

The Young and Old

Adam C. Powell

“Adam, you need to learn to play a sport.” After experiencing a decade of her son’s nerdy loafing, my mother thought that it was time for a change. She then continued, “Tennis of course! A game for the young and old.” With that decree, I began swatting at bouncing yellow bullets.

My mother did not realize that there are no beginning tennis classes (locally) for players aged eleven years. Like an off-vintage wine, I did not fit into the lessons for seven-year-olds, nor the lessons for retirees. For the next three years, I would play tennis with “the young and old,” but never with my peers.

Herbie, one of my grandpa’s friends, might have seemed frail off the court, but he was a demon when he met the turf. Sure, he walked with a cane due to his arthritis, and had survived triple-bypass surgery. He was on his second Pacemaker, third hip replacement, and fourth wife. But, he had five decades more experience in the game of tennis than I. While playing him in the openness of a sunny outdoor court, I sometimes felt embarrassed. What would my friends think if they saw me playing the feeble? I realized that if I succumbed to those thoughts, I would defeat myself. To motivate myself, I resolved that I would only defeat Herbie if I practiced regularly. My eventual victory would come only after countless defeats by his gnarled hands and forceful biceps. As he went through countless tubes of Bengay, and I drank liters of Gatorade, I progressed until I was a good enough to play against a new crowd: the young.

Evan, a frisky boy four years my junior, became my new opponent. He had fresh cartilage in his joints, the concentration of Buddha, and an older sister named Anna in my grade. If I failed to pull my racket back, and “swing it from low to high,” the results were predictable. A brightly colored missile would either pass me faster than an F/A-18 Hornet, or strike me firmly in the genitalia.

Like an outbreak of the bubonic plague, rumors that I played tennis against Anna’s little brother spread through Washburne Middle School. Occasionally, I would be asked to verify the rumor. I realized that the best course of action was to confirm it. As long as I didn’t react adversely, no one would enjoy spreading the rumor. As long as I could manage to ignore the giggles of amusement being slung at me, I could concentrate on the balls being launched at me.

After a potentially humiliating three years of tennis against Herbie and Evan, I was able to play tennis against my own age group. Through playing “the young and old,” I learned that patience and confidence are necessary for success. I know that I will never play in the Wimbledon, or the U.S. Open, but I can play on my home court.

This essay was written in October 2001, and submitted with my application for admission to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.