

Tennis, my beautiful game

Recalling his best ever topspin lob and one glorious, unbeaten summer, Martin Amis celebrates a sport where the physical meets the cerebral

Martin Amis

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Writer Martin Amis on a roof. Photograph: Erica Berger/Corbis

I took up the game, from scratch, as a teenager, and began with a series of lessons. First, at an indoor club, with Harry, the kind of middle-aged ruin who drank a bottle of port with his breakfast; and then, later, with elderly Syd, a public-park freelance whose startlingly bandy legs were, moreover, incapable of bending at the knee. Harry and Syd were, by then, deplorable physical specimens, but they shared the characteristic that marks the talented player: they knew exactly where your reply was going to go, and flowed towards it with leisurely economy. And at the net they both had "soft hands" - blotched and dappled in the case of Harry, gnarled and claw-like in the case of Syd, but undeniably soft, and supply responsive to the feel and pace of the ball. Your hardest forehand would be met by their racket heads quite soundlessly, and the ball would drop, die, and slowly roll halfway to the service line.

Harry, at least, gave me some reasonably sound advice. When serving, he said, imagine you are throwing your whole racket at its target; on groundstrokes, make a full circular swing as the ball starts its journey towards you. Syd's teachings, I now know, were hopelessly antique. "Stand tall at the net. However low the ball is, just look down your nose at it." (In fact your head should be level with the point of impact.) He was traditionalist in other ways. "Come on," Syd once softly snarled, as he watched me struggling against Linda, a well-schooled ex-girlfriend. "They don't want to win. And you shouldn't let 'em." Later, I used to bear Syd's words in mind while being regularly and eagerly slaughtered by my pal Kate.

When I turned 30 I stopped hiring teachers and started hiring "hitters" (who are much cheaper and barely say a word). So in an hour you make about 600 strokes. But hitting, I slowly realised, has a fundamental flaw. Stored in a kind of spindly trolley, the tennis balls fired at you vary in quality, some as good as new, some bald, some limp and soggy (as if prised out of a dog's mouth six months ago). They all bounce at different heights; thus the supposed goal of getting "grooved", of acquiring "muscle memory", is entirely delusive. I stopped learning, and stopped hitting, and just went on playing, sometimes as often as six times a week.

My first serve was necessarily flat (I am 5ft 6in), my second a weak but reliable kicker. My volleys were always jittery, though my smash usually worked. My looping forehand had "quite a lot on it", as they say; my backhand was an accurate slice, and I later developed the topspin variant (deployed only against midcourt longhops). My defensive lob, far and away my most effective weapon, developed likewise. One time I topspin-lobbed a very good, very fit, and very tall opponent when he was standing on the service line. He didn't jump, he didn't even turn; he just clapped his hand against his racket. That's what an average player's career finally amounts to: the cherishing, in the memory, of perhaps a dozen shots. That angled drop half-volley, that topspin backhand down the line, that wrongfooting drive that put the other guy flat on his arse

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I peaked at the age of 40. One legendary summer I performed on the court like a warrior poet, with ichor streaming through my veins, and a visionary gleam in my concentrated eyes - and carried my Wilson for five months without losing a set. At the end of that year I recorded what was perhaps my greatest victory, against Chris, one of the burlier and wittier first-teamers at Paddington sports club. It was just the one set, that day, and I had a plan: I moonballed him into a frenzy (while his piss-taking peers looked on). Chris stood there with his hands on his hips and his head down, waiting (and swearing), while the ball descended from the troposphere. When we shook hands at the net (7-5), Chris said: "Well played, Mart. You're useless, and if I don't beat you six-love, six-love next time I'm giving up the game." Next time he won 6-0, 6-1. Chris did not give up the game.

But I did - by degrees. In my mid-40s I noticed that I was always losing to my erstwhile equals; then I started losing to people I had never lost to; then I started losing to absolutely everyone. And each match, for me, became an increasingly effortful passion play about the ageing process. You become slower, of course, and clumsier, and your pelvic saddle hurts a lot all the time, and you simply don't want a second set, let alone a third. But the most terrible symptom of all is the retardation of your reflexes. The ball comes over the net like a strange surprise: you just stand there and watch until, with a senescent spasm, you bustle off to meet it. This tendency manifested itself elsewhere. One afternoon I was watching a tense football international with my sons, and halfway through the second half the elder said: "In the 63rd minute, Paul Scholes scored for England. And in the 65th minute, Dad leapt to his feet."

About a year ago I came to the convenient conclusion that the day wasn't long enough (and life wasn't long enough) for tennis: changing, driving, parking, stretching, playing, losing, stretching, driving, showering and changing - not to mention the hours spent at the hands of sadistic physiotherapists. Maybe, one day, I'll start limping back on to the lined court. But for now I just miss it. Tennis: the most perfect combination of

athleticism, artistry, power, style, and wit. A beautiful game, but one so remorselessly travestied by the passage of time.

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