

Competition

All's Fair in Love and Tennis

Late one summer, my parents sent me to tennis camp at Hotchkiss, a fancy prep school in Connecticut. I'm not sure why. Perhaps they hoped some time among the civilized set would improve my prospects and put me on the path to the Presidency or an ambassadorship. Little did they know the peril they were placing me in as they escorted me to my assigned dorm room and said goodbye for two weeks.

"I'm not sure I fit in here, Dad," I said, eyeballing the cot laid out for me and its woefully thin mattress.

"Nonsense. You're gonna love it," my father enthused, a sure sign it was too late to get out of this catastrophe.

"But the other kids have been here all summer and I'm just coming in for the last part," I protested.

"It'll all work out. Now your mother and I need to go," he said, reminding me that their first scheduled wine tasting in the Berkshires was only hours away.

My parting words: "I'll never make friends," were a bit dramatic, but they proved prophetic.

After unpacking my things, I headed down to the tennis center, a dilapidated clubhouse surrounded by dozens of courts, for a skills assessment. Following a flurry of introductions, I walked onto the Har-Tru green clay surface and the tennis professionals, none of whom were likely certified to teach tennis, began feeding me balls. Forehands, backhands, volleys, serves and overheads were tested while a shirtless guy with a clipboard took notes.

Ten minutes into the exercise, with a shiny, sweaty face, I notched my first victory. Fritz, the shirtless guy, announced I would be in the top group and would practice with the best campers. Flattered as I was, this meant the camp, billed as a competitive training session for

advanced juniors, was closer to babysitting between the lines for kids still trying to figure out how to get their racket out of its case.

"This guy might be a match for Heysoose," said Fritz.

"I'm not sure about that," said Barry, another staff pro.

"Who's Heysoose?" I asked.

"You don't know Jesus Loco?" Barry asked as if he was surprised.

"No. I just got here, remember?" I said respectfully.

"Well, everybody knows him. He's a Mexican kid up here from Guadalajara for the summer. His name means Crazy Jesus but everybody calls him Heysoose. He's the best player in the camp," Barry explained.

"You might get to play him in the tournament next week," Fritz said.

"There's a tournament?" I asked.

"Yes. You got here just in time," Fritz said.

"Great," I thought as I returned to my dorm to unpack. "I've been here one hour and I'm on a collision course with Crazy Jesus."

That evening in the dining hall, I was a model of anonymity, quietly eating my Salisbury steak, green beans and small dish of vanilla ice cream at a long table with twenty strangers. Nobody said a word to me and I didn't mind. At least that's what I told myself as I bussed my tray and followed the crowd to the campus recreation center; where a couple of sad-looking ping pong and pool tables were hopelessly occupied and I sat along the wall, too afraid to start a conversation with anyone.

If it hadn't been for the music coming from the jukebox in the corner, with its beckoning neon lights, I might have given up altogether and retreated to my dorm room. But the machine kept serving up songs, one after another, with the kind of mournful, dreamy atmospherics popular in the late 1970s and perfectly designed to feed the love-starved infatuations of 13-year old boys like me. As in every romance, the music mattered and right on cue, with Fleetwood Mac's *Dreams* filling the rec center and entrancing me, someone intriguing interrupted my reverie.

"You're new, aren't you?" a voice said.

I looked up and saw a goddess with golden hair and a mood ring standing in front of me.

"Uh, yes," I choked out.

"I'm Beth – one of the counselors. You looked kind of lonely over here."

"My God, this girl can read minds," I thought. "Must be the mood ring."

"It's tough being the new kid," she continued.

I couldn't believe my luck. With Alan O'Day's *Undercover Angel* playing in the background, I scrambled to come up with a question.

"Where are you from?" I said, expecting her answer to be a distant planet given her rapturous hold on me.

"Bethesda, Maryland."

I had never heard of Bethesda, Maryland but it didn't matter. I was smitten and happily in love with Beth from Bethesda. This was the greatest camp ever.

Everything was going perfectly – better than perfectly as our conversation flowed like a freshly-Drano'd sink. She liked *Happy Days*. I liked *Happy Days*. She liked Mr. Pibb. I liked Mr. Pibb. What were the odds? This was one of those romantic comedies where the couple meets cute and after a series of comic mishaps and misunderstandings comes to realize they can't live without each other. In our case, however, we were going to skip the mishaps and proceed directly to happily ever after. At least that's what I was thinking when our first mishap arrived.

"Have you met Heysoose?" Beth asked me out of the blue, her gaze now directed over my shoulder indicating someone was behind me.

Before I could answer, I turned around to see Heysoose's smiling brown face offset by bright white teeth. He was much bigger than me with muscular arms, sweeping shoulder-length black hair and the beginnings of a mustache on his upper lip. To put it in terms of bread, he was a thick, perfectly-cut piece of pumpernickel and I was a thin, wobbly slice of Wonder white with a few thumb prints. More troubling, the gleam in his eyes told me instantly that Crazy Jesus liked Beth from Bethesda the same way I did.

"Hola," Heysoose said to me, extending his hand to shake mine.

"Hello," I countered, standing up and robotically extending my hand to meet his as the chorus from Dave Mason's *We Just Disagree* echoed overhead.

"Everybody loves Heysoose," Beth said. "Isn't he cute?"

Having just met my competition for Beth's affection, I nodded and suddenly felt very insecure. Heysoose reminded me of every foreign exchange student I'd seen at my school. They all smiled a lot, spoke little and were loved much for no reason other than their benign presence. How could I compete with that?

“Are you looking forward to the camp tournament?” Beth asked Heysoose.

“Si,” he replied.

“Everybody says you’re going to win it,” Beth gushed, reaching out and touching him on the arm.

“Si,” Heysoose said, purring like a cat getting his fur rubbed.

Horrified by their chemistry, I watched helplessly as Heysoose charmed Beth with a handful of words and a 5th Avenue Bar he casually offered and she gladly accepted. Clearly, this guy had big league moves when it came to the ladies and as I stood there with empty hands, wishing I’d brought a Baby Ruth or a Charleston Chew, I felt outmatched and defeated. From then on, every evening in the rec center as my crush deepened and England Dan and John Ford Coley crooned *I’d Really Love to See You Tonight* in a seemingly endless loop, I kept coming in second to Heysoose.

Under the gaze of Fritz and the rest of the still shirtless pro staff, the same was true on the tennis court. As part of his practice group, I learned firsthand that Heysoose had heavy topspin groundstrokes that landed deep in the court and bounced high above my shoulders, making it tough to win points. His shots were suffocating and each one was punctuated by a grunt so loud I thought he was dying. I looked for weakness but found none and concluded everything I’d been told was true. Not only was Heysoose the best player in the camp, he was also the nicest and the most popular. Campers loved him. Counselors loved him. And, worse yet, I feared that the woman I’d set my heart on loved him, too. Still, I couldn’t give up and when the tournament arrived the next week, I was inserted as the number two seed, right behind Crazy Jesus, setting up our inevitable match of destiny in the finals. It would be winner take all – the title, the trophy and Beth from Bethesda.

The week of the tournament was the hottest of the whole summer. Temperatures tipped 90 degrees and the humidity made it feel like 100. With a draw of 128 players, the tournament required its winner to prevail in seven matches over seven days. Playing on green clay, a surface that slows the ball down, meant that every clash would be physically draining no matter the opponent.

In the first round I drew Peanuts Connelly who was only three feet tall but had a vicious slice backhand. Unfortunately, five games into the first set, Peanuts twisted his ankle and had to be carried off the court while yelling for his mother. My second round foe, Karl “Handy Man” Henderson, was known for playing James Taylor over and over on the jukebox in the rec center. He was also known for being a really crappy player making it easy to get by him. The third round brought a guy everyone referred to as Mad Dog. I quickly learned why as he threw his racket into the fence and yelled out “sh*t!” every time he lost a point. After several warnings from the tournament director to calm down, Mad Dog threw his racket over the fence, hit another camper and was promptly defaulted. My fourth round and quarter-final opposition both

succumbed to heat stroke and somehow, six grueling days into the event, I was still alive and only one match away from the finals.

Standing in my way was a kid called Visor, a nickname he'd been given due to his enormous headgear. Visor was so skinny and his tennis visor stuck out so far, he looked like a gigantic letter F. Visor was known as a backboard, the kind of player who never misses, but he had an endurance problem. In addition to asthma, he had a sodium deficiency that required him to gobble salt tablets like Chiclets. If I could keep Visor on the court for at least two hours, I figured I could sink him.

We started at 10:00 a.m. and by Noon; we were tied at one set a piece. To my dismay, Visor proved resilient, relentlessly launching his trademark moon balls, one after another, as rallies frequently reached 30 shots or more. After three hours of play, with the score tied 4-4 in the third set, Visor was popping salt pills and clinging to his inhaler at every changeover, but he wouldn't quit. Under the glaring sun, I felt myself starting to wilt and wondering whether I could outlast him. Until then, my thoughts of Beth and reaching the finals had kept me going but now negative thoughts began to creep in like unwanted weeds in garden. I began to doubt myself. If I didn't win, I wouldn't get the chance to face Heysoose and win Beth over but what difference did it make? I had no chance against Heysoose and Beth liked him better anyway. Why keep going?

In a funk, I lost the next game and fell behind 5-4, leaving Visor only one game away from beating me. At the changeover, I tried to regroup, recounting in my mind all the conversations I'd had with Beth and searching frantically for a reason to hope. All seemed lost but as Visor began coughing and choking on a large handful of GORP he'd eaten too quickly it suddenly came to me. One night in the rec center, with another female counselor by her side, Beth had pointed at me and said, "I think he's going to be handsome when he grows up, don't you?" Now I could have interpreted that as it was intended, namely that I was too young for her but that I had potential or I could have interpreted as her saying I was good looking and that she would like to bear my children. I chose the latter and convinced myself in the minute and a half I had before I had to return to the court that she liked me the same way I liked her and nobody but Beth could tell me otherwise. After that, Visor didn't stand a chance and the next thing I knew I was standing at the net victorious and poised to play Heysoose.

The next day, the grandstand abutting court one was full of campers and counselors, over 100 strong, ready to watch the finals. I got nervous when I saw Beth in the crowd and more nervous when I noticed dozens of small Mexican flags on sticks being held by nearly everyone in attendance. Where they found these flags was a mystery but the crowd favorite was not. From the top to the bottom row, they had all come to see Crazy Jesus devour me like a freshly-ripped packet of Pop Rocks.

Heysoose looked like a Mexican Bjorn Borg with his checked Fila attire and long, black hair held back by a headband. The smile I was accustomed to seeing him flash Beth was gone and when I went to make eye contact, he conspicuously avoided doing the same. Battle-hardened by my prior six matches; I picked at the strings of my aluminum Head Edge and

readied myself for the physical and mental struggle about to commence. I refused to be intimidated.

As soon as we started, I felt the power of Heysoose's popularity as the crowd cheered every time he won a point and stayed silent when I did. Up high in the last row of the stands, where the rowdiest fans had gathered, several campers beat bongo drums while a sea of small Mexican flags waved around them urging Heysoose onward. The atmosphere was akin to a Davis Cup match in Acapulco and before I knew it, I was down 3-0. Distracted by the mob and overwhelmed by Heysoose's topspin, I struggled to get my bearings. I searched for Beth in the crowd but found no assurance in her eyes.

I knew something had to change if I was to have any chance of winning. Going toe to toe with him from the baseline would be futile as he was taller, stronger and more consistent. After losing the first set 6-1 and going down 2-0 in the next, I noticed the harder I hit the ball the harder it came back. Like all enemies, Heysoose loved power and used it to inflict pain. Maybe if I slowed things down and started to alter my shots, like a pitcher using a change-up to frustrate a fast-ball hitter, I would meet with more success.

Sure enough, as I started to slice the ball and take pace off of it, Heysoose began to make mistakes. My new strategy led to the further discovery that Crazy Jesus hated coming to net. He was a creature of the baseline and felt uncomfortable anywhere else. So when I repeatedly dinked the ball short over the net, forcing him to run in, and then lobbed my next shot over his head, he got frustrated. Over and over I employed this technique and miraculously won the second set 7-5, leaving Heysoose and his supporters thoroughly flummoxed.

With the match now even, Heysoose's veneer of cool began to show cracks. It started with muttering under his breath and escalated to him swearing in his native tongue. Having taken 7th grade Spanish the prior year, I knew he was calling me a big, fat, hairy something but I wasn't sure what. Sensing that their boy was in trouble, the worried throng doubled down on its support. The bongos beat louder, the flags waved incessantly and a rhythmic chant of "Hey! Soose! Hey! Soose! Hey! Soose!" rang out in the hot, wet, Connecticut wilderness.

The third set was a fist fight with rackets. Heysoose made adjustments to his strategy and started hitting his own short balls for me to chase. Back and forth we went, shot after shot, betting the other guy would fade first. My sweat-soaked shirt clung heavily to my chest like a lead vest and my legs started to cramp but adrenaline and a banana pushed me past the pain. I was learning how to compete and it was exhilarating.

At six games all, the referee instructed us to play a nine-point sudden death tiebreaker. As we prepared to start, the chant for my adversary went up again.

"Hey! Soose! Hey! Soose! Hey! Soose!"

I looked up to the stands to see if Beth was part of this vocal pack but her face was obscured leaving me unable to tell.

“Hey! Soose! Hey! Soose! Hey! Soose!”

With the bongos beating and the flags waving, I tried to concentrate on Heysoose. Both of us were spent, but we played on until we reached four all in the tiebreaker and were down to one final point to settle everything. I had never wanted to win anything so badly.

Heysoose served the last point, hitting the ball directly at me and jamming me. Luckily, I managed to get my body out of the way and get a good look at it. My backhand return floated before landing just inside the baseline. Heysoose stepped in and fearlessly smashed a forehand down the line forcing me to run and stab at the ball. My return, a short lob, barely made it over the net and sat up high as my momentum took me beyond the court's boundaries. Moving forward, Heysoose was well-positioned to put me away. All he had to do was punch the ball over the net at a reasonably short angle and there would be no chance for me to reach it. Instead, he hesitated in making his shot selection and then tried to compensate by hitting the ball too hard. Flying off his racket, the ball hit the top of the net and lingered there, seemingly suspended forever, as the crowd gasped and I watched helplessly. Finally, it fell back on Heysoose's side. It was over.

Everyone was stunned, but the momentary quiet was immediately pierced by the sound of someone standing up and exuberantly shouting “Yes!” from the grandstand. She was the only one who said a word and her name was Beth. Beth from Bethesda.