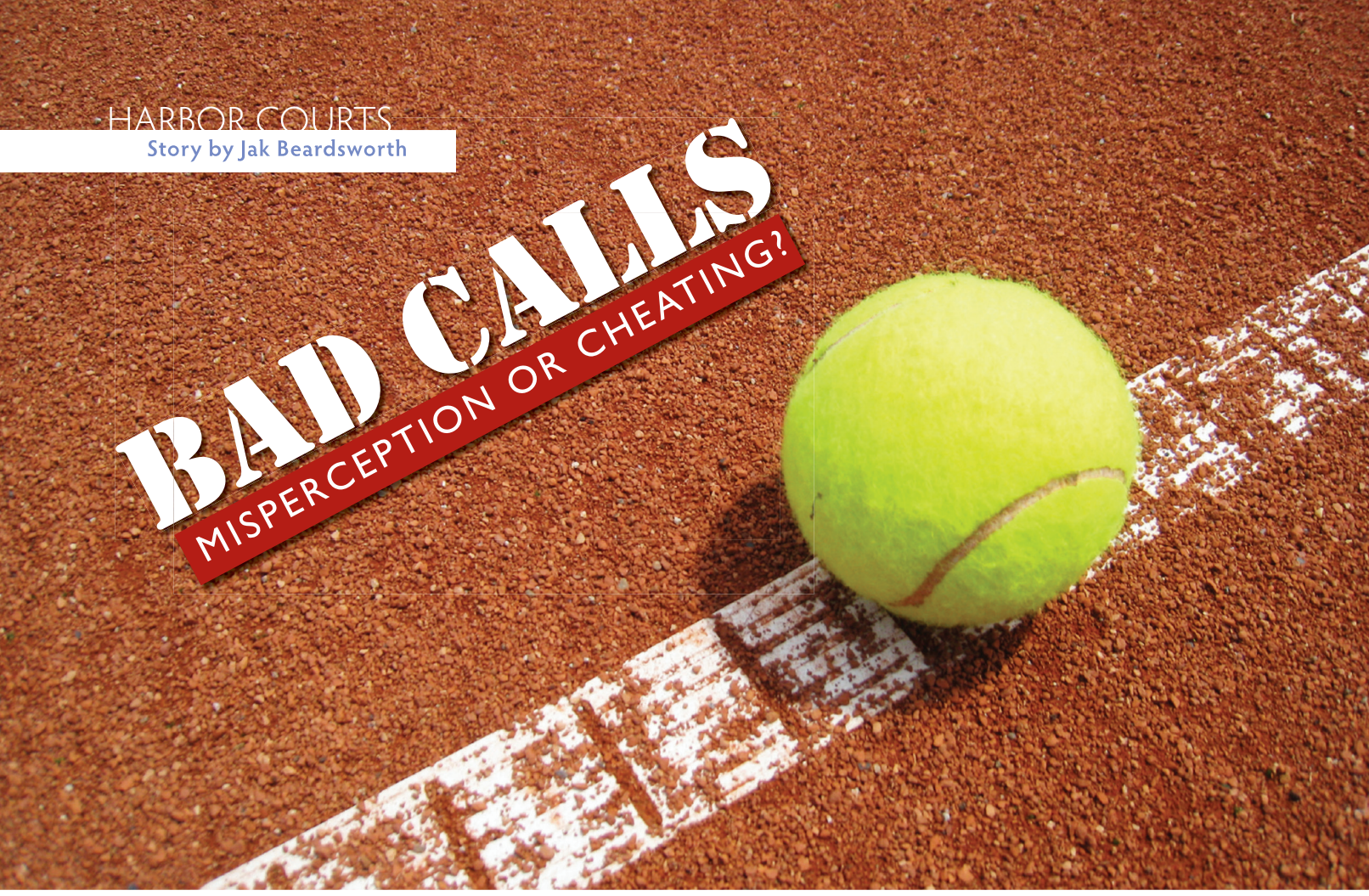
Story by Jak Beardsworth

BAD CALLS

MISPERCEPTION OR CHEATING?



It's a heated USTA match in clubland. After battling on all cylinders in the hot sun for more than two hours, a point here or there could mean the difference in experiencing, as ABC's Wide World of Sports would say, "The thrill of victory, or the agony of defeat." Then, always at the most inopportune time, it happens.

Your shot lands squarely on the line, predictably skidding away at a speed considerably greater than a ball bouncing off the clay alone while simultaneously emitting that distinct "splat" sound of ball-on-plastic that's completely at odds with the usual ball-on-clay noise.

The opponent, with no chance of making a play, immediately calls the ball out. There is no ball mark on the court on either side of the line, and there are no tour umpires climbing down from their chairs to overrule and reverse the call. And their doubles partner has conveniently recused themselves both in their body language and silence. The call stands.

Where's Hawkeye when you need it?

In my early tennis life I was quickly introduced to what I thought was a curious attempt at levity that club players constantly, half-jokingly used to banter about regarding any questionable line calling of the day, "When in doubt, call it out." Ha ha. It wasn't funny then, and it's not funny now because, in reality, it actually happens far too often.

Later, as a teenager taking it to the long-reigning city champ, when big city championships were a big part of the national tennis fabric in the "shamateur" days before the arrival of open tennis, I experienced it firsthand.

My opponent, 20 years my senior, began making bad calls. Lots of them. Years later, it begs the question: Was it willful, overt cheating, or was he so repelled by the prospect of losing his title, to a kid no less, that he was victimized by his subconscious mind distorting what he was actually seeing, seamlessly deferring to his less virtuous self?

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This was in complete contrast to the player morals of the day at the elite level, long before the advent of professional officials and hi-tech line calling wizardry. Pre-open era players, often faced with coping with untrained spectators coerced into sitting on a line, routinely overruled bad calls that went against their opponents. Such was the state of fair play among the very best in more genteel times. Accepting unearned points was unacceptable and considered very bad form.

In the big money tennis of today, when was the last time you saw a player, even a multiple Stephan Edberg ATP Sportsmanship Award winner like Roger Federer, approach an umpire and insist that a point be awarded to an opponent after a particularly egregious missed call that the other player failed to challenge?

Overt cheating, if you can get away with it, has always been in the human nature mix, and it's not unique to tennis. Baseball has always had the spitball. Jersey holding to inhibit an opponent in contact

sports like basketball, football and soccer remains commonplace. A world class speed skater was recently caught tampering with a rival's blades. Fishermen are being busted for smuggling in prize winning fish not hooked during the tournament. A marathoner hacked into his event's computer timing system to digitally fabricate a terrific run that never took place.

Worse yet is the doping phenomena rampant in all sports.

Outside of sports we have, among myriad examples, the Bernie Madoffs of investing, scientific researchers fudging findings for recognition, and even cheating scandals in Ivy League institutions and our service academies.

Amazingly, all this boldly occurs right smack in the face of the very regulatory officials and agencies in place to specifically prevent an unleveling of any and all of society's playing fields.

So, is it an epidemic? A sign of societal decline? Or is it that the 24/7 news cycle, along with the explosion of social media, that has resulted in such an information overload that it only appears that way, and, in reality, the level of cheating has changed little over time?

In *The Honest Truth About Dishonesty*, Dan Ariely tells us that cheating is contagious. The more we see, and the more that goes on unbridled and unpunished, the more we begin to methodically, unconsciously con ourselves into thinking that it's okay.

Where does this behavior begin? In his article, "The Competing Views on Competition," Matt Richtel shares his concern when his 4-year old son, on the way to the bathroom with his little sister to brush their teeth before bedtime, exclaimed, "I'm going to win. I'm going to win!" Young Milo, figuratively fist-pumping with his toothbrush in hand, is a scary thought going forward.

The psychology of cheating is stripped down in David DeSteno and Piercarlo Valdesolo's new book, *Out of Character: Surprising Truths about the Liar, Cheat, Sinner (and Saint) Lurking in All of Us.* The often depicted cartoon angel on one shoulder and devil on the other is concluded as not exactly right. Character is instead viewed as the always fluctuating result of warring impulses in the brain that focus on either immediate rewards or long-term benefit.

Of course, line calling in tennis by club players officiating their own matches encompasses both subconscious brain impulsing *and* one's visual acuity. Enter renowned tennis authority Vic Braden and biomechanist Dr. Gideon Ariel, who once spent $50,000 of their own money to study the visual aspect of line calling, and its inherent fallibility, back when only the service line was called electronically while all others were called by trained lines people and pro players would regularly go ballistic over perceived missed calls.

In a control group of eight veteran officials and 12 former player teaching pros, it turned out that it was the players who were the least accurate, a surprise since players had always maintained that they knew best. And they admitted that 40 percent of the time their calls were really educated guesses; getting a stationary fix on a fast traveling ball is extremely difficult when in motion with a jiggling head. Try reading a book while jogging.

The seated lines people fared far better precisely because of their advantage in having a still head while sighting down a single line, interestingly the very same dynamic employed by players to strike a ball cleanly and eliminate miss-hits.

Those in the umpire's chair, although scoring better than the players, were not as good as those sitting on the line because of their in-point head movement following the ball back and forth, which will undermine even 20/20 vision in a big way.

Today's tour players benefit from a computerized line calling system, the aforementioned Hawkeye, that interfaces with strategically placed multiple cameras and boasts to have a miniscule margin for error. Have you noticed that player challenges to a suspected bad call are incorrect far more often than not.

So it appears that when there is doubt, there is a good chance that the ball is not necessarily out. Your call.