

Balls to the Wall: 7 Ages of a Squash Player

*Friends, Sports Lovers and Squash Players,
Lend me your ears ...*

***All the world's a Squash Court,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.***

Apologies to that Shakespeare fellow, who seemed to have a mystical view of the psyche of Squash Players who have been bliksemming balls around courts since their days in the Debtors Jails. Methinks, that had he been exposed to the game, based on his writing, he would have been a fine strokemaker, using powerful driving lines intertwined with delicate touches and an intricate understanding of all the nuances of his opponents' weaknesses and strengths.

***At first, the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.***

There are some who are lucky, born into squash-playing families with racquet-shaped silver spoons, and paraded in their prams alongside the courts as their parents free themselves of the angst and anxiety of everyday life. Like "Mom", and "Dad", lengths and lobs become part of their' vocabulary, Tee is a position, not a letter, and they visualise in wonder, suckling bottles, longing for the days of a beer after a game.

Others are born into oblivion, ignorant Calibans, knowing nothing of the cut and thrust, ranging rallies and competitive joy de'vivre of the game. They will be late-starters but Squash is a simple game, for simple folk, with simple needs so there is little lost, if via labour, one is not thrown pre-maturely into that bubbling witches cauldron of Squash Jesters and Wenches.

***And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school.***

Here is where most will be measured, measure for measure – for their Squash cloth and racquets. Unwilling as they may be for scholastic teaching, squash will open opportunities for them to bash, and smash, compete, travel and teach them about life. Those fortunate ones, whose schools have had the foresight to squash long-term opportunities into their sporting curriculum, are introduced into a game

which is far more than much ado about nothing. Initially their play is a helter skelter, as-you-like-it, comedy of errors, but gradually they boast themselves into being able to meet and compete

***And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow.***

Once introduced, most are smitten by this Lover, who offers so much, and takes so little. Sweaty, fervent and fertile, they fall in love with The Game. Not for them, the long-distance affair of a boring fielding afternoon, or the one-night stand of a disappointing duck-walk. Not for the squash player, the orgiastic mauling, broken bodies, fiendish fitness sessions and brain-bashing of rabid rugby coaches, rancid with self-fulfilment. Not for her, the Midsummer Night's mind-numbing meander of swimming endless lengths, long before others have even dreamed of awakening. Nay, their dreams, are distilled with drop-shots, and Romeo-like, they sneak away to their beloved, in cloistered rooms with balconies for quick adventures, which will leave them tired, satisfied, and yearning for more. "More" they scream, as now, they become brave and boastful, trying new shots and experimenting with wild ideas and gay abandon. But lacking discipline and experience, often, they are chastened. They will lose on occasions, but actually, they will never lose, as each loss is a lesson, and victories, hard fought, will be paraded as they start reaching for the stars and Ranking Lists.

***Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth.***

With the Game seeping into blood, muscle and psyche, they become fighters. They train with discipline, climb the ranks, and seek promotion. Now, it is about hustle, and bustle, toil and trouble. While there may be winters of discontent, leading to Hamlet-like introspection, these are often indications of improvement, and are made glorious by victorious notches, carved into their racquets. Macbeth-like ambitious, brave, and valiant, they thirst for recognition, sponsorship and superiority. Sadly, fame and fortune, are distant cousins in the World of Squash but that camaraderie of troops in the trenches, is special. Strong bonds are bound as they suffer injury, insult and are prepared to shed blood, in pursuit of glory. Their lives are embroiled in mantras of, "As he was valiant, I honour him. But as he was ambitious, I slew him." In modern parlance, "The Best Man Won"

***And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,***

Full of wise saws and modern instances;

And so he plays his part.

Gradually, other slices of life assume more importance. Family, business and prosperity take control, and now the Lover, becomes an ally and friend, lowering stress, maintaining health, and keeping Falstaffian flab from floundering. And sometimes, perchance, to offer beery solace amongst other Masters when the Merchants of Business come seeking their pounds of flesh. Wizedened, their skills sharpened, they use the brain to outwit and as the movement slows, the desire for a quickened nick outweighs the drool for a draining rally. Giving, becomes more important than taking, and secrets are shared with those who are making the same mistakes, which caused crying, wailing and gnashing of youthful teeth in their days of yore. And the cycle is continued, as children are led to the same havens, where once, these Masters were baptised into the game.

The sixth age shifts

Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,

With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,

His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide

For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,

Turning again toward childish treble, pipes

And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,

That ends this strange eventful history,

Is second childishness and mere oblivion,

Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Eventually, booming drives disappear and even bulleted nicks lose significance, as The Game which has offered companionship for so long, now slows to a pitter patter of gentle rallies, amidst chatter of tales of trials and triumph. To Tee, or not To Tee, is replaced with the stark reality that they will not, Forever Be. That they will shift from this Squashed cocoon. But still, they come to the water's edge, cherishing, thirsting and cheered that the baton has been passed and they can feed on watching the Young Ones take control.

As they shuffle from this mortal coil, they take their bows, their ashes, dusted into the cracks of the courts they have courted, and they know that they have been embraced by a Lover, who they have caressed for Life.