

TENNIS A-GO-GO

The real estate market came crashing down and along with it my travel plans for the summer. After re-examining my priorities I decided I could afford to take that one-unit tennis class over at Sacramento City College. I hadn't played in almost thirty years and thought perhaps some instruction would be helpful as I eased back into the swing of things. As things turned out it was an interesting, entertaining, enjoyable experience.

College P.E. classes are generally a cinch, the grades based almost entirely on attendance and participation. One friend even accused me of sandbagging an easy "A" to boost my grade point average. I already have a B.A. degree so the lily hardly needs gilding down at the local J.C. It also turned out that our instructor happened to be the tennis team coach at City College.

A lot of the people in class were taking it with a friend, which I suppose is natural for a game like tennis. Those that are there singly, as I was, get partnered up. This was particularly true since the focus of the class was on doubles tennis. Age plays a great factor in the choosing up process. I was one of the oldest people in class. There was one other guy near my age and hence Bruce Higley became my default partner. If I had only known what this seemingly innocuous development was to hold for me for the next eight weeks I would have taken notes.

Bruce Higley is a moron. A buffoon. A dunce of the highest order. Aboobastoogeac clown. It is hard to conceive of an adult human being of his age with a job and a house and a car and kids and grandkids and a divorce being so completely and utterly inept. I could only shake my head in disbelief. He signed up for the class but did not own a tennis racket. After lengthy instructions from the coach about what type of racket look for and where to buy one, Bruce went to a thrift store and bought a racket for \$3.

At first his ineptitude was only slightly annoying and I kept reminding myself that it was only a beginning class and not everybody is necessarily a great (or even mediocre) athlete. Then again everybody else had a racket that cost more than \$3. No, what finally began to wear on me was the lack of mental effort. Sure, there were whiffs, mis-hits and balls launched into the parking lot but physical mistakes happen. I was far from perfect myself. It was the repetition of mental mistakes caused from not listening to the instructor and not following simple instructions. The very first thing we were taught was to face the net squarely. Do not stand sideways, we were emphatically told. And for the first two weeks we started each day with a volley drill at the net to reinforce this fundamental principle. In those two weeks Bruce never once squared up to the net and always stood sideways to it. That was clue number one. He didn't seem to take instruction well and it was laughable to watch him try to catch a ball or chase a loose one around the court. Watching him attempt an overhead serve was one of the most comically ludicrous sights I had ever seen. It defied description. Jerry Lewis at his most spastic had nothing on Bruce.

Because he paid little attention he never knew where to stand, that he was to alternate sides when serving, that one didn't alternate sides when receiving service, how to keep

score, etc. He couldn't remember which lines were the boundaries used in doubles and was constantly watching playable balls bounce next to him in the doubles alley without even swinging at them. This was invariably followed by his characteristic snapping his fingers and saying, "oh yeah, that's in, isn't it?"

Finally, after yet another "oh, yeah, I forgot." I had reached the boiling point. "Look," I said sternly, holding up three fingers, "this isn't brain surgery. There are three rules in tennis: the line is in, you get two serves and if you miss both, it is a point against you. The rest of it is just details."

The ultimate, though, was his scorekeeping. Like everything in tennis, it is pretty simple. If you aren't familiar, it goes: 0, 15, 30, 40, game. It takes about two minutes to master. As the weeks stretched on, Bruce was still flummoxed by the whole deal. And then in week seven the fateful day arrived when the coach introduced the concept of "deuce" to the class. This is the rule that mandates that you must win by two points. It introduces the element of a tie game at 40-40. It takes an additional minute to master. Bruce's reaction was the same one grade-schoolers have when they are introduced to fractions -- complete, total and utter confusion. He simply could not get his head around it.

As I noted earlier, the class focused on doubles tennis with only a short foray into the singles game. Each day the familiar partnerships paired off in a rotation that allowed us to play many different sets of opponents. The way it worked, and the way I explained it to Bruce many times, was there was a championship court and as long as you won you remained there. If you lost you started a rotation of the remaining courts and moved up each time you won until you returned to the championship court. There were days we never moved off of a court while our visits to the championship court were expedient to say the least.

As much as I loathed playing with Bruce the other people in the class made a very disparate group. What is nowadays called diverse. I enjoyed most of the people in class and after awhile you got accustomed to the way they played. At least some of us did. I came to think of some of the teams in particular terms and the coach even had nicknames for some of the pairs.

There were the "Speed twins", a couple of Asian guys who tried to hit everything as hard as they could. Nguyen had a hard serve that he got in about 10% of the time. The second serve was a softball. Bruce never became aware of this obvious difference and thus stood in the same place on both serves. The first one would invariably crash into the net and as the second trickled over the net he was caught too far back to reach it before it bounced a second or third time. He never caught on.

An extreme example of two people who take a class together was personified by a pair of cute, giggling ingenues I called Betty and Veronica. One was actually named Veronica. They were almost literally inseparable. They did everything together. They came late together, giggled together, talked during lecture together, were absent together. During matches they engaged in non-stop chattering to the point of helplessness.

The coach had a name for one of the pairs: Dueling banjos. That would be Frank and Phil. Frank is an idiot. Really. A genuine one. He had taken the class last year and was taking it again. He was literally starting over. He is friendly, slow-witted, naïve and guileless in a very childlike way. However, he has a savant-like ability at tennis. Physically he is a hulking, immobile lummoX who can't get to a ball more than two steps away from him. But he serves with consistent accuracy and rarely misses a shot. His partner, Phil, may or may not be mildly retarded. It is hard to tell because he rarely spoke and even then very softly and just a syllable or two. I had my suspicions though because of his haircut, which was of a type that would only be worn by a forty-year old man who allows his parents to choose his hairstyle. He was easily the least athletic person in class. He ran like an acutely arthritic assembly from Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory. He seemed easily confused and, like Frank, pretty much went wherever you pointed him. Naturally he and Frank got paired up.

One day as we were being trounced by all comers without getting close to moving up the court rotation, Bruce was complaining loudly and frequently about how his crummy racket was fouling up his game. "No," I thought to myself, "it isn't the three-dollar racket, it is the ten-cent head operating it." That day we lost to Frank and Phil three times in a row! I'd tell Bruce to hit the ball away from Frank because he didn't miss but couldn't get to anything very far away and that left Phil to execute the return. What could I have possibly been thinking? Direct a shot? Asking Bruce to direct a shot in any direction was like asking a monkey to build a submarine. I would have had better luck with the monkey.

To my surprise and delight in the sixth week the coach announced we were going to play some singles. Singles, I learned, was just like doubles only with a narrower court and without an idiot partner. All I could think of were the immortal words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty free at last." I was finally unshackled from the burden of my dumbo partner. Needless to say the results were immediate and predictable as I toured the circuit of courts piling victory upon victory while Bruce languished at the back corner, losing match after match and going nowhere. I wound up playing him once and easily won as I employed the not-too-cunning strategy of simply hitting the ball to him and allowing him to make mistakes, thus defeating himself. It was child's play.

There was one guy who was worse than Bruce -- Kelvin. Kelvin is a nice, polite young man who went to the trouble to remember my name and said hello to me every day. He also has the misfortune to be holding down the wrong end of the athletic bell-curve. He is terribly unathletic. Even Betty and Veronica made short work of him. One of the days we were playing singles both Bruce and Kelvin arrived at the court farthest (both physically and figuratively) from the championship court. My own match on the adjacent court had ended with yet another Bruce-free victory for me and I was on my way up. Momentarily I was torn between my march toward the glory of the championship court and my morbid fascination with the prospect of seeing what could prove to be history's worst-ever tennis

match. Glory won because I realized a day of singles play was my only realistic chance for it.

During the last two weeks of class Bruce decided that his racket was to blame for his deficient play. So he brought a different racket to class each day to try out. Familiar results ensued.

At one point at least a poetic form of justice was served. This was the occasion of our mini-tournament. The coach split the class into four teams and we played against each other following the World Team Tennis format. Thus a match consisted of one set each of men's and women's doubles and singles and mixed doubles. Since each team only had one woman, a man had to fill in as the other woman in the women's doubles set. (This essentially meant we were playing two sets of mixed doubles) Both days of the tournament Bruce was selected as our second woman and both times substituted out after the first game because of his horrific play. Further justice was served on the second day when the stupidity of his play was front and center for all to see. During his game as our "other chick" he got caught out of position and stupidly allowed a ball to bounce away without playing it because he thought it was going to be out. It wasn't. So he was wandering around behind the baseline, not paying any attention, making lame excuses to the coach as the other team was serving to his partner. She hollered for him to get into the game and he scrambled madly toward his position. What a dope.

Ultimately, though, I am conflicted about Bruce because on the one hand he was an incredibly aggravating person yet on the other he provided me so much comic material that I am indebted to him. Each day his antics provided loads of grist for the humor mill down at the local pub as people were constantly asking about him. So forget the Sheboygan bratwurst festival, Wrigley Field, Pittsburgh, Madison and my friends in Milwaukee. My summer was made right here at the local junior college. For \$20 I got reacquainted with tennis, got some exercise each morning for eight weeks and met some new people. Not to mention that "A" on my college transcripts.