

Article featuring ROBERT SALUM

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"ALL IN THE FAMILY"

"Passion Play -- One married couple's quest to put the love back in their tennis game."

By Erica Sanders and Alec Foege

WE'D BEEN OUT ON THE court all of 15 minutes and already our match had taken a turn for the worse. Without naming names, here's what happened: Instead of crushing an easy lob, the kind any player worth his or her salt wallops with an overhead smash, one of us sympathetically dinked the shot over the net. The other responded with an equally lame reply that was a good two feet long. Now we were both upset—upset that neither of us had put away the point, upset that we were back to deuce for the sixth time, and upset that we weren't having any fun.

We'd both be lying if we said this hadn't happened to us before. And each time it does, we inch perilously closer to whacking each other with our racquets. Seems silly. After all, it's just tennis.

Or is it?

Like most weekend hackers, we relish competition. Given our druthers, we'd both play less-familiar opponents, the type who go home in their own cars. But sometimes, playing each other is inevitable. That's because we aren't just tennis buddies—we also happen to be loving husband and wife. And, unfortunately, our singles matches had become as stale as the ham-and-cheese croissants at the U.S. Open food court.

Don't get us wrong. We love being married. But getting hitched did bad things to our tennis. We started playing together in the months after our first date, consummating fierce sets in exhilarating tiebreakers. Unfortunately, that energy mysteriously dissipated after we exchanged vows two years ago. The fire was gone, and in its ashes stood two very unhappy players mired in long, tedious points, players who liked competing against each other—except when one of them had to lose. So half the time we didn't even bother to keep score. Sound boring? You bet.

Not that our problem was unique. "It's very common for couples, married or otherwise, to struggle on the court," says sports psychologist Allen Fox, Ph.D.

"Tennis is an aggressive sport. It's a fistfight without fists. Which, for obvious reasons, can cause problems between a husband and a wife."

Chief among those problems: One player is usually better than the other. "The guy, who may have the physical edge, dominates the game and starts sniping if his wife isn't playing as well as he thinks she should be," says John F. Murray, Ph.D., the author of *Smart Tennis* (Jossey-Bass). "Other times, the weaker player will become passive or will overcompensate by hitting low-percentage shots."

Tennis couples face dozens of other difficulties. But we weren't sure what ours was. So in the interest of recapturing our former on-court heat, we headed for the Colony Beach and Tennis Resort, an 18-acre haven on Longboat Key, off the West coast of Florida, that sells tennis packages for two for about \$400 a night. Our itinerary was straightforward: brush up on our individual skills, rediscover a healthy sense of competition, and road test the new strategies by beating the crap—urn, engaging in a higher level of play against each other.

RUNNING LATE FROM A BREAKFAST of bagels, cereal, and fresh fruit, we fretted about missing our first clinic. Fortunately, Robbie **Salum**, the Colony's pro assigned to our case, was a patient man. He was also enormously competent. The native of Argentina had a debonair brush mustache to match his first-class deportment, and he came through the same training system that produced his old friend Guillermo Vilas.

We began that morning by stretching to the strains of New Age music emanating from a boom box on the court. After a quick assessment of our ground strokes, approach shots, and volleys, **Salum** drilled us like a pair of junior recruits. The pace was unrelenting, the 85-degree temperature unforgiving. Our only solace was a cooler of ice water.

Salum's constant chatter of compliments and recommendations, all delivered with a gentlemanly lilt (think Ricardo Montalban), went a long way toward feeding our fragile egos. He espoused a whole-body technique he called "tai-chi tennis." "Move the hips, move the trunk, then follow through with the arm—in one motion—to get power and consistency," **Salum** said. To our delight, our shots suddenly had more zing.

Later, we studied a continuous-loop video of Rod Laver executing his textbook forehand, backhand, and serve. "Watching these strokes over and over helps muscle memory," said **Salum**.

But it wasn't just our strokes that needed work. So after our first session, we sat down with Don McMurray, the Colony's sports psychologist, to sharpen our mental game. The problem, he explained, was our inability to put shots away for fear of upsetting the other player. He advised us to adopt an aggressive approach by, paradoxically, de-emphasizing winning: "Think of it this way: You're not playing against each other; you're playing for yourself and with the ball."

Figuring we'd need some NFL-caliber strength to back up our improved strokes, we hustled over to the fitness center for aerobics with trainer Anna Ayrault. She had us running shuttle sprints with rubber hoses around our ankles and performing excruciating slow-motion lunges to improve our speed and strength. She also showed us a few "intimate" ways to stretch each other, all of which involved twisting ourselves into a pretzel.

Come that afternoon, showered and freshly dressed, we were ready to test what we'd learned. **Salum** set up a video camera and McMurray took his seat in the bleachers. On the center court: Erica and Alec.

For the first few points we were Steffi and Andre, firing off forehands and running down shots with a ferocious passion that even surprised us. But after a while, our good work of the morning was forgotten and we became Mr. and Mrs. Nice-Nice again. Our shots looked cleaner, but they weren't getting the job done. Having abandoned our newly acquired serve-and-volley games, we were back to never-ending rallies.

Why was this happening? As we powwowed on the clubhouse porch, where we watched our match on tape, **Salum** pointed out that we were still having trouble finishing points. No argument there: We came to the net easily enough, but we just as happily retreated to the baseline like a pair of South American clay-courtiers. "You were really nice with each other out there," he said. "Maybe *too* nice." We told him how hard it was to get over each screw-up. "Don't focus on the misses," said McMurray. "The way you really build confidence is by focusing on what you do well."

That night, the only thing we wanted to focus on was the food at the Colony's main dining room, a restaurant that *Zagat's* rates as one of the Top 10 in the area. Famished, we double-teamed a sashimi appetizer, pan-roasted red snapper stuffed with crab, and seared Chilean sea bass with shrimp. For dessert, we stared into the pyre-like glow of berries flambé. If we hadn't been so dog-tired, we'd have been awestruck.

BY THE THIRD DAY, WE WERE no longer nodding off at meals. In fact, after two days of drilling, strategy sessions, and playing sets, we felt like a couple of Tennis Terminators. At that morning's session, we got a new trainer, Sammy Aviles, co-director of the Colony's tennis program, who worked us even harder than **Salum** had. He ran us around the court, hitting balls at us from a terrifying array of angles. Without sounding like braggarts, we handled each new challenge with poise and agility. During the most grueling drill, which resembled the kid's game Red Light, Green Light, we sprinted from the baseline to the service line, then split-step and punched a volley over the net.

But it wasn't until we played practice points that we really noticed the difference. Smacking winners without remorse and admiring each other for our newfound verve, we abandoned all previous decorum. We felt ready to take opposite sides of the net once again. But the pros had something else in mind.

That afternoon, they signed us up for a doubles match. Our opponents, a German couple in their 60s whom we'll call Helmut and Helga, appeared frail. It was hard not to feel insulted. They'd be no match for us.

Or so we thought.

As it turned out, the Deutsche Duo had 30 years of experience under their belts. With Helmut calling the plays, they set us up like clay pigeons. Helga moved wide to cut off attempted passing shots.

Helmut scooted to the net to retrieve drop shots. Point after point, our best stuff was gunned down. They won 6-2.

Humiliated, we walked back to our bungalow, where McMurray's words rang in our ears: Pay attention to your game and focus on the things you do well. Then we finally got it. We really had been thinking about our singles game all wrong. Rather than being concerned about who was winning or losing, we each needed to play our best and trust that the other could handle defeat.

Now it was time to open up the can of whup-ass. Our final court time was scheduled for 9 o'clock the following morning. Gone were **Salum**, Aviles, and McMurray. It was just the two of us and three fuzzy, yellow tennis balls.

We'd both be lying if we said the score didn't matter (though we're not telling who won). With our improved groundstrokes, our confidence soared. Freed from the constraints of worrying about each other's feelings, we cast aside our inhibitions and went for it, calling out "nice shot" after each winner. Finally, we were able to sample each other's naked aggression. The last two years of mediocre married-people tennis magically fell away, and again we experienced the *frisson* of our courtship. It felt good. Really good. ~

Erica Sanders and Alec Foegen are writers who live in New York City. They play regularly on the courts in Central Park.

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