t say I was hopeful. I was holding a lens in one hand and a mangled frame in the other.

I made my way to the counter.

I held out what was left in my glasses.

“I am in town for a tennis tournament,” I said, throwing my rackets on the floor and still wearing my bandana. “I broke my glasses and I don’t have a back-up pair. Is there anything you could do for me?”

A friendly young woman took the glasses and went into a back room.

“She came out about a minute later and handed me my glasses. They were good as new except for a slight scratch on one lens.

“Wow, you fixed them,” I shouted.

I took out my wallet. I was expecting and willing pay hundreds of dollars. “Oh, we do it all the time, no charge.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you so much. You just saved me a 2,000-mile trip.”

I stepped outside and called my wife. At that point I realized I was shaking.

I had overcome my first challenge before playing my first match.

The draw was only 32 players so one win would put me in the final 16 and get me 200 points. That would almost assure me a top 20 finish in the rankings.

I arrived early for my first match. The club's heating had broken down and it was freezing, but I remained calm. If I could handle not seeing I could handle anything.

My opponent was a local who I did not know much about. Neither did anyone else.

But he hit the heck out the ball in the warm up. His backhand was weaker than his forehand, but he hit everything hard and had a very good serve.

I would just try to get the ball back at the beginning.

We split the first two games. But a pattern was developing. He was spraying his backhand long.

When I would go to his forehand he would hit one in the court but a second one very long.

The first set was over in 15 minutes, 6-1.

By the end of the set I was hardly hitting any balls because his errors were ending the points so quickly. I held for the first game of the second set. But then he got smarter. He pulled back and held the next game. Then I started making errors. So I smartened up and played defensively. And so did he.

It was turning into a 12-and-under girls' match on slow red clay. Instead it was a 45-and-over men's match in the fastest conditions possible.

But he was getting tired. Or bored. Or something, because he was coming to net and I had a chance to force him to volley up and then I hit passing shots to take a 5-3 lead. But he was serving well by now.

We went to deuce. He sprayed a forehand long to give me match point. The next point was cat and mouse until he hit a net chord. I sprang up to get it.

He drove a backhand down the line. I saw him go to cover the open court and off my wrong foot punched a volley behind him. He could not recover. It was my only volley of the match and it gave me the win.

I was in the final 16 of a National.

My next opponent was Mario Tabares, the number 2 seed.

Tabares had won the National Grass Courts, defeating Rick Leach along the way. Yes, Rick Leach, the multi Grand Slam winning doubles player.

I was looking forward to the match because I had nothing to lose.

I was practically assured of finishing in the top 25 and maybe even top 20.

This was going to be fun, playing someone at the game's highest level.

The warm up was great. He hits a very clean ball. I thought to myself "I can play with this guy."

I was right. The first game went to seven deuces. He won it.

And he broke me after two deuces to win the next. But I broke him to make it 2-1.

And even though I played well I did not win another game. My goal was to be out there at least an hour and I did not achieve that.

But I did break the serve of a top guy. He would go on to beat Leach in the final to win the tournament.

## Chapter 23

After my match with Tabares, I struck up a conversation with one of the roving umpires, the one who had spent most of my match against Tabares sitting in the chair above the net.

“You played a great match,” he said to me in the lounge afterward. “You ran down so many balls in the first few games that I thought you had a shot.”

On the plane ride home I realized the kind of roller coaster the tournament had been. I had gone from telling Troy I thought I would have to default to holding my own (sort of) against one of the top players in the country.

I thought about my journey in Nationals. Ten years earlier, Goers was involved in another scary moment on the national circuit for me. That time I thought my life was in danger.

I had gone into that National 35 and over clay courts more prepared than ever. The event was in Daytona Beach. I took two weeks off and spent a week training for it at Saddlebrook.

I spent that week playing six to eight hours a day in the steaming heat. I was sore but the heat cured me every day. The only problem was staying hydrated. I could only drink so much water and drank a lot of Gatorade during the day and Diet Coke at night.

I lived on cereal, pasta and salads. For all the poor preparations I had for tournaments in the past this one I felt I was ready for.

I drove from Saddlebrook to Daytona Beach.

The facility hosting the tournament was brand new and there did not appear to be a building or tree for miles. Forest fires a few months earlier had made the land barren. It was like parachuting into a little tennis-only universe.

My first match was against another New Yorker, a guy who plays in many National tournaments, but is nowhere near National level. I beat him 6-0, 6-0.

My next match was against Goers, who I was meeting for the first time. But I had scouted his first match and noticed that he was a lefty who ran around his backhand. My strategy was to try to get to that backhand. And make him run.

We played a long first game with him holding. The second game was also long, with him breaking me. I was discouraged, but thought if I could just keep the games long he would tire. It was a total misread.

He held to win the third game. The fourth game was a war. I saved a break point to bring it back to deuce when I could not catch my breath. And my chest was hurting.

Was this some sort of asthma attack? A reaction to chemicals that they may have used in the new construction?

I did something I never did before or since at that moment. I intentionally bounced the ball on my foot so it would roll back to the fence. Then I slowly walked back to the fence to pick it up.

I tried to catch my breath. I could not. I lost the next point. Then the game. I still couldn't breathe. But I was still moving and sort of playing so it couldn't be too bad I thought. I tried to play through it, but I started going for crazy winners and did not have a chance.

The breathing didn't get worse but the chest pains did. I even started to think I might be having a heart attack.

The match ended and the breathing went back to normal. But the chest pains continued as I drank my Gatorade. The next day it was a dull ache but I tried to practice. The chest pains came back instantly. Now I was scared. I stopped playing and even though the pains went away they would come back with even the mildest exertion, like when I took a shower.

I was fine as long as I did not exert myself in any way, but something was definitely wrong. So I drove back to Saddlebrook. I thought about seeing a doctor, but I was so much into my training I thought it was more important to consult the coaches at Saddlebrook. I told them I was still getting chest pains in the shower.



They told me to see a doctor. I flew home and looked up a doctor. I kept thinking here I am in the best shape of my life and I was going to a doctor because I couldn't exert myself.

Aside from my back issues, which I saw the chiropractor for, I had not been to a doctor in years. I looked up my health plan for one that was nearby.

I was in his office the next day.

I described my symptoms. He said he wanted to test my lungs. He gave me a contraption to blow into. I blew into it. He looked at it.

"This can't be right," he said looking at the result. He adjusted it. Shook it in his hands and appeared to tighten a loose screw. He gave me it to blow into again. He looked at the result.

"You have the strongest lungs of anybody who has ever come in here," he said. I almost jumped for joy. I am in great shape, I thought. Wow, I had accomplished my goal.

Then I thought a little bit. The people in his waiting room look to average about 80 years old so maybe he wasn't saying that much about me.

Then I thought a little bit more. If it wasn't my lungs, it must be my heart. I started to break out into a sweat.

He brought the nurse in to hook me into a heart monitor. Eventually, he came in and leaned over the machine to read the results. He was shaking his head. I was a goner. I was expecting to hear I was dying.

He turned around. "You have the heart of a marathon runner," he said.

I was shocked. I went from dying to being in top health in about 15 seconds. But the question was still there. What was wrong with me?

I was confused and still a bit scared. He said he would run more tests and get back to me.

That is one of the weirdest times of life. Waiting for tests to determine whether you will die very soon or be considered in top athletic shape. Not only is there the range of emotions, but there is the reaction to the range of emotions.

"If I am healthy, boy it was stupid to be so worried and depressed about my fate." Or "If I am dying, it would be really arrogant and reckless to be going on with my life as if nothing was wrong."

The tests finally came back.

I had something called acute esophagitis. All the dehydration and rehydration with Gatorade and soda had caused my esophagus to get ripped apart. I was given pills and told to drink nothing but water and stay away from spicy foods. I felt better instantly.

And at that point I started to treat nutrition as important as physical training. Or at least tried to.

# Chapter 24

One tournament was left on my year in the 45s. It was another Eastern Sectional championship, this time in the Bronx. And unless I reached the final, which I realized was highly unlikely as the field was as good as I had ever seen for a non-National, it would not give me any points to improve my ranking.

So this one was for fun. Or something like that. Frankly, I couldn't figure out what this was for anymore.

I knew all the top players, had played most of them and even had wins over some. But I had accomplished my goal. I knew I was in the top 25 in the country, and maybe even in the top 20.

I was not seeded, and in the 17-person draw, did not deserve to be.

My first round opponent was a player I had never played before, but had seen on draw sheets many times before. His record was not good.

When I saw him, I realized I had seen him many times at tournaments. His head was down, and he looked like he was about to fall asleep. He would smoke cigarettes and drink coffee before his matches. He spoke to nobody. I saw him fall asleep, his head on a desk while waiting to play in one tournament.

We were waiting to go on a court when the tournament director wanted to have a word with him because there was a problem with his payment.

"My mother sent in a check," I heard him say.

He looked a lot older than 45, and was painfully thin and hunched over.

He walked very slowly.

When we got to the court, it was even worse. He slowly took out his racket and looked at it like he had never seen it before.

I gave him two balls. I took the other one. He walked to one side of court.

He went to start hitting. The ball did not reach the net. Not because he mishit it, but because he was not swinging hard enough. That was true when he tried to start the rally again.

He could return the ball when I started as my pace was enough for him to get the ball back.

I was stunned. There was nothing wrong with his strokes, there just wasn't any swing speed. And there was no foot speed either. He did not run to the ball and only would hit balls that were within his reach.

The warm up lasted longer than usual, as I was in shock and didn't want to rush him. I felt pity, fear and shame. Pity for what looked like a decent player who obviously was dealing with some physical, mental or emotional issues. Fear for being afraid of having my ego on the line playing such an inferior player and shame for thinking so selfishly about my tennis ego in this situation.

I finally said I was going to take serves. I took three and said I was fine and gave the balls to him.

He took a few and most of them actually made it over the net. Again, nice form, just no power.

I told him I didn't care if I served or received and that it was his choice. I had always done that because I never could make up my mind what I wanted to do.

I always thought it was good for my opponent to see I had no desire for either as it gave me a mental edge. But in this case I was so psyched out it was just force of habit.

He decided to serve.

I made four straight return errors.

I was a mess.

He went to the towel after every point even though it was maybe 60 degrees at the most in the cold indoor bubble.

"Just get the ball in," I told myself. That is what I did. I won six straight games in a total of 15 minutes.

The last game of the set was the longest. In the middle of it, he stopped for water, which I had never seen before.

I started thinking again.

He was sweating profusely. And seemed to get more disorientated, seeming to forget where he should be standing to serve and return.

I lost the second game of the second set. But he didn't seem to realize it. He wanted to keep on serving. I told him he won the game and it was my turn to serve.

He walked up to the net and threw me the balls.

That is how he gave me the balls the entire match.

Every other player just hit the ball to the other side. He would walk up toward the net and just before reaching the service line would flip the balls over the net.

Was he too weak to hit the balls over on his own power? Or was he copying the ballboys he had seen? Was playing in tennis tournaments a part of some sort of therapy?

I started the shiver in the cold and in the bizarreness of it all.

I bore down and won the next five games.

I shook his hand.

"Can you give me a ride back to Manhattan?" he asked, speaking to me for the first time.

"Where to?" I asked instinctually. He told me his neighborhood, and it was on my way.

"OK," I said.

He slowly walked to the locker room as I went to the tournament desk. The match took about 40 minutes, most of it spent with him going to the towel.

We silently went to my car. He had trouble getting his rackets into the car so I took them and put them in my backseat.

We had been driving for 10 minutes before a word was said.

"What do you do for a living?" he asked.

"I am an editor," I said. "New York Times."

He nodded.

I felt like I had to reciprocate.

"So what do you do?"

"I don't work."

I turned onto the Triboro Bridge.

“That is a good deal if you can manage it,” I continued.

“I am schizophrenic,” he announced, and giggled.

“Oh,” I said. Speechless would be a good word to describe my reaction.

He continued: “I used to know a guy who worked in the Sports Dept. at the Times. I went to 17 Knicks games when Walt Frazier was playing.

I got off the Triboro bridge and made a wrong turn.

I had to make a U-turn to get back on the correct road. But as I was starting the unconventional maneuver I had an internal panic attack. “Will this make him lose it?” I thought.

It didn’t.

He went on to say how he had been ranked in four different divisions the last year and rattled off his rankings for the last seven years. It made me a little less impressed with my own ranking obsession. The only person I knew who could rattle off his rankings like that was, well, me.

He asked me if I had played certain players. Most of them I hadn’t heard of.

Finally I reached his block.

“Make a right here,” he said. It would have put me on a road that would take me further out of my way. “I am just going to let you off here,” I said.

“He sure got bossy there at the end,” I joked to myself as I drove away.

Well, while I have played a lot of people who were crazy, this was the first person I played who was certifiably mentally ill. Or maybe he was just the only who would admit it.

# Chapter 25

Sometimes there are wins (and losses) that are burned into your memory.

Five years ago I had that kind of match with Rob Rios. A teaching pro from Connecticut, his results against common opponents had put him a level above me.

But we were playing outdoors in 90-degree weather and I was determined to not just put up a good showing, but to win.

Rios, as it turned out, was also a grinding baseliner. Although my two-handed backhand was my stay-in-the-point shot his one-handed backhand was his big weapon.

So, him being left-handed, our cross-court battles would feature his backhand going up against my forehand. And he was winning, hitting amazing drop shots that I could not run down.

So I turned the match into a battle of my backhand against his forehand. The points were long, and I beat him, 6-4, 7-6 in two hours and 20 minutes. He cramped at the end. I cramped on the drive home.

I remembered one point in particular when we went corner to corner for about 25 strokes. Finally, he had me way off court and angled a ball deep to my forehand and came to net.

I managed to barely get to it, but could not get my racket into position to hit my normal topspin. I reached and hit a squash shot just before it hit the ground.

I had never hit that shot before, even in practice. I was eight feet behind the baseline and just to the right of the doubles alley. It went low cross-court and just past his attempt at a volley for a winner.

The tournament director, who was sitting behind the court and was the only one watching, screamed “Oh.”

I had never enjoyed a shot more.

Rios was my next opponent in the Bronx. I had not seen him in five years until the grass court tournament in Philadelphia in August. He had told me he was playing some 45s this year in preparation for playing a full national schedule when he turned 50 the next year.

I was shocked when he told me he was going to be 50.

Today I would try to see if I could upset him again. I thought keep it away from his backhand and extend the points.

But when I hit it to his backhand early he was making errors. So I changed my strategy. Angles, make him run.

It worked. I won the first set, 6-3.

It was looking good. Then he changed his strategy. He hit the ball up the middle, giving me no angles to shoot for. The points got longer. And I started making errors. He won the second set, 6-2.

So I buckled down. No more errors. The points got longer, the games even longer. And 40 and 50 stroke rallies became the norm. Neither one of us were about to give in.

Then he got more aggressive when he would see an opening, forcing me into bad positions. He took a 5-1 lead.

But I refused to give up. I made it 5-2, then hit two winners myself to make it 5-3. Suddenly I had won 11 points in a row, when I went for too much and belted a forehand long that would have given me the game. I made another error. Then he hit a backhand winner to make it deuce. After two more deuces he closed it out.

I had lost my last match of the year. It was over.

“We are all even at one,” he told me after the match, which had gone three hours and 15 minutes. “And I don’t want to play a decider.”

I agreed, even though we both knew we were lying.

Even though I would finish ranked 19th in the country, I realize the ranking is not why I play now – even if that was where I started from.



It is the thrill of the battle. The love of the game. The love of life.

The game is always there, through injuries and job crises. It causes great joy if you allow it and great stress if you let it.

It was time to move on, I thought as I drove home. I had gone as far as I could and proven to everyone, including myself, what I could do.

I was the fat kid of an alcoholic father and a mentally fragile mother who managed to stay employed in the profession he loved and proved himself in the sport that adopted him.

What could I do next?

It wasn't feasible to play on the national circuit again the next year. It was just too demanding schedule-wise, as I wanted to do more writing and expand into more areas. I took three weeks off from tennis as the weather had turned and playing outside had become impossible. And nobody was inviting me to play inside.

Until I got an email from Alan Edelman wondering if I wanted to play him indoors at Prospect Park in Brooklyn.

Why not? I thought.

I had never taken that kind of time off when I was healthy before, and even though I spent every day in the gym, I didn't know what I would feel like hitting a ball again.

I crushed him. And every forehand I hit was with my new Nadal-like follow-through, which I had learned was called the reverse forehand.

I went to the gym and practiced that forehand motion with light weights.

And went back again to play with it the next week, and the week after. I was playing only once a week, but could not wait to get back to playing full-time when the weather got warmer.

I decided I wouldn't be playing any 45 and over Nationals the next year, but would use the time to play some local tournaments and practice and prepare.

I can't wait until I turn 50.

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