

Double Fault

by

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I marveled as yet another backhand stroke took off like a canon blast from my racquet strings. The ball headed directly toward its intended destination, sending my opponent scrambling cross court in vain. He was tiring, each step increasingly labored. Half an hour ago the same shot probably would have been returned, but my rather masterful placement had begun to pay dividends. It was evident to me from our very first match that I was the superior athlete. Strangers would have reached this conclusion strictly at a glance, based on the gut he carried about while my own abdomen is nearly as flat as it was in my teenage years. An accommodating metabolism rather than strict diet and a cardiovascular enhancing work-out regimen bore primary responsibility for this.

Despite my higher level of fitness, I continued to be winless against Melvin at tennis. This was at least our fiftieth match. As usual, it was two out of three sets to determine the victor. Quite unusually, our latest match had made it to a third set. Even if a win over Melvin was not guaranteed, I had already achieved the moral victory of not being vanquished in straight sets as had happened in each of our previous matches.

But success of the merely moral variety would be vastly insufficient on this day. I reached this conclusion as soon as I took the second set six games to four. Now that I had Melvin in deep waters, there was no excuse for not stepping up and causing him to drown in a barrage of drop shots and overhead lobs. Either I would secure match point or else cause him to collapse in exhaustion, granting me victory by forfeit. Losing to him after making it this far was unacceptable to my ego. Although our matches are friendly in nature, this being especially critical since we are next door neighbors, this did not change the fact that I am a competitive person and my pride can only take so much battering.

For this reason, unbeknownst to Melvin, I had been taking private lessons with a former professional for the past couple months. Vlad's expertise was a rather expensive luxury, but my improved performance against Melvin proved that it was paying off. The brand new racquet I was playing with upon recommendation from Vlad handled beautifully. These factors inspired

me to step on to the court brimming with confidence that Melvin's term of having my number was coming to an end.

My optimism was dealt a blow when he served to start the match and immediately sent an ace past me. He proceeded to hold me at love for the first set, and the second, and the third. By the time he sent a slice into the net to give me my first point of the day, Melvin was well on his way to taking the first set six games to zero.

My head was hanging low when he double faulted to start the second set. When he sent a forehand wide to give me the next point, my pulse began to quicken just a bit. I then hit a winner down the line to reach forty-love and suddenly the impossible was within reach. Every game I ever took from Melvin in the past had been on my own serve. I had come close on a number of occasions, but never managed to break him. The rally that followed was the longest played between us in all of our matches. He kept going to my backhand, knowing it to be the biggest of my various weaknesses, but I continued to respond and send the ball back to the deepest part of his side of the court. Each of his shots had a little more spin than its predecessor, forcing me lower and lower as the ball dipped with increased pace. My tenth consecutive backhand clipped the net, remained suspended in mid-air for what felt like an eternity or at least the length of the chick flicks my ex-wife liked to rent, and finally fell on Melvin's side. The point and the game was mine, and even more importantly, the invincible aura of Melvin's service game had been punctured.

Riding the high of this unexpected turn of events, I easily held serve to go up two games to none. As I faced the first of his serves in the next game, cockiness was replaced with nervousness. Ordinarily, I was at relative ease when playing Melvin because defeat seemed inevitable each time out. Now that the opportunity to reverse this trend had presented itself, I tensed up with concern that I would blow it.

Plenty of muscle was put behind the serve to come. The best I could do was to take a lunging stab at the green blur. Yet I somehow managed to get the center of my shockingly expensive racquet in the right place at precisely the right time, returning the ball even faster than it had arrived. Melvin could do nothing but watch it rocket past him for a winner. My nerves instantly settled in realization that from this point on I would be giving as good as I got. Five points later I broke him for the second time to go up three games to nada. Things got a little tougher for me after that as Melvin turned up his game a few notches. But it was too little too late to prevent me from taking the set and removing a tremendous almost literal weight from off my shoulders.

Our first ever third set was an epic seesaw battle. Neither of us could maintain momentum because the other kept snatching it back. After twelve grueling games we were knotted at six apiece. Rather than playing the type of tie breaker used in the pro game, we decided to play one more set to decide the matter. I spun my beautiful new custom strung racquet on the ground. If the letter at the end of the handle came up W, it would be my serve. M would put the ball in Melvin's hands and the match on his racquet. I had been unable to break his serve in the third set. Unlike previous contests between us, he had not been allowed to casually go through the motions and depend on my unforced errors to give him a substantial number of free points. Each

one needed to be earned by performance at maximum capacity. I was dueling with him at his best and ably holding my own.

As the racquet went round and round, I looked closely at my worthy adversary's face for signs of weakness. What I found was a stone face expression and enough perspiration trickling down it to form a waterfall. He was breathing heavily from our long rallies and my strategy of running him over as much court as possible before finishing off a point. My greater stamina would have to see me through because luck was not on my side.

The Wilson racquet fell and we both peered to find an upside down W. Melvin came close to fully suppressing a grin, but not quite. He walked back wearily to the service line and prepared to finish me off. I set up to return fire with conflagration, unwilling to concede that I would have to wait for another day to end my losing streak.

His first ace flew millimeters beyond my outstretched racquet. The second went right down the T with such ferocity that I didn't bother to move for it, conserving my energy for when it might do me some good. His legs may have been shot but there was nothing wrong with his serving motion. When his next serve went into the net, I knew I would have an opportunity to take the next point. Melvin was adept at a few different styles of serve and skillful at unpredictable placement of them. This made dealing with his first serve a formidable challenge. But when it came to his second serve, he was as reliable as the rise and set of the sun. It came with minimal speed and kicked up high, forcing the receiver back deep. It was a safe serve that forced a timid return, leaving the point up for grabs until someone seized hold of it. I did just that to win the point, and the one after followed an identical pattern.

With the set even at thirty, I watched another first serve ace fly by to set up match point for Melvin. On the next point he needed to go to his second serve again, and after a few shots back and forth I hit a stunning cross court winner for deuce. Advantage next went to Melvin followed by another deuce. The scoring replicated itself nine more times until two consecutive drop shots fell short of his stumbling reach. Advantage was finally in my favor.

His next serve went blatantly wide. This was it. Match point for me on his second serve. I involuntarily held my breath, but quickly realized that breathing would be far more useful. Be calm, be cool, stay focused, and above all else I reminded myself, keep your eyes on the ball. I took a greatly condensed refresher course of Vlad's teachings as Melvin went through his routine of bouncing the ball three times before his toss and swing. Yet I knew that reflecting on my instructor's numerous tips regarding proper form would be useless. I could not will myself to perform with textbook execution. Once the ball was in play things would move too quickly for contemplation. Muscle memory would determine if my strokes were up to the task. Match point could not be treated differently than any other we had played. Succumbing to the pressure of the moment would no doubt cause me to either over or under hit. The final message I recited to myself as Melvin struck the ball was that this was just a game. In the grand scheme of things it would not matter if I won or not. Convincing myself of these lies was a futile effort.

I was unprepared for what transpired next. Melvin did not fall back on his old faithful second serve. Instead he fearlessly went for broke and blasted the ball down the center of the court.

Ninety-five percent of it, maybe even a little higher, fell on the wrong side of the line. But the outermost edge nicked it for an ace, the set back at deuce. At least that's what I was supposed to confirm for Melvin. Instead I stared at the line for a few seconds before raising a finger to falsely call the ball out. Double fault – game, set, match to me I declared with a single digit, the little piggy that stayed home, pointed things out, and declared my new position in our rivalry as number one. Melvin and I played by the rules of gentlemen. The disbelief that his facial expression shouted was not verbalized. He briefly bowed his head and then trotted to the net. As we shook hands I understood that he knew I had cheated. His eyes spat accusations but other than to weakly congratulate me for a “nice game”, his lips remained pinched shut. I held his gaze and tried to figure out whether it was the intense physical exertion of the past couple hours or a guilty conscience that caused me to suddenly feel overwhelmed by exhaustion rather than euphoric in victory.

The mother of all headaches kicked in about an hour and a half later. Unlike my ex-wife Sheila, who I hate to reference but find it unavoidable on occasion, I do not suffer from migraines. What I do find myself incapacitated by from time to time are brutal tension headaches. During the final six months of our marriage and the ugly divorce proceedings, the frequency of my headaches dramatically increased. Thank God we had no kids to fight over or else my head probably would have exploded. With lawyers on both sides who were adept at dragging matters out to their fullest possible length, it often seemed that no end was in sight. Then one day it was officially over. Every “i” had been dotted, every “t” crossed, every applicable line signed on. I was a free man who did not even have to move from my house because Sheila had latched on to a new guy, a wealthy one whose mansion-like home was more to her liking than our humble three bedroom Dutch Colonial. So I bought her out and began the next phase of my life. During this period the biggest changes in my day-to-day have been that my headaches went away, and I developed an enormous passion for the sport of tennis that is shared by my next door neighbor.

I consider myself to be an honest man, perhaps even a good one. Granted, an application for sainthood won't be filed on my behalf any time soon. I have my fair share of flaws and vices. For a full list of them with considerable embellishment, ask Sheila. Just keep in mind that her application will be even further down in the pile than mine. It was her actions that set the demise of our marriage in full speed motion and placed her towards the top of Santa's naughty list. I freely admit that I did not live up to the potential she first saw in me, either squandering opportunities or else failing to pursue them aggressively enough. For this perceived sin, Sheila betrayed me. Sometimes I wonder if she would have stepped out on me with another man even if my career and bank account had reached greater heights. But I tend to swiftly change the subject from such useless thoughts. There is no impartial review of the instant replay in life. It works out as it does whether fair to you or not, and that's all there is to it.

The four aspirin I took earlier have failed to make a dent in my headache. Only coming clean will accomplish this feat. I pick up the phone and ask Melvin to come over for a minute, explaining that I have something to tell him that needs to be said face to face. In a desperate moment of weakness I listened to the devil perched on my shoulder whispering in my ear. I temporarily forgot that there is no shame in defeat and no honor in deceit. In order to maintain self respect, I must make my foyer a confessional. The doorbell summons my moment of truth.

“What’s up?” Melvin asks when I open the door but do not invite him in. Our chat will be a brief one. “You said you have something to tell me. I suspected you might, even made a little wager with Claire about it. She won though because you took a half hour longer than I guessed.”

The look on his face is the very definition of smug. Melvin’s air of superiority over me has been inflated well beyond what another mere victory at tennis would have resulted in.

“I do have a few confessions to make.”

“A few? I was only expecting one.”

“Well, you’re going to get three,” I inform him. “Do you remember about six months ago when your Sunday newspaper was not delivered?”

“Not really.”

“Trust me, it happened. I ought to know because I’m the one who snatched your *New York Times* that day. I should have denied the impulse, but I didn’t. I apologize for it.”

“Oh, okay. That isn’t such a big deal. I’m glad you told me if it makes you feel better to get it off your chest.”

“It does. My second confession is for something I did about four months ago. Remember the dent you discovered in your car?”

“That was *you*?”

“I’m afraid so. Once again, my sincerest apology. The driveway had a thin coating of ice, my car got away from me for a few seconds, and your car took the hit. I didn’t want my insurance to go up. Ordinarily I would have offered to reimburse you for the repair charge. But I was consumed with how much money the divorce was costing me. I knew it was a jerk move on my part, but then it turned out you have a cousin who is a mechanic and you got it taken care of for free. So I figured all is well that ends well and kept my mouth shut.”

“Until now.”

“Yes, until now.”

“What’s so special about today?” Melvin asks, anxious for me to get to the confession he has been expecting.

“Just felt a need to put my accounts in order, which leads me to confession number three.”

Melvin smiles like a little boy coming downstairs on Christmas morning and seeing a big gift wrapped box that he was certain contained what he wanted most out of everything in the world. It is not until this moment that I realize just how much he must have enjoyed beating me at tennis

all those times. He never gloated, never bragged, yet he had become spoiled, taken domination of me for granted. That is, up until today when I made the call that awarded bitter victory to me. Only I can reverse it and restore the natural shape of our rivalry, with him back on top. I want to smack the satisfied grin off his face, but instead speak my piece.

“When I found out that Sheila was cheating on me, I did not confront her right away. I decided to take the payback route. There’s this woman in the neighborhood who had made it clear on more than one occasion that she was willing and able whenever I was. She said her husband did not know how to please her. I knew I wasn’t the first guy she had propositioned like this because two others told me she made them the same offer, and they both took her up on it repeatedly. After I found out what Sheila was up to, I took my place in this woman’s line, also repeatedly. We did everything I could think of that I never would have suggested to my wife, but nothing was too kinky or degraded for this woman. She gave new meaning to freakiness, at least in my own personal sexual dictionary.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Melvin asks, clearly intrigued by what I’m saying yet still impatient for what he had come to hear. “What the heck does it have to do with me?”

“Think about it, Melvin. Tell Claire that me and the fellas say hello.”

I close the door with rude quickness in case he is faster at releasing a punch than at figuring things out. It is beyond debate that I ventured well across the line. This is a shame, perhaps to eventually blossom into a regret.

After all, well matched tennis competition is hard to find.