

Chrissie – Power To Inspire

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When I emerged from the subway that day, I was in a part of Montreal I'd never seen. For a 15-year-old kid living a sheltered suburban life, taking a trip into town alone was a bit scary.

I found my way.

I was quivering with excitement as I plunked down my allowance money and bought a ticket into Jarry Park on Tuesday, August 21st, 1984.

Finally, I was about to see Chris Evert Lloyd in action.

My earliest recollection of Chrissie only dated back a few years. When she won Wimbledon in 1981, she was cheered on by Lady Di, just a few weeks before the royal wedding, when Diana's every move, every wave, every smile set off a million flash bulbs. Those images went around the world, transcending the sports news. Two young queens side by side, at the height of their popularity, bathed in decorum and style. That was the first I'd seen or heard of Chris Evert Lloyd.

Tennis had not fully permeated Montreal sports consciousness yet, and between the Expos in winning form, the good old Habs, and the brand new Manic soccer team, my 12-year-old brain took an extra couple of years to take full notice.

But when I noticed – boy, did I ever.

By the time I finished watching the 1983 Canadian Open on TV, I was addicted. Hook, line, and sinker. Oh sure, Martina won the tournament. Apparently, she'd been practically invincible these last couple of years.

Martina was gifted, powerful, outspoken. Martina was the best – a perfect role-model for tomboys like me everywhere.

But you can't choose who you love.

It wasn't about rooting for the underdog – Chrissie was hardly an underdog, beating every other opponent quite handily.

Sometimes in life, you just know. Gene Kelly or Fred Astaire. Betty or Veronica. Chrissie or Martina. It's okay to like both, but you can't choose who you love. You just know.¹

Chrissie was quiet, but intense. Laser-focused. Tunnel-visioned. Mentally tough. The commentators had run out of words long ago to capture just exactly how she could be such a champion even though she was not the fastest, not the strongest, not the best athlete.

As a scrawny but crafty left-winger in my burgeoning little league soccer life, I identified with that. I wanted to be that. I became that.

Watching Chrissie and Martina at the height of their storied rivalry sent shockwaves through my puberty-stricken system, like sticking my finger in a proverbial light socket.

From that point on, I read everything I could get my hands on, trying to catch up on the first 10 years of Chrissie's career, piecing together what she had accomplished and what she meant to the tennis world. I couldn't believe I'd missed out on so much, and I was panicked at the thought that she might retire soon, as her 30th birthday loomed.

She embodied everything Billie Jean King had envisioned for women's tennis and dovetailed perfectly with second-wave feminism. The young woman from a conservative family who chose a career over marriage – and a career in sports to boot. The poster-girl, in the midst of Title IX, for what women could accomplish when given opportunity. The South Florida girl with a staunch Catholic upbringing who grew to become pro-choice and who publicly supported her gay friends, before it was popular to be gay-friendly.

From the outside, she didn't appear to be a maverick. She wasn't overtly rocking the boat. She was just shifting its course.

Clearly, she had transcended the sports world. She was an "it" girl. She was a star.

And now, after what felt like a very long wait, I was about to see her play on Tuesday, August 21st, 1984.

It was an early-round match and the outcome was never in doubt. It was a drubbing of the sort Chrissie inflicted on many of her opponents.

Or at least, I think it was. I had trouble concentrating on the match. Even from far away in the stands, all I could think was: she is right there. All that poise and grace and style, right there on display.

Everything I knew she would be.

¹ I'm paraphrasing, but this philosophy was expressed by Jack Todd in a column published in the Montreal Gazette sometime in the late '80s.

When she waved to the crowd as she left the court, I knew I had to see her up close. This couldn't be it.

I walked around the stadium until I figured out where the players exit after their press conference.

When Chrissie finally walked out, a ripple of excitement buzzed through the fans lining the exit path. A tournament security official, a jovial man with broad shoulders and an easy manner, preceded her to lead the way to the courtesy car waiting to take her away.

A few people took photographs as she walked past them, smiling. But nobody said a word. My heart was pounding. Did no one speak English around here? Wasn't anyone going to ask for an autograph? Was she simply going to disappear into the night? What if she did retire at 30, never to return again?

I don't think of myself as a bold person. Most people would describe me as reasonable, disciplined, reserved. Definitely goody-two-shoes. But in that moment of panic, I thought of that time at the Expos training camp in 1982 when my mom, also not bold by nature, seized the moment and asked Gary Carter during batting practice for the broken bat he had just tossed aside. He laughed and carefully passed it to her over the fence. Carpe diem.

In that moment of panic, I was bold.

I broke rank and stepped out in front of the jovial security man, walking backwards ahead of him. "Okay, we're desperate here" I said to Chrissie over his broad shoulders, as I held out my tennis program and a pen.

She laughed and tapped her security man on the shoulder. "You know what, my match wasn't too long. I can stop a few minutes."

Galvanized, other fans crowded around her as she put down her equipment bags. She signed my autograph first. And then graciously signed for everyone else.

Everything I knew she would be.

I vowed to see her again.

There are moments in life that change you.