

PLAYING nice

Local tennis expert stresses the importance of playing well with others, *especially* your spouse!

You would never expect the legendary Rod “Rocket” Laver, the only player to ever win all four Grand Slams in one calendar year twice, to weigh-in on the ever delicate and potentially volatile subject of husband-wife doubles. Yet, such an impeccable model of sportsmanship and decorum once offered the following: “An otherwise happily married couple may turn a mixed-doubles game into a scene from *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf?*” If you’re old enough to remember the film version of Edward Albee’s Broadway play, featuring Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, that’s a very scary proposition.

With over 50 years in the game, I’ve witnessed some harrowing encounters and can recall displaying some very boorish and unfortunate behavior myself, directed at my former spouse in a USTA husband-wife tournament. Many years later I still have a stinging Kodak moment taken immediately after she had blown an “easy put away” at a pivotal juncture in a tight match. There I am, glaring in her direction; there she is, feeling horrible about her missed opportunity. Not nice.

In retrospect, my goal was to win at all costs, short of tubing anyone in a totally defenseless position. Her goal was to enjoy playing doubles with her husband and have some fun while sharing the great sport of tennis together. My actions and negative vibe *ensured* that she would now play tentatively, afraid to miss, creating a strained climate for the remainder of the match, which we lost...


not to mention the long ride home. How could I have strayed down the path of creating completely unrealistic performance expectations of the person I cared for the most? After all, I was making errors, too.

A Lesson for All Partners, Married or Not

Never, *ever* fail to unconditionally support a struggling partner, especially one who isn’t your equal in skill, experience or both. I have yet to ever play with, or observe, anyone participating in a tournament or competitive club encounter making errors on purpose.

The game is difficult enough without rolling your eyes in disgust, shrugging your shoulders in resignation, barking accusingly loud instructions, turning your back and not talking on the changeovers and generally communicating to your opponents and anyone else in proximity to your court that your partner is dragging your otherwise wonderful game down.

In reality, influencing the best doubles partnerships, whether partners in life or not and whether there’s a clear disparity in playing skills or not, is so easy even I learned do it. First and foremost, adhere to a fail safe prime directive, which is the acceptance of the “anything you can comfortably reach and hit is yours” contract. After all, this is *doubles*.



Always encourage your partners to get into the act, to be a part of the “T” in team, win or lose.

Avoidance items include darting in front of your partner to take a shot that is clearly their ball, even if their backhand is a bit dodgy. Don't incessantly tell your partner to watch their alley to, in effect, get them hugging the singles sideline to create more balls for you giving nothing more than the appearance of playing in tandem. And please, unless a family member has received a death threat if you lose, don't tell partners, “I'll take all the volleys in the middle,” or especially, “I'll take all the overheads.” If any of these examples is striking a chord, you might reconsider your take on doubles play and think about playing mostly singles.

For better or worse, it takes two to tango. Always encourage your partners to get into the act, to be a part of the “T” in team, win or lose. Be continually positive with any partner making inadvertent unforced errors with supportive comments like, “No problem!”, “Keep going for it!”, “Good effort!”, “Almost!”, “It's okay; no worries!” or “It's alright, let's go!” You can be instrumental in helping them to relax, regain their focus and composure, diffuse over trying and, ultimately, right their game to influence the result in a positive way. Or, you can literally join forces with the other team and add to the adversity that they already experience. You choose.

When communicating with a sputtering partner, never use the “you” word even when offering positive advice. “You've got to do this.” “You've got to do that.” Always, even if you aren't

experiencing the same difficulties, use the “we” word. “If we can avoid lobbing the opponent in the blue cap, I think we'll be better off.” Or, “Let's both go crosscourt on the return and keep it away from him if we can.” You'll find that partners are much more accepting of the types of exchanges that indicate you're in it with them, not against them.

Besides the psychological aspect addressed thus far, along with underdeveloped mechanics, keep in mind that the two biggest liabilities in doubles play are playing out of position, especially at the net, and poor, low percentage shot selection. Make it a point to continually improve these areas of your game. The demand for your doubles services will continually improve as well, and all will be well in your tennis world.

Prior to his untimely death, two-time Kentucky Derby winner Chris Atley explained his widely recognized ability at getting the most out of his mounts, even ones he had never ridden before. “To make the horse my friend by the time I get to the starting gate,” he said. If he could successfully communicate that with an animal, shouldn't it be a given for all of us to coax the best out of another human being?

Plato had it right when he offered this sage advice, “You can discover more about a person in an hour of play, than in a year of conversation.” Be the best you can be and allow your hour to be one filled with shared fun. 