THE FIRST BEAUTIFUL GAME

Stories of obsession in Real Tennis

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INTRODUCTION

Bent rackets, hand-sewn balls and netted windows. Painted crowns, brass bells and penthouses. Chases, railroads and giraffes. Welcome to the curious world of real tennis. Originating in medieval Europe, the court, rules and equipment have hardly changed in four centuries. Yet this book is not a chronicle of its history, nor is it a manual on technique and strategy. It is about the players and their obsession.

Over the past five years I have spoken with real tennis players about their experiences of the sport, why they play and what it means to them. I learned that most of them are fanatics, some are addicts. More than a few are eccentrics. And I found their stories revealing about the art of living: whether to pursue our passions and ambitions, how to balance work and personal life, why we need respect and equality, where we can find and create beauty. This book tells those stories in their own voices.

I should admit that I am one of the fanatics, an amateur player who has named three bicycles and a car after former World Champions. I first encountered real tennis in the late 1980s when a student. At the time I was dedicated to another sport that, in my ignorance, I called 'tennis' – the game played at Wimbledon and in parks on sunny afternoons. I soon found out two things. First, that real tennis players generally refer to their game as 'tennis' and the modern sport I was familiar with as 'lawn tennis' (a convention followed in this book). Second, that there was no longer much point playing lawn tennis. I was immediately drawn to tennis by its strategic complexity and subtle artistry. There were balls bouncing off the walls and sloping roofs, I had to prevent my opponent from hitting winning targets such as a square with a unicorn painted on it, and I needed to adjust to another unique feature of tennis: that no two courts share precisely the same dimensions and angles.

In the following years I made a third discovery: that tennis was transforming me as a person. It started shaping the way I talked and thought. When speaking with a friend about love, I would instinctively draw an analogy with the game. When contemplating my lack of adventurous spirit, I contrasted it with my spontaneity on court. Gradually tennis became a filter through which I looked at the world and myself. This book is therefore also, unavoidably, about my personal obsession with tennis and how it has shaped my own approach to life.

Two hundred years before football became known as 'the beautiful game,' the French tennis professional Pierre Barcellon, renowned in the late eighteenth century, used the same phrase to describe his own passion.[1] Tennis, as you are about to discover, is the original beautiful game.

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If you know anything about tennis, it is probably that Henry VIII played at Hampton Court Palace. In fact, in the sixteenth century tennis was played all over Europe and by people of all classes. By the 1970s it had almost completely disappeared. Abandoned courts became used for a bizarre range of activities, amongst them: sheep pen and silage storage, part of a prison complex, furniture storeroom, industrial museum, student rooms, synagogue, gymnasium, science laboratory, hotel, squash courts, and garage.[2] Perhaps the most famous former court is the Jeu de Paume, a honey-coloured stone building on the rue de Rivoli near the Louvre in Paris, which now serves as a gallery of contemporary art.

Seek out the tennis courts of the world today and you are unlikely to find many sheep. Old courts are being brought back into use and new ones built. The game has experienced a remarkable revival in the past two decades and there are now some 5,000 players. Most of them play in England, where there are

25 active courts. There are a further 20 courts scattered throughout France, Australia and the United States.

You might imagine that tennis is an elite sport and that the typical English player is someone who went to an exclusive private school and now works in the City of London. He (and it is a he rather than a she) has a posh accent and plays the game more for the social status it bestows than anything else. On court he wears long white flannels and doesn't exert himself too much. Now and then he shouts out 'jolly good shot' to his opponent, although he hates losing.

These are not the kind of people who you will meet in this book. Although tennis has a history of upper-class aficionados, and some of them still inhabit the more traditional clubs, since the 1970s it has become an increasingly middle class sport. Visit a tennis club and you might see a game of doubles between a doctor, a retired plumber, a teacher and an accounts clerk. One of the greatest changes is that you will encounter more women players than in the past, although one club in England still bans women members. There are also over 70 professional tennis players. They are not, however, simply travelling the world playing tournaments like the lawn tennis pros you see on television. The majority work at clubs doing everyday tasks such as giving lessons to their members. While the tournament circuit is growing, there is still not enough money to be earned from competing full-time, except for the top few players.

Most of the people I interviewed for this book are club professionals living and working in England. Some are amongst the finest players in the world. I focus on the pros partly because I feel an obligation to dig where I stand. It is astonishing how often we take for granted the people who make our lifestyles possible. We can happily survive without knowing the name of our postman or the chef at our favourite restaurant and what is important in their lives. I had been playing tennis for over a decade before I stopped to think about what life was like for the club professionals who had been teaching me how to play, making the balls, restringing my rackets, umpiring my matches and cleaning the courts. I realised that I had been so busy enjoying the pleasures of playing that I had failed to delve below the surface of my experience. So I decided to speak with the professionals to try to understand tennis from their perspectives.

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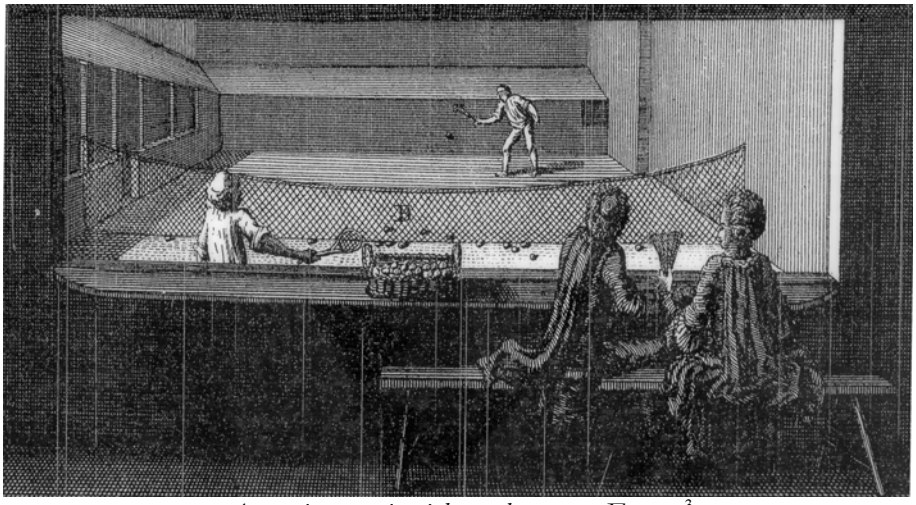
To begin this journey into the world of tennis I invite you to enter the seating area and take your place with the other spectators.



A tennis court in eighteenth century France.[3]

Chapter 1

THE WORDLESS CONVERSATION

My fingers curl around the racket handle. I hit the ball firm and straight over the net. He returns it down the centre. I chip the ball to his backhand. His next shot is wide. It strikes the main wall then bounces back into the middle of the court. I move to my right a couple of steps, rotate side-on and flick the ball cross-court. It enters the 'winning gallery,' ringing the brass bell. The sound echoes around the four walls.

I pick up another ball. The warm-up continues, the ball travelling back and forth, the beginning of a wordless conversation that promises intensity, intuition and the unforeseen.

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Tennis is the sporting equivalent of the prehistoric tree fern, a survivor from an earlier age that seems to have defied the laws of evolution. The game is still played almost as it was four hundred years ago. And just as the genetic code of the tree fern has revealed to biologists deep secrets of existence, the codes and practices in the ancient sport of tennis contain unexpected insights into the art of living that gradually unfurl through the course of a match.

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After five minutes we are becoming used to the character of the court. I've noticed his backhand is a little shaky. I win the toss and elect to serve. The 'marker' – the umpire – standing at the net post calls out, 'Play'. I raise my racket head to my face and make the traditional pre-match bow to the silent spectators, then turn to offer the same respectful salute to my opponent.

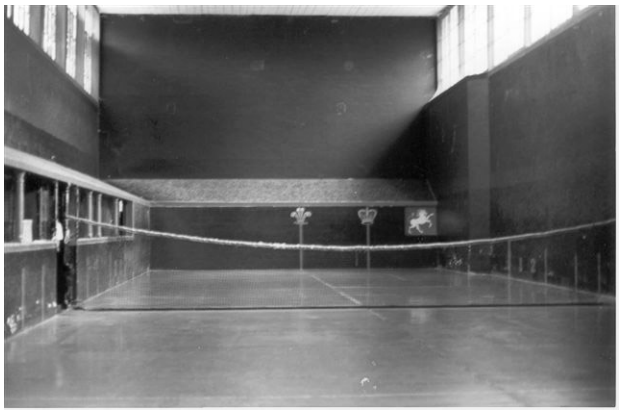
*

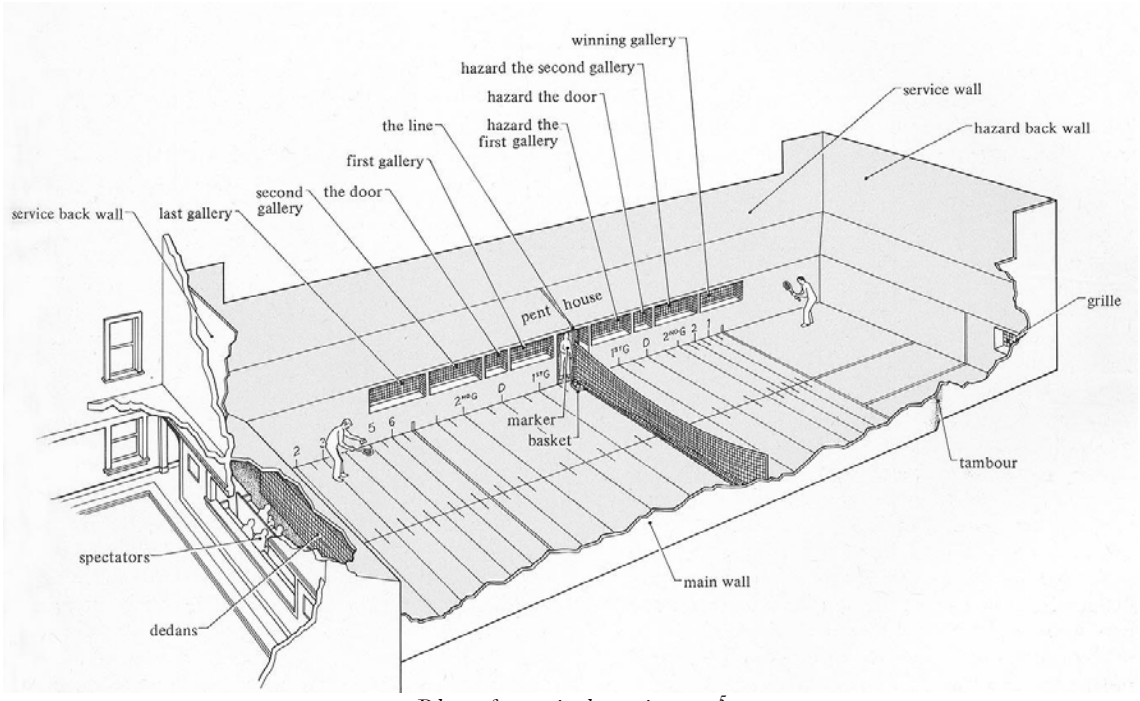
If you are a novice spectator, you are probably intrigued by the bizarre court and unfolding spectacle, and want to understand more before the match commences.

The most confusing aspect of tennis is its name. In England the sport is called 'real tennis', but it is known as 'court tennis' in the United States and 'royal tennis' in Australia. The French still call it 'jeu de paume' – game of the palm – even though tennis has been played with a racket, not the hand, for over five hundred years. It is commonly believed that the term 'real' derives from 'royal' and refers to the origins of the sport as a pastime for monarchs. This is an etymological myth. The appendage 'real' was only added to tennis in the 1870s to distinguish it from the new outdoor craze of 'lawn tennis'.[4] 'Real' means 'genuine' or 'original'.

How do you actually play? As in lawn tennis, a net divides the court in half, and you can play either singles or doubles. Points are generally scored in the familiar way – 15, 30, 40, deuce – and matches are the best of three or five six-game sets. But there the similarities end. Tennis is played on an enclosed court, a little larger than a lawn tennis court, with high black walls on all four sides. Along three of the walls are angled wooden roofs known as 'penthouses,' rising from a height of around six feet and resembling the sloping roofs of a cloister courtyard. The ball can both hit the walls and roll along the penthouses.

The penthouses are visible in this photo of the court in Oxford, built in 1798. Along the left-hand wall below the penthouse are the 'galleries', large windows filled with netting. Hitting the ball into the 'winning gallery' (the most distant of these openings), which contains a small bell, is one way of winning the point. Points are also won by hitting two other targets: the 'grille', the square just visible in the back right-hand corner; and the 'dedans', a long netted window at the end of the court where spectators sit and from where the photo was taken. On the wall opposite the galleries there is an angled buttress jutting out – the 'tambour' – that, if struck, deflects the ball in unexpected directions. Playing tennis is like being inside a giant pinball machine, with the ball ricocheting off the walls and roofs, and striking targets.





Plan of a typical tennis court[5]

The asymmetries of the court are echoed in the racket, whose head is angled to one side, making it easier to hit a low-bouncing ball. The balls are solid, containing a cork core wrapped in string and hand-sewn with a felt cover. Club professionals spend around a quarter of their time producing the balls with a technique unchanged over hundreds of years, in addition to stringing rackets, giving lessons and competing in tournaments.

That is enough of an introduction for the moment. The match is about to begin.

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My opponent, a young Australian named Kieran Booth, skips around like a boxer, impatient for my opening serve. I take my time. I hit the ball underarm with plenty of spin. It traces a quiet curve through the air. Then it bounces once on the sloping penthouse roof and drops down into the back left-hand corner of the court. He steps forward and tries to volley the ball cross-court. An aggressive and risky shot. And the ball strikes the top of the net. I'm relieved: it's bad luck to lose the first point.

Each point I try a different serve. A railroad. A giraffe. Then a bobble. Kieran continues in aggressive mode. He smacks the ball as hard as possible, mostly without success. He hits it as if he hates it. But I also sense that his tactics mask nervousness. I win the first game easily: 15-love, 30-love, 40-love, game.

The second game is more complex. I'm still not used to the court's floor speed: the ball skids fast and low, hitting the wooden frame of my racket. His point. The court is larger than my home court in Oxford too. I respond by pushing the ball deeper and wider than usual. A few spectators murmur in appreciation at my accurate ball placement.

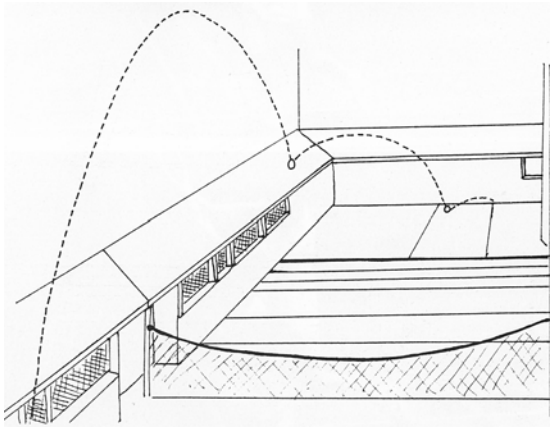
One more point and I'll have the game. I wipe my sweaty palm on my shorts and prepare to serve. 'Come on, this one,' I mutter to myself. I swing the racket in front of me in a pendulum motion and hit the ball with tremendous spin just above ankle height – an underarm twist. It flies upwards, then skips once, twice, three times on the penthouse. Kieran allows the ball to bounce on the floor. But he misjudges its spin and fails to move his feet. Hopelessly out of position, he lunges awkwardly at the ball and strikes the air with flailing racket. It's an embarrassing moment of Buster Keaton comedy that he will not repeat.

*

We live in a standardised world. Supermarkets provide us with apples of uniform colour and diameter. We buy a new jacket or sofa or car, hoping to stand out from the crowd, then notice a stranger with the same one. We deliberate over competing brands of washing powder then discover they are all owned by the same corporation.

Tennis defies the standard. Every court is slightly different in its dimensions and angles, its floor and wall speeds, the seams of its balls. Pick up a book on the game and you will learn, for instance, that the court at Hayling Island is around three foot longer and two foot wider than the Oxford court, and that the Oxford penthouse is over a foot more narrow. Tennis courts are a celebration of uniqueness and diversity. They are individual characters – each with its personality and history, its peculiar tics and quirks. Each one should be approached differently for a successful conversation on court.

In lawn tennis everyone serves in roughly the same way and from the same position on the court, just behind the baseline. But in tennis you can serve from almost anywhere you wish. As a result tennis players have, over the centuries, developed dozens of distinct serves with different trajectories and spins. So just as there is no standard-sized court, there is no standard service. The names of the serves celebrate their character. The 'giraffe' has a long neck, flying high into the air. The 'railroad' is straight, hard and powerful. The 'boomerang' doubles back on itself. The 'caterpillar' jumps along the penthouses, its arcs resembling multiple humps.



Above, the path of a giraffe serve. The ball is hit in a high arc then bounces off the penthouse.[6]

Left, the great nineteenth century French player 'Biboche' (Charles Delahaye), contemplating serving a giraffe.[7]

The service in lawn tennis resembles the conversational opener, 'How are you?' It is predictable, boring and rarely produces an unusual exchange. In contrast, the various services in tennis are like beginning a conversation with, 'In what ways would you like to be more creative?' or 'What are the limits to your compassion?' Tennis allows me to live in a world in which 'How are you?' is only one of many possibilities.

Anyone watching top professionals play lawn tennis will also notice how the serve is not only a tedious conversational opener but usually ends the discussion. On most surfaces apart from clay, the game is a spectacle of power serving and often little else. In tennis, however, it is almost impossible to serve an ace; the serve is more a way of putting the ball into play than winning the point. Because the serve does not dominate, the receiver is usually able to respond, so the first word of the point is seldom the last.

When serving, a tennis player is generally attempting to limit the kind of return his or her opponent can make, such as by coaxing the serve to hug the side wall so closely that they can barely get their racket behind it and are forced to return down the line. Spin and accuracy are more important than speed. The strategic thinking required to choose the appropriate serve, combined with the skill needed to master the variety of service techniques and the sheer beauty of the different ways the ball arcs through space, transforms serving in tennis into an art form.

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Today I feel unusually confident. I return serve with a smooth and severe certainty. The ball drops quickly off the penthouse. I volley it cross-court. It curves away from Kieran as he stretches to reach it on his forehand. Another ball speeds dangerously fast towards my head. I swivel quickly and block it back into the base of the tambour. It's a moment of spontaneous creativity. The ball rolls along the floor, unreturnable.

He's four games to one down and tries some new serves. I adjust my feet in a rapid quickstep, hitting the next three returns straight past him into the dedans. Kieran is clearly frustrated. He utters some unintelligible oath. I sprint across for a backhand and hear the distinctive sharp twang from my racket of a ball struck with perfect timing.

I am no longer strategising: I move around the court swiftly, naturally, free, with little thought about how and where to hit the ball. The division between mind and body begins to dissolve.

I hit another volley, this time into the winning gallery. The bell attached to the netting rings in recognition. Applause. It's only half an hour into the match and the first set is over. Six games to one.

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From the age of seven, Helen Keller, who was both deaf and blind, communicated with the world through her hands. Beginning in 1887, her teacher, Annie Sullivan, would hold Helen's hand and use finger movements on her palm to translate what someone was saying. Helen often placed her other hand lightly on the person's face or lips as they spoke to decipher their words and feelings. She later wrote that a drawing of her mind would have to depict not her head but her hands, for this was the main place she experienced thought.[8]

While I instinctively locate my thinking self in my head, Helen Keller's experience is familiar. Sometimes when playing tennis I feel that I am 'in' my right hand. As the part of my body connected to the racket, it seems to control what the racket is doing, usually without explicit 'instruction' from my head. My hand is the centre of my being, even though I know that other parts of my body, like my forearms, are helping me hit the ball. By focusing hard I can also 'think myself into' my racket head.

If this sounds strange to you, try closing your eyes and repeatedly clenching and unclenching your fist. If you focus intently on this for a few moments, concentrating on the various parts of your hand moving through space, other bodily sensations and thoughts eventually fade away and you will begin to feel yourself to be 'in' your hand. This kind of sensation is understood by those who practice the Alexander Technique and is probably similar to the experience of soccer players who say, 'I think with my feet'. It makes the purported distinction between mind and body seem absurd.

When I feel overwhelmed by writing and thinking, tennis restores my sense of mind-body balance by helping to shake up my brain and to relieve it of cramp and knotted thoughts. A solution to some complex problem, such as how to restructure a story I am working on, often comes in an unexpected instant in the middle of tennis practice. This would not surprise neurophysiologists. Recent brain research shows how physical activities such as walking or yoga stimulate neural activity that can help with problem-solving, trigger fresh thoughts or bring back forgotten memories.[9] I hope that the asymmetries of the court and irregular bounce of the ball inspire me to think unusual and unconventional thoughts, and to take surprising angles on intellectual problems.

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I begin the second set slowly, perhaps still shocked by my success in the first. I scrape through to win the first two games. My opponent then changes tactics: he does spinning serves that bounce short and awkwardly up into my body. The first one surprises me. My limbs entangle like a confused octopus. The ball rebounds off my racket frame and rolls into the net. As the next one comes, I stretch forward to volley the ball at knee height before it bounces. Again the net. He tries a third time. I let it bounce but over-hit the return. He slams the simple shot assertively into the grille.

I become anxious. What if he continues to trap me with this serve? How should I respond? Am I losing my concentration? The questions fill my head, an unwanted distraction from the game.

Kieran's confidence grows. He lunges for a backhand and guides it skilfully down the line over the high part of the net. I'm left waiting for the ball in the opposite corner.

I begin to flounder and panic. He gives me a straightforward shot. The words 'easy ball' fill my mind. And I drive it into the net. 'Roman!' I shout out in frustration. It's a rare outburst, a sign that I am unravelling. I'm four games to two down and see no prospect of winning the set. I lose a close deuce game. I look into the small crowd in the dedans. Even friendly faces do not meet my eye. I am alone.

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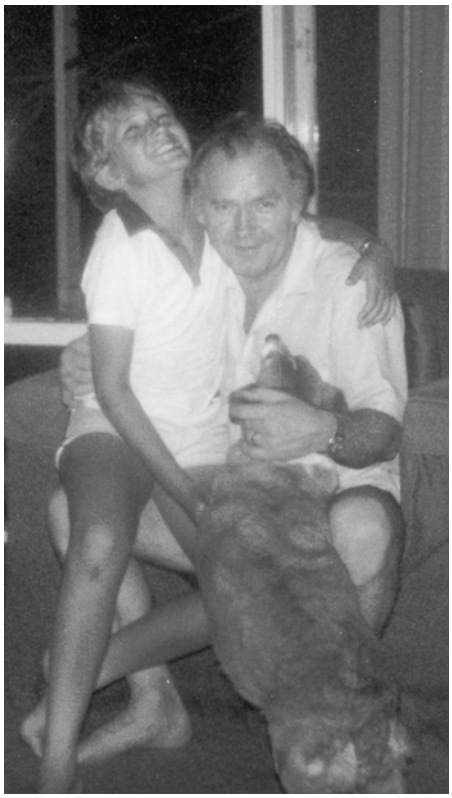
I have very few memories of my childhood before my mother died. I look back and see images of myself in the second-hand memories of family photos. In one of these fading shapshots, taken when I was nine, I am sitting on my father's lap, laughing. I'm wearing white sports gear, my skin is sweaty. Perhaps Dad had just driven me back from one of the junior lawn tennis tournaments I used to play in. I imagine that my mother, at the time dying from cancer, took the photo.



I recollect nothing of the service on the day of my mother's funeral, when I was ten. All I remember is that during the wake I asked my father if he would take me to a friend's place to play lawn tennis. He did, and so I spent the afternoon hitting a ball across a net.

I was recently back home in Sydney, over twenty years later, showing Kate the places of my childhood. As we walked along a suburban street one day, I suddenly saw my teenage self cycling past us on the way to lawn tennis practice, then disappearing left into a driveway up ahead. And I was gone before I had a chance to ask myself why I had left the wake.

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I'm thirty-love down. Kieran needs only two points for the second set. My racket grip feels slippery. A railroad service comes straight and hard along the penthouse edge. I risk a volley return. A great shot, he'll never reach it. But he does. His mis-hit stroke scrapes over the net and nicks the edge of the tambour. The spectators' delight deflates me. I lean against the wall, despondent. What the hell is going on here? My next return is pathetic, halfway down the net. The set is over, six games to two. One set all.

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In Zen Buddhism, the purpose of meditative practice is to retain your 'shoshin' or 'beginner's mind'. The mind should be empty and at the same time ready for anything, open to all possibilities; you should have no thoughts of future achievement or longing. A related idea in a treatise on the Zen approach to archery is that technical knowledge is insufficient to become a master of an art; you must transcend

technique so that the art becomes an 'artless art' emerging from the unconscious. Instead of aiming at the target, you should aim at yourself.[10]

While realising it has become a cliché to say so, I have been inspired by such aspects of Zen Buddhism. When practising, I often focus on watching the seam of the ball spinning towards me rather than thinking about taking my racket back early, or hitting the grille, or winning the point. Soon I am no longer trying to watch the ball; I am just watching it. Unlike other Zen acolytes, however, I am equally inspired by Pierre Etchebaster, tennis World Champion from the 1920s to the 1950s, who claimed that he always tried to count the stitches on a slow bouncing ball.[11]

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I must recover my beginner's mind. The first serve of the final set bobbles towards me on the penthouse. I concentrate intently on the ball. It hangs suspended at the top of its bounce. The world is on pause, silent. I pound the ball into the main wall and it rebounds into the dedans. My point.

This intense focus is not enough. I must also make strategic changes. I remember his weak backhand in the warm-up and realise I have failed to test it. So I start returning serve wide to his left. The first he hits back but not in the middle of the strings. The second lands close to the wall under the galleries. His swinging racket strikes the wall, not the ball. In the next point I play a shot short to his backhand. He stretches forward, loses balance, and misses. Our roles are reversing.

The games reach one-all. I'm stuck down the hazard end of the court. I desperately need a chase to get back to the service end. His next serve is over-hit and rolls off the back penthouse. He probably expects me to blast it down the line into the dedans. Instead, I take the racket back feigning a hard shot, then slow down my swing and slip the ball just over the net with more spin than pace into the forehand corner. He moves the wrong way and the ball bounces twice, falling at 'chase one yard'.

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Early in Shakespeare's Henry V, King Harry informs the King of France that, through his great-grandfather Edward, he is entitled to 'some certain dukedoms' across the channel. In response the Dauphin, heir to the French throne, sends a mocking gift to Harry. 'What treasure, uncle?' asks Harry. The Duke of Exeter opens the box and replies, 'Tennis balls, my liege'. Harry turns to the French Ambassador, his initial sarcasm becoming fury:

We are glad the Dauphin is so pleasant with us.
His present and your pains we thank you for.
When we have matched our rackets to these balls,
We will in France, by God's grace, play a set
Shall strike his father's crown into the hazard.
Tell him he hath made a match with such a wrangler
That all the courts of France will be disturbed
With chases.

Using a tennis match to symbolise a forthcoming battle between England and France reflects the popularity of tennis in Elizabethan England. But only a tennis player can understand the full significance of Harry's words.

The net splits a tennis court into two sections, the service end and the hazard end. A player at the hazard end is at a disadvantage. Not only are they always receiving the serve and never serving

themselves, they should also be ready for a ball that deflects sharply off the angled tambour and must prevent their opponent from hitting either of the two targets at the hazard end that win the point, the grille and the winning gallery. Thus when Harry threatens to strike the crown of the French King into the hazard, he it implying that France will be forced into a weak position, on the receiving end of Harry's wrath.

Harry continues his clever wordplay, telling the Ambassador 'that all the courts of France will be disturbed with chases'. Tennis players cherish the 'chase' although they dread explaining this confusing rule of the sport. The spirit of the chase most resembles the game of bowls or boule. The first player throws their ball, trying to get it close to a target, which is usually a very small ball. The aim of the second player is simply to throw their ball closer to the target, in order to win.

In tennis, a chase is usually created when the ball bounces twice on the floor at the service end. 'Chase one yard' means that the second bounce was on the line that is one yard from the back wall. When a chase occurs, the rally stops but no point is scored. The chase allows the player at the hazard end to swap sides of the court and occupy the more advantageous service end. After changing ends, this chase is 'played off': the receiving player must hit the ball so its second bounce is closer to the back wall than the one yard line. If they succeed, they win the point; if not, they lose it. As with boule, whoever is closest, wins. Hitting the ball so the second bounce is in the narrow area between the one yard line and the back wall is extremely difficult. King Harry is saying that it is the English who will be laying chases against the French, rather than the other way around, and that England will thereby be placed in a stronger military position.

The chase is beautiful because is requires finesse. Tennis players are not only slamming the ball as hard as possible into the winning targets. They are also trying to stroke it smoothly to perfect length, out of their opponent's reach, so the second bounce is as close to the back wall as possible, laying an almost unbeatable chase and giving them entitlement to the service end of the court. In lawn tennis, by contrast, fine touch has almost disappeared. Subtle and elegant elements of the game, such as the drop shot or lob, are increasingly rare as brute strength becomes the norm.

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I've laid a chase so we swap ends. I walk towards the net post, as does Kieran. He respects the established ritual of allowing the player at the hazard end to pass around the net post first. As we brush past each other he hands me two balls. Another custom. He still looks fresh. I try to hide my heavy breathing.

*

The tradition of allowing the new server to come around the net post first is, for me, one of the most precious features of tennis. Whether the person at the hazard end is a pauper or a prince, a woman or a man, a stronger player or a weaker one, they are allowed to pass through first. Many ancient social customs and ceremonies, such as the coronation of a monarch, or men holding doors open for women, symbolise or perpetuate authority. This one creates a moment of equality.

I do not mean to idealise the social relations of tennis. Until the 1970s, for instance, tennis was primarily a male pursuit. The author of this late Victorian book on tennis mentions some famous female players but advises ladies to be spectators.[12] Although today there remain a few all-male clubs where such attitudes can be found, tennis is no longer considered too fatiguing or dangerous for women.

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Now at the service end, I find new energy. A quick succession of points gives me a four-one lead. I can see the end of the match before me. Just two more games. Don't think about it. Keep focused. Play it point by point, I whisper to myself.

Kieran does not give up hope. He starts going for his shots with unexpected force. I miss two easy volleys in a row. A thought flashes through my head: I've lost my last three matches in the final set. The thought passes, but something changes. I now hit the ball tentatively, trying to avoid errors. I lose the service end and miss a simple return of serve. I hear a couple of spectators clap. How can they applaud an unforced error? I breathe deeply a few times and play on. Now he feels the pressure and makes some errors. Furious with himself, he shouts out in anger. The audience in the dedans is hushed.

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In the mid-eighteenth century Voltaire wrote: 'How shameful it is to think that for the first performances of *Mithridate* and *Tartufe* there was no worthier accommodation that the Star Tennis Court with the audience standing in the pit and with the dandies sitting amongst the actors on-stage'.[13] During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, particularly in France, tennis courts were increasingly used as theatres. They were a favoured venue for the playwright and actor Molière (author of *Tartufe*) and his troupe Théâtre Illustre, since only a few purpose-built theatres existed. Such arrangements also suited court owners, who realised that their dwindling revenue caused by the declining popularity of tennis could be compensated by temporarily renting their courts for dramatic performances.

Most sports, tennis included, can be their own drama. The athletes, like actors in a play, represent something beyond themselves: they embody a social struggle or a clash between ideologies or cultures.[14] A famous instance is the heavyweight boxing bout between the African-American Joe Louis, son of an Alabama sharecropper, and the German Max Schmeling, Aryan symbol of Nazi oppression. Held

before 70,000 sweating spectators on June 22, 1938 at Yankee Stadium, New York City, the contest was a microcosm of racial politics and the approaching war. 'A right to the body, a left hook to the jaw, and Schmeling is down!' cried the commentator. He stayed down. The encounter lasted 124 seconds. In a country of lynchings, discrimination and segregation, Louis became an idol to Americans of all colours.

The crowd at this tennis match are not waiting for a knock-out. They realise, however, that the game has reached its dramatic climax and the outcome is uncertain. They assess the character of each player. Roman is older, more experienced. He will probably remain calmer in these tense final moments and wear down his opponent with steady play. Kieran is less predictable but more talented. He could easily unleash a series of winning shots to take the match. This may not be democracy versus fascism or black against white. But the tennis players represent two distinct approaches to life: balance and composure versus spontaneity and inspiration.

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I'm now five-three up and leading forty-fifteen. Two match points. Experience and composure will triumph.

I serve and he pounds his return down the line. I dive across for a desperate backhand volley, both feet in the air. I can't reach it and the ball sneaks into the dedans. His point. My next serve is tight against the side wall. Kieran's return is too high and hits the back penthouse. Surely this is game over. The ball slowly rolls off. I watch it bounce…racket back, step in…my shot strikes the top of net cord…hovers a moment…then drops my side of the net. I close my eyes in despair. Deuce. There are mutterings from the crowd.

As if they know something.

Kieran takes the game. And the next one.

The score is five-all. Whoever wins the next game, wins the set and match.

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I am interested in the art of losing. Like anyone, I can enjoy victory, at least for a moment. But the joy soon fades and I feel increasingly uncomfortable, even embarrassed. I have a strange allergy to coming first, reaching the top, defeating adversaries, being a hero. The desire for such achievement seems to me an anxiety for social status emerging from our bad habit of judging ourselves through the eyes of others. This anxiety is manufactured by school exams, by parental pressures, by Hollywood films, by advertising. 'Be the best!' shout the army recruitment ads. What for? I prefer to judge myself against my own past performance or imagined potential, whether in tennis, work or other realms.

Most victors look down on the defeated; and they, in turn, live in the shadow of inadequacy. There is already enough personal insecurity in the world and I don't wish to add to it. Victory is the enemy of empathy.

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The final game. Over two hours of struggle are now distilled into a few moments. It's his chance for a big win against a higher-ranked opponent. I desire dignity, at least. I no longer sense the spectators.

We both play nervously. There are loose shots. We can't put them away. He has a match point – but then double faults. Deuce. Kieran wins the next point: his advantage. Can I save the match? His serve comes towards me. It skims the

penthouse dangerously. I'm too frightened to volley it. I let the ball bounce off the back wall. It sits up for me, waiting. And I strike it firmly. Straight into the net.

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Perhaps tennis, as King Harry believed, is war by other means. But remove an undiluted desire for crushing victory and its metaphorical potential expands.

A good tennis player is a versatile conversationalist. Listen hard to understand your opponent's individual abilities, intentions, insecurities. Respond instinctively to the surprising angles and spins of each idiosyncratic court. Choose between a score of different serves to open the discussion and be ready to reply to all of them. Prolong the conversation with lengthy rallies when necessary. At times be assertive and uncompromising to hit the winning targets. Then change the pace with subtle shots to lay the perfect chase. While constantly switching between personalities, remember to talk with yourself.

The wordless conversation of a close tennis match is the model for an ideal dialogue, one-on-one, intense, intuitive, unexpected, creative. Whether you win or lose, the conversation has always changed you.

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We shake hands over the net. I force myself to look him in the eye. I thank the marker, who still stands attentively at the net post. 'Unlucky,' he consoles me. I gather up my rackets and towel, and return to the dressing room.

It's empty. I sit down, take off my shoes. My feet throb. I close my eyes. And the final shot appears before me – a simple return of serve driven into the net. 'You fool!' I hiss out loud. 'Two match points and a stupid shot to finish.'

I stand under the steaming shower and let the hot water wash off my sweat, my anger, my unwanted ambition.

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[1] Barcellon 1987 [1800] 41.
[2] Garnett 1999, 342-344.
[3] Garsault 1767, Plate 2.
[4] Gillmeister 1997, 28.
[5] Aberdare 1980, 115.
[6] Ronaldson 1985, 53.
[7] Author photo, from a print at the Manchester Tennis & Racket Club.
[8] Keller 2003 [1908].
[9] Ratey 2003, 178.
[10] Suzuki 1973, 21; Herrigel 1985, 5.
[11] Etchebaster 1971, 48.
[12] Heathcote 1987 [1903], 40.
[13] De Luze 1979 [1933], 71.
[14] James 2000, Ch. 16.