



What We Have Here is a Failure to Communicate

It's not unusual for me to comment supportively to doubles' players – those especially befuddled by the constantly changing positional responsibilities unique to the doubles game – that, in marked contrast, “a chimpanzee could play singles” considering the devolvement of tennis from the more tactically complex and nuanced game that preceded the arrival of today's big bang, slam bam equipment.

Look no further than the extraordinary success of the Williams sisters, whose doubles play is often characterized by an out-of-position ball-bludgeoning style that so few pairs on the women's tour — even those who do utilize text book teamwork and court sense — can stand up to.

Yet, with inter-club league play now in full swing in our area – that's approximately 1,500 players – doubles play in men's, women's and mixed takes center stage, but the brand of play brandished by the Williams is not a doable option for most by a long shot.

Clubbers, from 2.5 up to even a 4.0 rating, are, despite their own hopped-up rackets and strings, typically still dependent on out-smarting and out-flanking opponents who might be the better shot makers, albeit with equal-on-paper NTRP ratings.

But, on their own, ball-striking skills coupled with text-book positioning are not necessarily the holy grail of success in team play, despite being an essential part of the mix.

This article's title, borrowed from a line in the classic movie *Cool Hand Luke*, just might strike a chord for tennis players who have experienced playing with an unsupportive, bossy partner — one whom you'd think by their behavior never makes errors — who has yet to discover that there is no “I” in team. The eye rolling and the negative body language at your errors – who misses on purpose? – plus the barked commands to do this or that without your input are debilitating to any partner at any level.

Not to be underestimated, the lack of positive dialogue and encouragement in between points or on changeovers, especially when the score line is going south, contribute mightily to a self-fulfilling losing chemistry.

The great Rod Laver's now dated, but still relevant, hilarious assessment of husband-wife play in particular covers double's troubles this way, “An otherwise happily married couple may turn a mixed doubles game into a scene from, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?*”

Long before Laver's time, and tennis itself for that matter, another legend, Plato, personified the trials and tribulations of today's doubles this way: “You can discover more about a person in an hour of play, than in a year of conversation.”



Today's professional players, unlike some of our league player friends, are the epitome of unconditional partner support. It is a rare day that you see one partner overtly communicating to those in attendance that they are in no way responsible for the losing effort being put forth.

Truth be told, I do remember witnessing a Davis Cup rubber at the Jimmy Connors Tennis Center in the early '90s. It was US versus Czechoslovakia. The Americans teamed John McEnroe with Rick Leach in the crucial middle day doubles. Leach got off to a terrible start that didn't improve much throughout the first two losing sets. Mac, not exactly known for his tolerance at the time for anyone underperforming, slowly but surely went on the boil with some world class shoulder shrugging, eye rolling and even the throwing up of the hands. Leach, a seasoned pro and doubles specialist, desperately trying to find his form, ultimately succumbed to the two-pronged pressure of the opponent's stellar play, and his own partner's abandonment, and folded like a deck chair.

Game, set, match.

Which brings to mind former US Davis Cup Captain, and current USTA player development coach, Tom Gullikson, who typically led off his clinics and exhibitions – including one right here in Punta Gorda a few years back – with a keen observation, one that always led to audience laughter, by noting that the most important element in doubles is choosing a good partner.

Intangibles.

In today's professional game we witness most team's high fiving or fist bumping encouragement after every point, win or lose. They overtly practice tennis amnesia, a trait consistently exhibited by the great Pete Sampras, who was always about playing the next point positively no matter what the difficulty he might be experiencing.

Be like Pete.

Along with the ritualistic fives and bumps, there is now also the quick chat. The old hand signals by the net man to the server – the net player dictating to the server in clubland was never a good idea – have, thankfully, lost favor.

On the professional doubles tour, a typical huddle after a point might go like one between recent US Open semi-finalists Raven Klaasen and Eric Butorac, with the server doing the quarterbacking: "High kick T left second serve high cutter body right."

Relax, it's okay if you're not exactly sure what that means. Create your own jargon.

Players are careful not to project their voices though. Don't think the opponents aren't eavesdropping if possible. It's "hearing gate"

if you can get away with it, but unlike pro football's infamous illegal video-taping (Spy Gate) of an opposing team, it's all good in tennis.

Tim Smyczek, who partners with Bradley Kahn, is one of many promoting another come lately adaptation for tactical stealth that's quickly becoming the norm: covering one's mouth with the balls when convening. "You don't want the other guys reading your lips," Smyczek said during this year's Flushing Meadows. Really, Tim?

The Bryan brothers, who celebrated their 100th career victory at this year's New York slam, are practically frenetic in their huddles – much like their play – and critical of those who take too long. "A few teams talk for, like, 30 seconds, and it just gets kind of boring," Mike Bryan said. "There's no need to go out there and have a conversation. You have a two second serve, and they miss the return, and their back at the drawing board again?"

Some see an opportunity for a little levity in the heat of serious battle. Rajeev Ram and Scott Lipsky shared this exchange at a winning press conference: "I told him not to hit any more lobs, and then I hit a lob the next point," Ram said, and he then told Lipsky, "Except for that."

Of course, there's always going to be some no nonsense, back in the day old-schoolers like Paul McNamee, who are not enamored with all this huddling and talking in today's game. The former Aussie doubles wizard believes that professional players should be readily able to read the situation in an instant – poach, close, return placement, etc. – and just react spontaneously if they truly know the game. And he makes no bones about it when he says, "At the end of the day, the best communication is unspoken."

In any event, club players who have solid shot-making skills and know their way around a doubles court can, like their professional models – McNamee's comment notwithstanding – make good use of in-between-point communicating, even if it turns out to be, more often than not at the club level, offering partner support and encouragement versus the x's and o's.

A good place to start. ■■■



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