

If You Can Meet with Triumph and Disaster...

In September 1984, my family finally took the plunge and acquired a state-of-the-art Betamax VCR.

I was thrilled. At the ripe old age of 15, I had decided a few months prior that I wanted to be a screenwriter and had spent my summer vacation avidly typing out what I was sure would be the next Olivia Newton-John & John Travolta blockbuster romantic comedy. The VCR would come in handy for getting an education in movie history, and just as importantly, I could start recording everything Chris Evert Lloyd did.

After my first encounter with Chrissie at the Player's Challenge in August of that year, my new obsession really took hold: compiling video archives. I had vowed to meet her again, and somehow, accumulating footage of her and watching it ad nauseam helped nourish that goal, like a pro athlete visualizing victory.

The Player's Challenge alternated between Toronto and Montreal, so by 1986, when the tournament was set to return to Jarry Park, I had two full years under my belt of documenting Chrissie's appearances, interviews and match highlights. I compiled a special tape that I planned to give her as proof of my undying admiration. "Athletes are usually live on TV, so she never gets to see herself", was my flawless reasoning.

I was devastated when it was announced that she wasn't coming to Montreal. She'd been playing injured throughout the summer, and rather than let her knee heal after Wimbledon, she'd gone to play Federation Cup in Prague to support her close friend Martina who was returning home for the first time, 11 years after defecting under the Communist regime. As heartwarming as this was, it did nothing to soothe my disappointment.

What if Chrissie was set to retire at 32, never to return to Montreal again?

I channelled the bold spirit that grabbed a hold of me in 1984 and called up the Player's Challenge tournament director, John Beddington. I'm not sure why Tennis Canada put my call through to him, but this was before voice-mail culture. He was affable and kind and I was grateful that my English made me sound credible. He readily put me in touch with Chrissie's agent, giving me the address for International Management Group in Cleveland.

I mailed off the Betamax compilation tape with a letter.

About a month later, I got a letter back from IMG, along with a nice autographed photo of Chris and her husband John Lloyd. At least, that was something.

Luckily, Chris showed no sign of retiring, and especially in light of her divorce from John Lloyd later that fall in 1986, she didn't seem to be in a hurry to settle down and have kids, as she always said she would.

There would be more opportunities to see her. So I concocted a new plan.

In early summer of 1987, I contacted John Beddington again, this time in writing. I was working on a screenplay set in the tennis world, and provided a reference from the CBC producer who had taken me under his wing. Mr. Beddington graciously agreed to give me accreditation both at the men's tournament in Montreal and the women's tournament in Toronto.

I was thrilled. Things always came easily to me.

When I first showed up to collect my press pass at Jarry Park, Mike G. from the media relations group gave me the marching orders. I could sit in the press gallery and I could sit in on press conferences, but I was not to disturb the proceedings in any way. Clearly, he wasn't pleased to be saddled on his watch with an 18-year-old aspiring writer.

I observed the journalists as much as I watched the matches. Everybody was talking about this flashy new kid on the rise, named Andre Agassi.

When Mike G. wasn't around, I felt bold enough to ask questions during the press conferences. I knew I wasn't supposed to, but some reporters took an interest in me and everyone treated me as an equal. I'd wait for a lull between questions and then put up my hand. I asked Stefan Edberg a question. I asked Ivan Lendl a question. I didn't bother with Jimmy Connors; he brought his young son into the pressroom, probably as a convenient excuse to cut things short when he'd had enough. I literally bumped into John McEnroe in a hallway, but only one of us was a polite Canadian. I did not ask him a question.

A few days later, on the bus to Toronto on my way to the women's tournament, I reminisced about my first foray as a 15-year-old, when going from Boucherville to Jarry Park seemed a bit scary. Now I was travelling out of town, on my own for the first time, feeling that unique young adult combo: scared but cocky.

When I arrived, I made my way to the National Tennis Centre at York University.

I got the lay of the land and collected my press pass once again from Mike G. And once again, I transgressed my marching orders and promptly started participating in press conferences. I felt bad for young Gabriela Sabatini, who could barely speak English, so I jumped in early on her conference when a long lull right off the top made it clear that reporters were at a loss to ask questions, knowing they would elicit nothing more than monosyllabic answers. But Gabriela found a way to answer my question with her broken English and I'd like to think it helped everyone settle down.

Pam Shriver was a hoot, and always had lots to say. After her press conference, I ventured over to her and enquired about a one-on-one interview. She happily agreed and referred me to the WTA media liaison to set it up.

I was feeling more and more emboldened.

The next night, after Chris easily won her 3rd round match, I sat in the press tent with my heart pounding in my throat. When she was ushered in, a tangible excitement took over. Journalists quickly retreated to their seats. It was standing room only. She immediately charmed everyone with small talk and said all the right things about her opponent, gracious in victory even though she had thoroughly cleaned the poor girl's clock.

After answering more questions about her next opponent, about Sabatini, about Shriver, and new #1 Steffi Graf, Chrissie jumped the gun: "What, no questions about Martina?" she teased. The press corps erupted in uproarious laughter, because that's what people do when a beloved celebrity says something even mildly amusing.

Everyone in the room was vying for her attention. There was no lull in this conference, and I didn't dare raise my hand.

But after it was over, a crush of reporters jumped up and swirled around Chris, even as she was being led out of the press tent. So I sprang up and did the same, trying to wriggle my way through the throng, hoping to hand her another compilation tape under the premise that her agent would appreciate it once more, and perhaps even with the hubris that she would know about me through my previous compilation.

"BRIGITTE! ... NO!" I heard from the back of the press tent. In the commotion, I don't know if anyone else took note. But Mike G. was wagging a finger at me the way you tower over a 4-year-old caught with her hand in the cookie jar. I stopped dead in my tracks and waited for the inevitable fall-out.

He lectured me sternly. I stood there and took it. He revoked my press pass. I handed it to him. He saw that I was on the verge of tears and softened somewhat. He said he'd let me keep my tickets to sit as a fan in the stadium but the press tent was now off limits. "I don't like doing this, but it's my job to deal with the Chris Everts of the world..."

I tried to look at him defiantly through my tears, thinking I had done nothing wrong, or certainly nothing the other reporters hadn't done. But of course, he was just doing his job. As he kept rambling on and on, my only thought was: "How dare you use that name in the plural form? There is only one Chris Evert." And therein lay the problem.

Chris Evert was not Pam Shriver.

Chris Evert was not Ivan Lendl.

Chris Evert was a whole different ballpark.

I felt like a total failure. I was incredibly angry at Mike G. for humiliating me in public, and at myself for putting myself in an embarrassing situation.

But I stayed for the rest of the tournament and sat alone in the stands, watching the next day as Chrissie defeated our homegrown Canadian star Helen Kelesi in the quarter-final.

On Saturday, Chrissie faced Pam Shriver in the semi-final. I took some nice photos of them as they were led through the crowd on their way into the stadium. Just a regular fan.

As if my week couldn't possibly get any worse, Chrissie lost. In straight sets. Not even close.

As I wandered aimlessly around the grounds trying to digest the loss, the WTA media liaison woman spotted me and called me over. "Pam could give you that interview now."

I stifled a sound somewhere between a chuckle and a howl. I sheepishly explained to her that I no longer had access to the press tent. She rolled her eyes at the mention of Mike G., clearly not seeing in me the towering menace that he saw.

She told me where to meet her a few minutes later. She took me to the players' tent, where I certainly had no access, with or without a press pass. But she ushered me in and left me in the company of Pamela Howard Shriver, all 6 feet of her, buck naked under a sheet, while a massage therapist cooled her down from possibly the best singles win in her career.

I hope I came out of my torpor well enough to thank Pam profusely. I hope I managed to sound engaging while we discussed the latest news and trends in women's tennis. I hope I overcame the awkwardness of interviewing a naked person to discuss coherently what an ass Pat Cash was, after his inflammatory comments at Wimbledon. I told Pam that her book "Passing Shots" was the funniest, most wickedly entertaining and insightful tennis book anyone could ever read, and wished her luck for the final. (And lo and behold, she won the tournament the next day.)

On my way out, I stumbled across Andy Mill. Chrissie's new boyfriend, a charismatic former Olympic skier, had been travelling with her all summer. Bud Collins had dubbed him the Designated Hunk. No wonder Chrissie took up skiing. You could tell he was the one. The one she'd retire for, the one she'd have beautiful babies with. The one who was accomplished in his own right, but secure enough to take a back seat to her big life. If Jimmy Connors was too 'this', and John Lloyd was too 'that', Andy Mill was like Goldilocks' porridge – just right.

Remarkably, he didn't laugh out loud at the 18-year-old tomboy urging him with all the gravitas she could muster, to please take good care of Chrissie. In fact, he stopped, shook my hand, looked me straight in the eye and said simply, "I will".

This was it, I figured. She would retire, never to be seen in these parts again.

On the bus back to Montreal the next day, I felt like a complete and utter failure. She didn't even know I was there. After all the exhilaration and anticipation, and the carefully executed plan, she didn't even know I was there.

It was August 23rd, 1987 and in the melodramatic flush of teenage angst, it felt like my dream was over. Things had always come easily to me. I hadn't yet learned how to meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two impostors just the same...¹

A few days later, a letter came for me in the mail. It was from IMG in Cleveland. The letter was dated August 24th, 1987.

“Dear Ms. Nardella, About a year ago I wrote to thank you for sending us that wonderful tape of Chris Evert. I am sorry I did not make a copy before sending it on to Chris, but I was hoping you could help me out. If you could please have a duplicate made of your tape, I would be more than happy to pay any expenses. If you think you will be able to do this for me, I would appreciate hearing from you. Thank you. Sincerely, Bob Kain”

I read it again. And then again.

It didn't seem possible.

It was like I had conjured up this letter, this lifeline.

And just like that, the dream was re-born.

Forget a compilation – I would send Bob Kain everything I had. I went to work, using every spare minute to transfer all my footage (although this time, I used a trendier VHS machine).

A couple of months later, another letter from IMG arrived.

“Thank you so much for the Chris Evert tapes. They are truly a great help, and I appreciate the time and effort you spent on putting these together for us. Please give my assistant a call sometime in the summer of '88. I think Chrissie plans to play the Player's Challenge in Montreal and it's about time you had a chance to meet her. I will try to make this possible at that tournament.”

My legs gave out under me. It was that rush of adrenaline and pure jubilation that comes from unexpected triumph, like scoring a big goal in a big game, or making an impression on someone that matters.

¹ From the Rudyard Kipling poem « If », which adorns the players' entrance onto Centre Court at Wimbledon

In the summer of 1988, I contacted IMG and Tennis Canada to make this dream come true. Bob Kain and John Beddington worked things out on my behalf.

I was cordially invited to bring a guest for Chrissie's opening match on Wednesday night, August 17th, 1988. I sat in the Tennis Canada box with my friend Rachel, having great difficulty concentrating on the match. As luck would have it, Chrissie was playing a young Canadian, Rene Simpson, and Simpson's coach was sitting alongside us in the Tennis Canada box. So it was semi-awkward trying to cheer for Chrissie. Perhaps it was just as well that the match was yet another early-round cake-walk and was over in a flash.

Rachel and I made our way to the players' tent 30 minutes later, as instructed. We introduced ourselves to the attending volunteer, and were told to wait a moment.

Shortly thereafter, Christine Marie Evert walked out to meet me.

I was nervous, but not alarmingly so. After all the time I'd spent planning this, imagining this, visualizing this, it was now happening. For real. And it felt almost normal.

Chrissie was freshly showered and wearing a shiny tracksuit. She had already put her ring back on after her match, newly wed just three weeks ago. We made small talk and she happily posed for pictures.²

There was something so luminous, so easy breezy sexy about her – that girl-next-door appeal of a nice all-American girl who's been famous her entire adult life. Breathtaking. She seemed genuinely comfortable being the centre of attention, taking in the adoration in the most unassuming way possible and, in return, effortlessly making you feel special in her company.

She thanked me for doing all that work on the video compilation, and before I knew it, the meet & greet was over. It was probably no more than 2 minutes, and she excused herself for rushing off – she had late dinner plans with her new husband Andy.

I savoured every moment, every memory. This felt like triumph.

It didn't sting nearly as much this year when Chrissie lost again in the semi-final, this time to a surging Gabriela Sabatini. Martina lost early too, dashing any lingering hope that I would ever see a Chrissie-Martina match in person.

I made sure to send John Beddington a heartfelt thank-you note, and I was thrilled when he replied, telling me he'd taken the liberty of making a copy of my letter for Mike G. and other members of his staff. I had enclosed a photo of me with Chrissie, of course.

Vindication is not nearly as sweet as triumph, but it's a nice aftertaste.

² Damn that bewitching summer twilight hour... The photos didn't turn out but I managed to steal a few seconds next to Chrissie a few days later to re-capture the moment.

Chrissie played one more year, and even though I was there just as a regular fan when she lost early in Toronto in 1989, shortly before retiring, I was at peace. Even if I never spoke to her again, I would be content that I had had my moment with her.

And yet, I travelled to Boca Raton in October that year to attend the very first edition of the Chris Evert Pro Celebrity tournament, which raised funds for underprivileged children in South Florida.

I even saw a Chrissie vs. Martina confrontation, albeit a non-competitive exhibition doubles romp.

It was reassuring to know that Chrissie wasn't going anywhere. That even after retirement, and the husband & kids, she'd still be active on the tennis scene. As a spokesperson, as a commentator, as an icon. I wasn't quite ready to let her go.

Oh, and that script I was working on in 1987... It went through many re-writes, but now exists as a feature-length screenplay, looking for rich investors, preferably tennis fans. Ask me about it sometime. It's called Love Means Nothing, and it may or may not be autobiographical.

Thank you, Chrissie. You're one hell of a muse.