

TENNIS ANYONE?

*When the One Great Scorer comes to write against your name -
He marks - not that you won or lost - but how you played the game.
Grantland Rice*

This world is a solemn place, with room for tennis. John Berryman

Tennis anyone? Attributed to Humphrey Bogart

The following tale is dedicated to a friend who is, without a doubt, the most obsessive tennis fanatic I have ever encountered. I will not name him. He knows who he is.

What can I say? I am a tennis fanatic. I love playing the game as well as watching it. I am stuck in front of my TV whenever a match is being shown, especially the major tournaments. I follow the life and times of all the great players, both past and present. When given names such as Pete, Monica, Steffi, Martina, John, Jimmy, Bill, Rod, Roy, Bjorn, Ivan, Venus, Serena and Margaret come up in a conversation, and they often do because of my overriding interest in tennis, there is no question in my mind, who we are talking about. (For those of you who are not tennis buffs, their respective family names are: Sampras, Seles, Graf, Hingis and/or Navratilova, McEnroe, Connors, Tilden, Laver, Emerson, Borg, Lendl, Williams, Williams and Court) I could have named many more. I know them all.

Am I totally obsessed with tennis? Perhaps I am and then again, perhaps not! I have often wondered what it is about tennis, particularly singles, that I find so captivating. Is it because hitting the ball as hard as one can provides an exhilarating sensation difficult to match in other sports? I know that aficionados of other athletic endeavors such as golf and baseball will disagree. Is it because winning or losing depends solely on one's ability and upon one's propensity to make unforced errors? It is true that in many other sports, more points are lost because of mistakes. It has been said that chess is the prime example since it can be argued that chess games are really never won but always lost. Is it because singles tennis is not a team sport, so that the results of a match depend totally on the individuals involved? Of course, boxing and golf are also examples. Is it because one's competence in tennis is a reflection of one's eye-arm-hand coordination, coupled with a physical agility to get to the right place at the right time? When all of these are well coordinated, the results provide an inestimable high. Or finally, is it because competitive sports are a throwback to Roman Gladiator times, minus the life-taking violence, and as such, appeal to the bestial and vicious side of our nature of which there is much evidence?

After considering all these factors, I still do not know why I have such affection for this game. After all, it is just a pleasant pastime in which the participants chase after a flexible ball as fast as possible to hit it as hard as they can over a net away from an opponent's reach but within a designated area. If one comes right down to it, tennis appears to be a rather ludicrous way of passing time. Actually, an analysis of most games and for that matter most human activities would lead to the same conclusion. Yet I love this game and that is at the core of this tale.

Before proceeding with the meat of my story, it behooves me to recount a little more about the type of person I am and what my profession happens to be. I have spent a

good deal of my life dreaming the impossible dreams, somewhat like James Thurber's Walter Mitty. In my first flight of fancy I conducted, a la Toscanini, the most prestigious symphony orchestra in works that I had composed. It is not coincidental that they had a rather strong resemblance to the works of Beethoven, Mozart, Bach, etc. As a result I received world wide acclaim as the greatest musical genius ever. Since I continue to love the great music of the past, this fantasy lasted for quite a long time. Indeed, it frequently reoccurs. In conjunction with it, I displayed the virtuosity of Heifetz on the violin, Rubenstein on the piano and Segovia on the classical guitar.

The next figment of my imagination was consistent with the one just described. I produced, directed and played the lead role in the greatest movies ever made, as witnessed by the tremendous accolade they all received. I won more Academy Awards in these categories than anyone in the history of the cinema. What can I say? When you're great, you're great.

However, in due course this musical interlude was replaced by my fabulous achievements in the world of science and philosophy. Socrates, Plato, Confucius, Buddha, Aristotle, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Freud, Planck, Einstein, et al were nothing more than mere pedestrians when compared to my contributions in these domains. This remains one of my favorite illusions because of my ongoing love for the sciences and mathematics.

My first fantasy in the world of sport was in Basketball. My shooting percentage was 100%. It didn't matter from where I shot. The ball always went into the hoop. My next foray was Baseball, both as a Pitcher and a Hitter. As to the former, my Earned Run Average (ERA) was zero, striking out every batter that I faced, and as the latter my Batting Average was 1000 with all my hits, of course, being home runs. I then turned to Golf. One can easily guess that my drives were always straight and true and if the ball was within reaching distance of the hole, it invariably went in. In Hockey as a Goaltender no one ever managed to score and as a Forward every shot I took ended up as a goal scored. Chess turned out to be a snap and as for Bridge, I quickly became the world's leading exponent of that superb card game.

As an aside, I suggest that in this dream world of mine I displayed modesty, grace, and an appreciation of my opponents' very positive talents and attributes. Also, in these daydreams, many of my fans were sumptuous and very seductive females, offering to provide me with erotic pleasures never before imagined, at least by me. This was particularly pleasing, since I know that I am not a handsome Adonis or Lothario and have always had difficulty approaching the gentler sex.

In any case, I was actually becoming somewhat blasé about my athletic and competitive prowess, so much so that my fantasies were beginning to become tiresome, until I discovered TENNIS. Again, I cannot explain it, but I have retained my passion for this game to the extent that it has become a compulsive interest and pastime. Obviously, I need not describe my tennis fantasy. Suffice to say that I immediately became the greatest tennis player ever.

One final thought! Did I ever try to make my woolgathering or any portion thereof come true? The answer is, of course. I tried to become a musician. I was a resounding failure. I still enjoy playing the classical guitar but I would never subject anyone to my butchering of that noble instrument or of the music written for it.

I joined a school for budding actors. While I can recognize good acting when I witness it,

my inability in that regard is overwhelming. I think I am able to identify a great movie when I see it, but, of course, it is always after the fact. After having read a screen play, I put up the necessary funds to enable me to produce it as a movie. It was one of the greatest flops of all time.

I quickly recognized that I was no Einstein, although I am enamored with advanced thinking in the arena of science, mathematics and philosophy. I know that I can be nothing more than a dilettante with respect to those profound thoughts.

When it came to athletic activities, I attempted them all. I achieved nothing more than an enjoyable level of mediocrity. For example, I thought that golf held some promise. It didn't take long for me to learn that Mark Twain was correct when he asserted that, "Golf is a good walk spoiled".

Now that I have described my daydream world, and some related distractions, it is time that I recount what I do in the real world. Compared to my fantasies, my vocation is rather prosaic. I am the Chief Executive Officer of a large company that specializes in producing hardware and software designed to enhance the performance of nearly anything. I started my company just at the beginning of the computer revolution. It took off like the proverbial 'bat out of hell'. I happened to be at the right place at the right time and astute enough to hire a team of extremely talented people. Luckily for me, they did not recognize their own worth. My company is one of the most successful of its kind. My team has been amply rewarded. Its members continue to bestow on me a degree of loyalty I am not sure I merit.

There is a certain irony in my situation. I have been eminently unsuccessful in my efforts to emulate what I am able to easily accomplish in my fantasy world and am very successful in the real world at something I have only a passing interest in. Not too long ago, I was sitting in my office thinking about this and wondering whether I will ever excel in something that I am passionate about. Into my office, disturbing my train of thought, waltzed my closest friend, Torus Alpha Edelson, a company confrere and probably one of the most brilliant problem solvers anywhere. He was also a very annoying individual since he was nearly always right in his opinions and predictions. He was prescient in that he had solutions to problems that had never been thought of. This was a very annoying trait. For me the worst was that he always beat me rather handily on the tennis court and at chess. However, I was very fond of him and had come to rely upon his brilliance on many occasions.

"T.A., what new crazy idea have you now come up with?" I asked testily.

He handed me a lukewarm cup of coffee and replied, "Can't a good friend come into your office without any ulterior motive?"

"Of course, but when you do I am always suspicious that you have something up your sleeve."

He laughed and continued. "Actually, I have had a premonition that it is you that wants to pose a new problem and that you need my assistance."

I looked at him somewhat askance and all of a sudden I knew that he was right. Again his prescience had been correct. However, I was so put out by his self-assurance that I nearly denied that I needed him for anything. In any case, the thought that had leapt into my mind needed some elaboration and he was the best person to discuss the idea with.

“Actually I was contemplating ways and means of beating you at tennis and this crazy notion presented itself.”

Smilingly, T.A. then started ruminating out loud. “I think I know what you are contemplating. Correct me if I am wrong and if I am right then I must compliment you on a most novel and innovative inspiration. You are wondering whether it is possible to apply our most up-to-date technology to a tennis racket so that it will automatically adjust itself to hit a winning shot each time the occasion presents itself. This would require the strings changing their tension and the angle of impact at a moment’s notice. That, in turn, would require micro-optical scanners and a microprocessor of enormous power to control those factors. Of course, the player would always have to get to a position that would allow him or her to hit the ball. That is one of many variables that would have to be dealt with. This requires some thought. It is quite a challenge, one that I am reasonably sure I can overcome.”

Once again he had beat me to the punch. He was quite right in that I had been considering some changes in tennis equipment but nothing as elaborate as he seemed to be suggesting. I was stunned by his audacity, but I had to give the devil his due. If anyone could create that type of racket, it would be T.A.

“For once could you stop reading my mind? No wonder I can never beat you at anything.”

Laughingly, he replied. ‘Well, if I succeed you will finally be able to beat me at something, unless of course I play with either the same racket or one superior to the one you will be using.’

“As Chief Executive Officer of our company, I insist upon one condition prior to granting you the go-ahead and that is when we play tennis, I will be using the enhanced racket and you, the one you have always used. In any case, you have three months to come up with a draft outline of this new technology.”

With a jaunty lilt to step, he strode out of my office, leaving me to scratch my head in wonderment at what I had just wrought. Little did I realize what was to come about. Periodically, I made inquiries as to his whereabouts, No one knew where he was or what he was up to. This did not bother me since disappearance and isolation had always been his way when faced with interesting problems that he viewed as personal challenges.

In any case, exactly three months after our last encounter, he phoned, asking to meet him at our favorite tennis court, which by sheer coincidence was located on my estate. I immediately dropped whatever I was engaged in, and hurriedly made my way home. He was waiting there, garbed in appropriate tennis togs, which I quickly emulated. Then, somewhat ceremoniously, he handed me a tennis racket that looked just like any other. “Let’s play,” he shouted.

Whereupon I experienced a most extraordinary game of tennis. I did not lose a point. Every serve was an ace and every drive, either fore or backhand was a winner. Yet I did not perceive any difference in the racket from any of my very technology advanced ones. We then exchanged rackets with the results exactly in reverse. In other words, he won every point in the same manner that I had. I examined the racket very carefully but could not find anything different about it. When we finished playing we agreed that I would have exclusive use of the racket for four years after which we would produce and market

them.

For the next four years I had a ball. I quickly fulfilled my tennis fantasy and became the international athlete of the century and the greatest tennis player of all time. I never lost a match, or for that matter a set. I surpassed the previous holder of grand slam wins rather substantially. What was demoralizing for most of the professional players was that I was at least twice as old and in some cases three times older than most of them. To make the matches I participated in appear more competitive, I allowed some points to be won by my opponents by simply disengaging my racket's microprocessor. My racket was inspected again and again with not a hint of something untoward. T.A. is truly a genius. As a matter of fact, during this period, which, I am sure, he was finding most enjoyable, he was not idle. Suddenly my golf game improved 10,000%. Basketballs always found their way into the basket and baseballs pitched were impossible to hit and bats made it impossible not to get a hit.

While I dabbled in these other athletic activities, I remained a steadfast tennis fanatic and concentrated on it until it was time to start marketing all these technological marvels. The impact was instant and somewhat disconcerting. First our competitors tried to get all these innovations banned, but to no avail. I was not the only one with fantasies. Then the competitive nature of these sports was dramatically altered with devastating results for the professionals. Anybody with one of my tennis rackets could play with the best and win. Professional sports became a lot less popular and the athletes involved were no longer the public idols they once were and no longer commanded the money they had been receiving. The populace became much more involved in competitive athletic activities, including those who had always seen themselves incapable of such endeavors and usually looked down their collective noses at those 'macho' types both male and female. The major social benefit was that the number of 'couch potatoes' diminished radically, with a corresponding major boon to the health scene.

T.A. then came up with another stroke of genius, although I can take a little credit for it. During one of those coffee chats we occasionally had and while expressing great pleasure over what had been achieved, I mildly bemoaned the fact that while I had garnered all those athletic accolades, they really weren't mine. It was the equipment that had actually earned them. Further, despite the fantastic tools I had, I still had to exert muscles that weren't always ready to do what I wanted them to do. I noticed T.A.'s ears perk up but I did not put much more store in it, since I thought that we had reached the end of this innovative process. Little did I know!

As before, he disappeared for about six months and when he returned, for the first time, he triumphantly asserted that he had solved the most difficult problem I had ever put to him. I could not believe it but again he was correct. In essence, he had created a series of very tiny microprocessor and micro-scan implants that were easily programmable. They took over parts of the nervous system, enabling the appropriate muscles to respond fittingly to whatever was required.

I asked if they had been tried. T.A. responded that he had only used them on himself without actually implanting them. He felt that for them to work to maximum benefit they would have to be inserted in certain selected parts of the body. He also pointed out that for optimal effect the modified equipment would continue to be used. However it would be the athlete's muscular response that would be critical. I insisted that I be the first guinea pig. Again the experiment turned out to be fabulously successful. Not only could I achieve in sport what I never had before, I could also play the piano like Rubenstein, the violin like Heifetz and the guitar like Segovia.

This time we marketed this new innovation immediately and again with enormous success. There was a downside to this, e.g. many professional musicians and artists found themselves without an audience and therefore without income. The upside was that these new bio-implants made it possible for most to derive satisfaction by doing instead of being nothing more than passive bystanders. People participated to a greater extent than ever before in a wide variety of artistic and athletic endeavors. This was all to the good.

One day while T.A. and I were having our usual coffee chat, he pointed out one major limitation to this fantastic technology. "No matter how hard we try we can never enable anyone to become really creative. Musically we could play music composed by the Masters, past and present but unless we had the innate ability to compose we would always be puppets in their hands. We could emulate Picasso but could never come up with a truly original painting or create a new school of art. There was no way that we could be changed to be like Einstein, Newton, Aristotle and company. It is time you came up with a new fantasy for me to consider."

Once again, he was absolutely correct. I had noticed a certain ennui with my new found abilities. Indeed, it was time for a new fantasy. How about one in which I wielded absolute economic, military and political power. Hmm!

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