



»» **Courting Disaster**
Tennis match, love match: Can the two go hand in hand? BY NAFARI VANASKI

By the summer of 2001, I felt like I was at the end of my rope. My job as a newspaper editor in North Carolina was fraying my nerves, even when I wasn't at the office. Nothing seemed to alleviate the stress, not even the timeouts I took in my car. So I took up tennis.

My first session with a tennis pro was great. I hit the ball as hard as I could, which was therapeutic. I didn't care that the majority of those balls landed about 15 feet out. I was content to have an outlet.

About two months later, I was at the backboard at Empie Park, in Wilmington, hitting the ball as hard as possible (as usual), when a man in a

Gilligan-style fishing hat, plaid Bermuda shorts, and black socks approached me.

"Wanna hit?" he asked.

His name was Jerry, and he hadn't played regularly for years. We were polar opposites: me, a 23-year-old black woman, with no time for a life or outside interests; him, a 40-year-old white man, an entrepreneur who coached high school basketball on the side. We connected immediately.

Jerry had a biting, sarcastic wit, and he let it fly with every backhand. In the first hour we hit, he took to calling me "Slappy Wheelhouse" because of my wristy forehand. Yet while I'm shy and reserved, I found myself ribbing

him back. I had never been so comfortable around a stranger before, especially a male stranger, whom I thought was kind of cute.

We didn't stay strangers for long. Both of us had moved to Wilmington from big cities. I was born and raised in Brooklyn, N.Y., and he'd spent his adult life in San Francisco. Each of us had been finding it hard to adjust to the deafening silence of a smaller city. Together, we created our own noise—the resounding whack of synthetic strings meeting a tennis ball.

We began to hit more often, and two things developed. First, I became more interested in tennis and wanted to play better so I could impress Jerry. I took more lessons, listened to more of his advice, and began to practice and work out more strenuously.

Second, I was starting to like Jerry. A lot. He had the brightest, most

mischievous eyes I'd ever seen. He was very smart, yet he was always teaching himself new things, like gourmet cooking or the swinging volley. His unpredictable nature threw me off my normal, boring routine, and I liked that. We both loved old movies: The first one we saw together was *His Girl Friday*, with a wisecracking Cary Grant as a newspaper editor and Rosalind Russell as his ex-wife and star reporter.

As tennis became our courtship ritual, I abandoned my gray T-shirts and shorts for cute tennis outfits. We spent evenings under the lights of Empie Park, often staying late. No

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matter how full the courts were, it was just the two of us.

We packed a cooler of fruit and Gatorade and refueled on the hard, wooden bench, bathed in warm, dewy air. That was our idea of a hot date.

We learned about each other. Unlike me, Jerry wasn't afraid to be himself. I found that refreshing. On a tennis court, his confidence became undisguised cockiness. As the attraction grew, I found myself wanting badly to beat him. I attributed this to my dual nature: The "I-am-woman-hear-me-roar" part wanted to conquer a man, while the "he Tarzan, me Jane" part couldn't wait to impress him with my West Indian cooking.

In the rare moments that I was at the courts without Jerry, I met other tennis nuts. They'd talk about how much fun they had—until they played with their significant other. There were horror stories of silent rides

home, of loud arguments, of conflicting line calls. I didn't understand that. If you love tennis and you love your boyfriend, why can't you combine those loves?

As our tennis games improved, our sessions intensified, and I experienced a side of myself I hadn't known since I was a toddler: I could throw a temper tantrum. I'd never played competitive sports, and I had a hard time having fun when I was losing. And I was losing. Every single time. It's a good thing I was buying my racquets at Wal-Mart, because I was breaking them left and right. I grew frustrated with my inability to take even a set off my boyfriend.

One night, after losing another close set, I walked toward the bench swinging my racquet angrily and yelling at myself. Jerry was already sitting there, having a drink and needling me. It struck the wrong nerve that night, and I carelessly swung my racquet in the direction of the bench, accidentally hitting him on the forehead. Jerry wasn't badly hurt, but he became very upset. I apologized profusely, but he didn't say much in return. That night, I experienced the first silent ride home.

In every relationship, you have a moment when you see your partner in a way that you never have before, and you wonder if that's what he or she is really like. I had that moment that night—but it was about myself. I knew I wasn't an abusive or temperamental person, but I feared Jerry would think I was. The incident made me reluctant to play with him, afraid to even tease him, because I wanted to erase that image. I found myself unable to relax the next few times we played.

I realized that sometimes you can't combine your loves. Chocolate cake is great. Sushi is great. But chocolate cake topped with sushi doesn't work. Playing with your mate can be a little like that because, let's face it, it's not easy to lose. What are you supposed to say, you don't care that you blew an overhead and lost? Losing also brings you face-to-face with your shortcomings, which can be doubly painful in front of a companion. No wonder most people have a lot of trouble competing against someone they love.

But it turns out that Jerry and I

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aren't wired that way. Thanks partly to Jerry's humor, we got over the beaming incident and continued to compete, each of us still wanting as much as ever to win. The incident gave us an opportunity to confront a misstep and put it behind us. It allowed us to recognize what each of us wanted: A partner who throws the kitchen sink out there and doesn't flinch when it comes flying back; a partner who wouldn't allow what happens on the tennis court to affect a growing bond; a partner with the stomach for chocolate cake and sushi.

Evidently, my stomach is made of steel. That blue Head racquet I bounced off my boyfriend's head was the last one I ever busted. And it was just a few weeks later, on Court 1 at Empie Park, that I took my first set (6-4) off Jerry. He feigned disgust for losing to "a girl." He spat. He got over it. And he's still my coach, teasing me about that Slappy Wheelhouse forehand. He still resorts to gamesmanship when I'm about to win a set.

Four and a half years later, I continue to find tennis therapeutic (I'm still in the newspaper business, after all). As for Jerry and I, we're a doubles team—legally married. We moved north and now have access to a private tennis court. It isn't lit like the courts in Wilmington; many nights we walk home under the romantic light of the moon, trash-talking about which of us has the advantage on court.

I don't win all the time, but I feel I've scored a significant victory. A lot of people probably meet their love match on a tennis court, but how many can say they still square off against each other one on one? ☺



Playing for keeps:
The author and
her husband.

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