
Fifty Great Essays. Robert DiYanni. Longman/Penguin Academics (2008)

Michael Hogan "The Colonel"

Tennis is so popular these days and so much a part of the average teenager's sports' experience, that it is difficult for most of them to imagine a time when it was not. Yes, in the post-war period and the Fifties of my childhood, tennis was considered more a rich man's sport played at country clubs and exclusive resorts. Competitive singles was largely a sport for the male sex and, although women had been competing for years at Wimbledon and other international venues, most were amateurs and the few professionals who did compete got paid so little it was laughable. It wasn't until Billie Jean King's assertiveness in 1967 and the Virginia Slim tournaments of the Seventies that the sport opened up for a generation of Chris Everts and Steffi Grafs, and finally grew to include the million-dollar players like Venus and Serena Williams who changed the sport forever making it the dream of every athletic boy and girl.

The courts in my hometown of Newport, RI, were mostly off-limits to working class kids like me: the excellent grass center courts and the red clay courts of the Newport Casino where the National Doubles Championships were held, were open only to wealthy members who paid a hefty annual fee. The courts at the Newport Country Club were restricted to those few rich families who were members, as were those at the even more exclusive Bailey's Beach. At the Brenton Village Navy facility inside Fort Adams, there were courts for officers and their dependants but these were not accessible to locals. Both composition and clay courts were available at Salve Regina College but only for registered students and faculty. So that left two casually-maintained asphalt courts at the city park on Carroll Avenue where, during the summer, students home from college would bang away in lusty volleys and dominate the courts in rugged camaraderie.

A twelve year-year old working at a summer job, I had little interest in tennis. To me, pickup games of basketball and football were more fun and more interesting. I played both at the Carroll Street Park and at the YMCA, and in the prolonged light of New England summer evenings practicing shot along in the backyard with a hoop hung from the front of the garage. As fall approached and the football season began, I'd play touch games with my friends and rougher tackle games with boys from uptown in the same park that abutted the tennis area. On occasion we might glance over at the courts if a particularly cute coed was playing doubles. Sometimes we would head over to the water fountain close by to get a drink and watch a game or two. "Love-fifteen. Love-thirty. Deuce." We had no idea what this absurd scoring method could signify. It was remote from our experience, as were the crisp white shorts, the spotless tennis shoes, and the white sports shirts that were de rigueur in those days. We were ragamuffins, I suppose; heady youth, and tennis seemed effete, subtle, complex and sophisticated -- more like an elaborate dance than a sport, a dance to which we would never be invited.

So, it came as a surprise to me when an Army colonel who lived up the street from us, began talking about tennis one day with my Dad. "Does the boy play?" I heard him ask. "No," my Dad said, "but he loves sports and plays basketball, baseball, football." "Well," replied the Colonel, "if he ever wants a lesson tell him to stop by. I was an Army champion in my day."

Later my Dad would mention it and when I replied that I thought it was a sissy game, he began to tell me of some of the great players of the day: Poncho Gonzalez, Jack Kramer, Ken Rosewall, but the names meant little to me. However, I did admire the Colonel who had great stories to tell about the War which was not too distant in memory. My father's brother Harry had died in the Ardennes Forest of Belgium in January, 1945 during the last German push. A Little League baseball field in our neighborhood carried his name. War games in the local hills were still very much a part of our youthful pastimes. So, on a Saturday afternoon, home from a half-day's work with a landscape company, I stopped by to talk to the Colonel. When the subject turned to tennis, his eyes lit up as he described the competition he faced in college and in the service. He regaled me with stories of tournaments, matches with famous players, games played at officers' clubs in remote parts of the world. He said, "Tennis is one game that, once you learn it, you will be able to play the rest of your life. When your knees go out and you can't play football, when there's no gang of boys around for a pickup game of basketball or baseball, you can always find someone to play..."

tennis with.” So, he convinced me. Or, perhaps, it was his enthusiasm, my love for his stories and respect for his retired rank, his war experiences, or his genial personality, that I just felt I didn’t want to disappoint. However it was, we agreed.

He loaned me one of his wooden rackets in its complicated screw-down press and the following day, right after early Mass on Sunday morning, he began teaching me the basics. In between suggestions about how to hold the racket and how to volley, he lectured me on the history of the sport, showed me how to score, how to adjust the net, how to anticipate the ball, how to refrain from cussing or displaying untoward emotional behavior. I think he probably bought me my first set of tennis whites that summer as well, although for the first few games I’m sure I played in T-shirt and Levi cutoffs much to his distaste. That July was my thirteenth birthday and my father bought me my own racket, a Bancroft wood, expensive, highly polished and tightly strung with catgut and protected in a standard wooden press with butterfly screws. The racket would be re-strung many times over the four years that I owned it. I would play with it in local matches, city tournaments, and even one memorable morning at the Newport Casino -- where I got to volley with Poncho Gonzalez on the grass center court, courtesy of my father who owned a business next door and had persuaded the famous champion to trade a few strokes with his son.

The Colonel was, I suppose in his mid-fifties, which seemed ancient to me then. I could not imagine, as I improved my tennis skills, and learned to volley deep, hit cross-court passing shots and top-spin lobs, that he could be able to keep up with me. Surely, the student would outplay the master any day no. But it never happened. Colonel Flack had a whole repertoire of moves: drop shots, slices, topspin backhands, corkscrew serves, and high-bouncing serves which just cut the end of the line. He knew the angles and the limits of the court and, comfortable with these absorbed geometries, kept his young opponent racing from the net to the baseline, ragged and breathless.

As the summer passed, I improved: the muscles on my right forearm grew oversized, my lung capacity deepened, and my strokes improved from the gradual anticipation of the slides and twists the ball would take as it came off the Colonel’s racket, My service improved as well, so that I sometimes caught him wrong-footed and could come to the net quickly and put the ball away. I still didn’t win a set, but the games were closer and I noticed the Colonel was flushed and winded more and more often.

We played less the following year as I found new and younger competition among military dependants, boys from De La Salle Academy, and returning college players. I was often on the courts for hours each evening and on the weekends. With only two courts to play on, you had to win to keep the court and I was often a winner. Sometimes I would generously concede to play mixed doubles with couples who were waiting patiently on the sidelines.

Then one afternoon, shortly after my fourteenth birthday, all of that changed. A new boy appeared on the block: redheaded, cocky, with an easy confidence and grace and a powerful serve which could knock a poorly-gripped racket clear out of your hand. Tommy Gallagher was a compact, good-looking Irish boy who appeared from nowhere and had all the natural moves of a champion. I was blown off the court again and again in swift, blurred games of intense ferocity. I began to learn the difference between a “club player” as opposed to a “show player” or competitive athlete. Tommy played like he was born to it. There was nothing you could hit to him that he could not return. When I tried to play his game he beat me ruthlessly, contemptuously, as if I was wasting his time.

On one of these occasions, the semi-finals of a city-wide tournament, Colonel Flack was in the audience. Shamed by the 6-1, 6-0 defeat, I did not look him in the eye as I retreated back to the bench. “I’m not going to try and console you, Mike,” he said. “You got sent to hell and back by that lad. And if you play him again, he’ll beat you again. He’s one of those kids who are a natural. But don’t let him take away your pleasure in the game: don’t let him do that to you. You’re a club player and a decent one. Play your own game, take the shots you can, don’t get caught up in his game. And don’t be intimidated.”

I was to play Tommy Gallagher several times over the next two years. He beat me, as he beat most of his competitors, but he won less easily as time went by, and never with the contemptuous indifference that I had felt in that one semi-final. More importantly, losing to him did not take away my love of the game or my sense of myself as a player. Partly this was true because Colonel Flack and I returned to our early morning volleys interspersed with lessons. But now the lessons had more to do with eliminating distractions, watching the ball, and feeling the sun, the seat on my skin, the slight breeze from the ocean, hearing the thwack of the perfectly hit ball coming off the strings. He taught me to be totally

present in the moment, totally aware, totally focused.

He also trained me to go after every ball regardless of whether it seemed returnable or not. He taught me to play according to my skill level, placing shots, not over-hitting because of a desire to put it away like a pro, but stroking with the steady grace and pressure of a good club player who often tires out his more ambitious, more aggressive opponent.

Finally, he taught me that graciousness is what saves the game from savagery and ugliness. He counseled me not to give in to the temptation to call a ball out when it was in, to always give the opponent the benefit of the doubt, and that it was better to lose than to win unfairly. He reminded me to hold my temper in check, to always be polite, to return the balls in a single bounce to the server when there was no one to fetch balls.

But what he couldn't teach me, and what I learned for myself over the years, was that all of this was a gift. Tennis would change with the Australian 100 mph serves of Rod Laver, the aluminum and titanium rackets, the oversized head rackets, with Wilson and Addis logos covering every piece of equipment and raiment. Bad boys like Jack McEnroe would cuss out line judges and umpires, as aggressiveness had its day and the subsided... though never completely. Competitive tennis would be enshrined in every high school and university; tennis camps would groom a new generation of players like Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi intent on making millions as they made their mark in the sport. Still, I would go right on playing my 3.5 club level game. I would play tennis in the dry heat of the Sonoran desert and on the mile-high courts of Denver; I would play in Argentina and Panama. I would play after clearing the debris off a hurricane-littered court in Florida: I would hit the low-bounce ball bundled while bundled in a jacket in up-state New York after sweeping off the snow-covered court, and--year after year--I would sweat through grueling sets in the tropical heat of May in Guadalajara. I would play through days of political unrest and assassination in my twenties, through the bitterness of a rancorous divorce in my thirties, through the crushing death of a beloved child in my forties, then through the uncertain days of financial disasters and overseas currency devaluations in my fifties.

Now her I am in my sixties, older now than Colonel Flack was on that summer morning when he took a skinny twelve-year old out to the concrete courts of a seaside town to give him the gift of lifelong victory. He gave me not only a way of maintaining both physical and psychological fitness, but also a way of moving with grace and a sure sense of gratitude. One of those ineffable spiritual gifts which continue to give again and again when I walk onto a sun-drenched court, go over to measure the net with my stick (a Wilson H-26 titanium racket), and all the world narrows down to the clear geometries of the white lines, to the sound of the thwack as the ball hits the strings, as my muscles respond again in their dependable way to the known rhythms of the game, and everything is suddenly whole and perfect, and the world completely intelligible.