

BALLS

by Richard Kigel

Tennis balls were falling all around them, beating soft rhythms on the ground like spring rain. Earl Weems and Henry Odom walked along the fence past several games in progress and when they got to an empty court they dropped their bags. Earl opened a can of new tennis balls while Odom strapped on his knee brace.

The two friends started an easy volley. Soon, their strokes became firmer. The ball picked up speed. They stepped back from the net, their competitive juices fired up.

In his younger days, Odom was tall and slim. He is heavier now and no longer looks like an athlete. Still, like almost everyone else, he has to play David to Earl's Goliath. If they were on a football field together, Earl would be the beefy nose tackle, Odom the sports reporter.

Earl was a physical marvel. He always wore a sleeveless shirt to show off his muscular shoulders, chiseled and hard by years of weight training. Even now, in his mid-forties, he could summon considerable athletic gifts. Most men his size were plodding and slow. Not Earl. Remarkably agile, he can spin and twist, start and stop in quick bursts. His tennis game is all offense. The ball explodes off his racket with stunning suddenness. His power would give a pro fits.

Odom cannot match his friend's athleticism but he plays smart. His moves are stiff and deliberate, like he has to think about it. He seems too slow to cover the court. But somehow, with keen anticipation and good balance, he is in position to return almost every shot. He wins most of his points on lobs, spins, and tactical placements.

Ten minutes of heavy action brought both men to a sweat. Odom seemed to be wearing down. He was struggling to reach balls he hit easily moments earlier. Earl took three, then four points in a row. During the next volley, Odom made an awkward turn. Suddenly he fell.

Earl rushed over. "Hey, buddy! You okay?" His deep voice was full of concern. A massive arm reached around Odom's back and gently lifted him to a sitting position.

"My knee," said Odom, his face contorted in pain.

"Man, I thought you had a heart attack," said Earl.

“Naah, it’s tendonitis.”

“Stay put,” Earl told him. He sprinted across the court to his equipment bag, grabbed something out of it and motored back.

“Chemical Ice,” he said.

While Earl was standing protectively over his friend, they barely noticed someone else was there. He stood with them, intensely interested in Odom sitting on the ground.

He was an Asian gentleman in baggy shorts too large for his squat torso. His shapeless knit shirt scored no style points with one side of his collar flapping up at a funny angle. His soft chubby face, thick glasses and bloated belly testified to the long hours he spent sitting in front of a computer.

“How’s your friend?” the man asked Earl.

Odom answered him. “I’ll be all right.”

“Are you still going to play?” the Asian man asked.

Weems and Odom exchanged a quick glance. They knew what he was angling for. The man was dying to play on their court.

The Asian man made an offer. “If your friend here can’t play, I’ll take his place. Then you will have someone to play with.”

Earl ignored him.

He tried again. “Maybe we can volley a little while he is resting. When you’re friend feels better, I’ll sit down.”

There was an awkward silence.

Finally, Odom said, “I better not test it. Why don’t you go ahead.”

Earl helped Odom up and walked him to the sideline where he sat, legs stretched out, pressing the ice pack to his knee.

“Okay, my friend,” Earl called to the small Asian man. “You’re on.”

“Excellent!” the man said. “Now I can practice my strokes.”

Earl shook his head, amused. Clearly, the man was no athlete. His narrow shoulders, soft round arms and portly physique advertised his sedentary lifestyle. There was no hardness in him. He probably never sweats.

Soon the ball was in the air, floating back and forth over the net. They settled into an easy rhythm, a gentleman's volley.

Then Earl sent a blistering shot to the ankles of his startled opponent, who made an awkward swipe while skipping out of the way.

The smaller man smiled. "Nice shot," he called. He tossed two tennis balls to Earl, conceding the serve. Then, with funny little steps, he trotted behind the service box and took his stance, crouching low, his racket swaying gently.

They began a competitive volley. The small Asian man showed he could hold his own against Earl's rockets. Then a bullet whistled by his face. He didn't even swing. First point to Weems.

Earl's next serve exploded like a missile. Ace.

On the next serve, the Asian man lunged and barely tipped it. The ball wobbled over the net. Weems slammed it back. Forty-Love.

The next volley was the longest so far. The smaller man managed to return three of Earl's smashes before hitting one into the net. Game to Weems.

As Earl walked to his position near the baseline, he glanced at Odom on ground with the ice pack on his knee. "I better take it easy on the guy," Earl said with a smirk, "or he'll never get to practice his strokes."

The Asian man's first serve was a low line drive that cleared the net by an inch. Earl moved left and returned it with his backhand. The smaller man sent it back, again to Earl's left. Again his backhand swatted it over. The next ball went farther to the left. Earl ran it down in the corner, reached out with a backhand stretch and returned it.

Then the Asian fellow surprised him. His next shot went to the opposite side, deep in the right corner. Earl came on charging, his massive body covering the entire width of the court with surprising speed. He reached for it and got his racket on it. The ball veered off into the next court. Opponent: Fifteen-Love.

On the next serve, Earl positioned himself a few steps to his left. Again, the serve came to the left. A forehand blast sent the ball over the net. The smaller man sent it back.

Grunting powerfully, Earl uncorked a bullet. He felt like he was finding his groove. The Asian man sent it toward the right. Earl went after it and slammed another forehand over the net. The Asian lobbed one to the left. Earl made an acrobatic return off his backhand.

The Asian man lofted it deep and to the right. Earl sprinted across the court and whacked it back. Anticipating another backhand stroke, he glided to his left. The ball came back in a high lazy arc, floating to his right, aiming for the spot Earl just vacated. With Earl running the opposite way, the ball bounced harmlessly behind him. Forty-Love.

Earl turned his back on the net. Ambling slowly toward the baseline, a closed fist resting on his hip, the head of his racket dragging on the ground, his mouth was open, his chest heaving. Each breath was labored as he sucked in gulps of air. He lifted the bottom of his soggy shirt to wipe the perspiration pouring down his face.

“Hey, Earl!” Odom called. Weems looked up. His eyes were dull and lifeless. Beads of sweat were swelling on his face like boils.

“You’re letting this guy get to you, man,” said Odom.

Earl growled. “I’m going to make him eat the fucking ball.”

He turned toward his opponent. Crouching behind the baseline, cursing and snorting, he spit on the ground. Earl was ready.

The man’s serve sailed over the net to Weems’ left. Earl attacked, throwing his whole body into the swing with a fearsome grunt. A low line drive barely cleared the net, sailing across the court chest high, soaring, spinning, gaining speed. Whistling past the baseline, the ball might have flown clear to the river if the fence wasn’t in the way.

The impact of the crash rattled the iron mesh. The ball was embedded so deeply nothing could work it loose, not twisting, prying or poking by the perplexed Asian fellow. It was stuck. Finally, he gave up and walked away, leaving the ball wedged in the fence. Game to Weems’ opponent.

After that, it was all downhill for Earl. His next serve blew through the box, past his helpless opponent. Again and again, Earl’s serves were barely seeable, impossible to return—and all of them were long. Each serve roared invisibly over the net, hitting ten feet beyond the baseline. His opponent did not move. He just watched the ball soar. Earl double faulted three times in a row and was quickly down Love-Forty.

His next serve was a blur and left a deep gash in the clay inside the box. Ace for Weems.

Up 15-40, the Asian decided to close out the game by returning to his strategy of attacking Earl's backhand. The next four or five shots went to his left. Earl returned them all.

Each backhand shot nailed Earl deeper in the corner. On his next return his momentum carried him out of bounds, leaving the entire court exposed. His opponent's next stroke aimed at the opposite corner. Earl, turning on a burst of speed, covered the distance across the court. Arriving with the ball, he made a desperate lunge. The contact felt good. It could be a winner.

He never saw the smaller man swing but somehow the ball was coming back at him, sailing to his left once more. It was a weak shot. Earl had plenty of time to set up and get off a sharp forehand. He crushed it. "This is it," he thought.

Somehow, the Asian man returned a high floater. Earl waited, hoping it would go out. When he saw it was falling in bounds, he hustled over and caught it on a hop. He sent it deep to the opposite baseline.

The Asian lifted another lob just clearing the net. Earl tore after it in a frantic race to the ball before it could touch down a second time. Those strong legs which gallantly carried his mammoth body with grace and determination, now lumbered in slow motion. His beefy legs thundered like the legs of an elephant.

It wasn't even close. The ball dropped softly just over the net, bouncing several times before dribbling off the court. Game: opponent.

Running hard, unable to stop, Earl rumbled toward the net. In a burst of frustration, he flung his racket, sent it skidding along the ground. A woman on the next court had to leap to get out of the way.

"That's enough, man!" he snarled.

"We have plenty of time," the Asian man called. "We can play a few more points."

Revulsion crossed Earl's face. He shrugged. It was the last thing he wanted to do.

"You can serve," the man said helpfully, trying to be a good sport. Earl ignored him and kept on walking toward the next court to retrieve his racket.

The Asian man approached Odom on the sideline. "Feeling better? Maybe you want to try a little volley?"

“Thanks,” said Odom, “but I think I’ll take a pass. You’re way too good for me. I like your strategy. You lobbed him to death.”

“Your friend is a powerful hitter. But a man’s strength can become his weakness.”

From his sitting position he offered a friendly handshake. “My name is Henry Odom. My buddy over there, that’s Earl Weems.”

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Peter Kim.” He made a little bow from the waist and they shook hands. “I don’t much care about winning and losing. I just like to play. Maybe we can meet again on the court some time.”

He turned to walk away. Out of nowhere a streaking yellow blur struck him hard on the side of his face with a sharp crack. It sounded like a gunshot. Kim collapsed in a heap, his hand reaching reflexively for his jaw. Behind his body, an errant yellow tennis ball dribbled away harmlessly.

Odom scrambled to stand up and rushed to his side. “You okay?”

Gently, Odom removed the stunned man’s hand from his face to examine the injury. There was no blood. His cheek, just below his eye, was beginning to swell.

Earl came trotting over. “Sorry”, he said. “You’ll be all right. Just get some ice on it. You’ll be as good as new.”

“Thank you,” Kim said as they helped him to his feet. “Don’t worry about it. I don’t think it’s serious. I’m sure it was an accident.”

Odom stared hard at his friend. He could not believe what he just saw.

The two men picked up their rackets and bags and headed off the court, walking along the fence past a dozen spirited tennis matches.

It wasn’t until they got into the car that Odom broke the silence. “What was the hell was that?”

“What you talkin’ about, man?”

“Why’d you do it, Earl? What were you thinking?”

“Why’d I do what?”

“You know what I mean. It was totally uncalled for. You hit that man upside the head.”

“Hey!” Earl said, wide-eyed. “It was an accident.”

“Tell me—how is a tennis ball going to rip into a guy’s skull at sixty miles an hour by accident?”

“Look, I was bouncing a couple of tennis balls on my racket and, I swear, one of the balls went crazy on me and took a nasty bounce off the end of the racket. Next thing I know he’s on the ground.”

“Well, you did a job on him,” said Odom. “Maybe you didn’t like how he whipped your sorry butt all over the court.”

This comment irritated Earl. “Look, I apologized, didn’t I? So what’s the problem? He’ll be fine.”

Earl turned his back on Odom and sat, gazing out the window, fingering his sunglasses. He wasn’t done yet. He had more to say. Still facing the window, he let it out. “He asked for it, man. He needed his ass kicked. That fool doesn’t know who he is dealing with.”

Odom winced. “I’m sorry, Earl, but you were way out of line.”

“Come on, man. That fat little peanut? Who does he think he is—the two Williams sisters rolled into one? All he could bring were his pitiful little dinks and dunks. That’s not tennis. The dude needs to learn how to play the game.”

Odom mocked him. “Great strategy, Earl. You can’t touch him on the court so you wait till the game is over and when he’s not looking you sucker punch him. It was your best shot of the day.”

Earl’s jaw hardened. “Look, I wasn’t going to stand there and take his cheap shots. The guy showed me nothing. He plays like a woman. Then he struts around like he’s freakin John McEnroe.”

“Give the man credit,” Odom responded. “He played smart. He had you running in circles.”

Earl shifted his bulky body in the seat. “Yeah,” he said, “I should have blown him away. I’ll tell you this. That wasn’t me out there. I couldn’t get anything going. My legs gave out on me. My wind was gone. The guy was damn lucky he got me when I was off my game.”

Odom tried to offer some words of wisdom. “Earl, we’re not twenty-five anymore. We can’t do it the way we used to do. At least, I can’t.”

“You never could,” Earl shot back. “I could always wipe the floor with you. You never beat me yet. But you know what? Even you would get me today. I let myself get out of shape. That’s what happens when you lay off training. You pay the price. It’s a fact of life. You work to reach a certain level and if you stop you slip back.

“Well, I’m telling you right now this is never gonna happen again. Next time, I’ll be ready. He’s gonna meet the real Earl Weems. I want him to go home and hang up his racket in the closet and tell his friends he’s giving up tennis for good. He has no business being on a tennis court ever again.”

Earl ended his harangue with a triumphant snort and turned to look out the window. As far as he was concerned, it was all over. In his mind, the score had been officially and decisively settled.

Odom had the last word. “I’ll tell you, man,” he said, shaking his head. “You got some balls.”