

Tennis veteran has strong opinions, but a soft heart for the game

by Jerry Magee

You must remember this: Tom Brown acted properly when he chose to put the title of his book, "As Tom Goes By," in the present tense. At 84, his romance with tennis is continuing.

As he notes in the foreword, " ... the sentimental things apply."

They do for Brown, who in the work he has done with Lee Tyler, his longtime female companion, relives another time in tennis, when there was no money in the game, men wore long pants, and Brown was the handsome chap from San Francisco who would come off the public courts of Golden Gate Park and make a name for himself.

In 1946, Brown, then 23, was both the gentlemen's doubles (with Jack Kramer) and mixed doubles (with Louise Brough) champion at Wimbledon. That year he was a singles finalist to Kramer in what then were the U.S. Championships. The following year at Wimbledon, he was a singles finalist, again to Kramer.

Ask him how many years he has stayed away from tennis and his answer, one he announces in his book, is "None." In 2004, Brown underwent a total reconstruction of his left knee. He doesn't get around so well these days, which has not improved his opinion of doctors. "One of them gave me a new knee," he said, "and the new knee doesn't work very well."

He also has had a shoulder problem. "I visited the best shoulder doctor in the Bay Area, and maybe in California," he said. "At the end, the great man intoned, 'How often in a week do you play tennis?'"

"Maybe two or three times."

"If you only played half as much, your shoulder would last twice as long."

"My feet started to talk," Brown said. "They said, 'Boss, we're out of here.' I didn't want to hear that I needed to play less, because that wouldn't be a cure. I thought he was not very bright, as a doctor or as a human being."

Brown is a person of strong opinions, about physicians, whom he distrusts; about the USTA, which he

contends did very little to enhance his career; and about the state of American tennis, which he argues is not as deplorable as it might seem.

"I don't think there is anything wrong with American tennis," he said. "It may be just the way crops get harvested. They (other nations) just happen to have a good crop coming along and we don't. Of course, people have constantly misjudged. During World War II or thereabouts, they would say, 'Why don't the Europeans have any players?'"

Tennis, as Brown views it, has been good to him. "It's been a good ride," he said. "Where else would a young kid get the opportunities that have come my way?"

A number of them are in his book, in picture form. Brown with an elephant in India. Brown in Machu Picchu, Peru. Brown with his tennis contemporaries, Kramer and Pancho Segura and Vic Seixas and all the others.

When Brown was rehabilitating after his knee surgery, Tyler also was recovering from surgery. She decided to tape their conversations. She ended up with 17 hours of tapes. The author of several works of fiction with golf themes, she would gather Brown's recollections into "As Tom Goes By," which is subtitled, "A Tennis Memoir."

Brown grew up near Golden Gate Park. "Where anybody could play," he noted. His mother played tennis, but he said she would not play him until he was 10 or 11. "The terrible thing was she beat me," he said. "Then she wouldn't play me again, and the other players at Golden Gate Park would kick me off the courts because I was a junior player they felt wasn't good enough to play them."

In time, he was getting matches. When he would win, he said he would advise his victims, "You shouldn't lose to me. I'm not very good."

"That," he added, "was a pleasure."

Brown attended Cal, lettered in track to win a \$5 wager from somebody who bet he could not, and became a lawyer. But tennis has been his lifelong fascination. Why?

"The answer would be similar if you found a young man who was shooting pool or playing some game like table tennis or something and he enjoyed excelling in it," he said.

"The drive to excel. That's it. That's what keeps players going when seemingly they've lost a match. It's a universal spirit, more prevalent in some people than it is in others. Some people, if they can't win easily, just forget it. But if you're built the other way, then you're going to pursue it."

As Tom Brown has. And does.

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