

# Why I Loved the Volvo

## by Robert Sullivan

Tennis, for me, has always been about my father. It was his game when he was growing up in Lowell, Mass., in the 1920s; he and his older brother Fred would knock the ball around on the public courts at Shedd Park. Dad turned out to be the better player. He more than once reached the finals of the City Tournament, but could never get by his good friend Elmer Rynne. Elmer was also his doubles partner. In fact, Elmer asked Dad to team with him for an intercollegiate match when Elmer was at B.C. Dad, at the time, was still at Lowell High. If things are leaky in NCAA sports these days, they were way leakier back then.

Dad went off to war, then he and Mom wed in Lowell shortly after his return, and began to raise their family. He was a spectacular and selfless father, and that meant doing whatever his two sons and daughter wanted him to do—take them to the beach, to Canobic Lake Park, to Benson’s Animal Farm, to the Swan Boats in Boston. Between his recreations in the European Theater of the 1940s and our childhood demands in the ’50s, Dad was pretty much out of the game—tennis, that is—for two decades.

But his brother Fred wasn’t. Fred continued to play, and in the early 1960s asked Dad to practice with him, to warm him up for some senior tournaments that he was intending to enter. Dad asked Mom, she said sure, and soon Dad was down at Shedd Park again, having borrowed one of Fred’s Dunlop Forts, whomping that big overstrung forehand and timidly offering at that lousy sliced backhand of his. (Until I got to college and received some authentic coaching, I would be

blessed with—and plagued by—a carbon copy version of Dad’s game, as he was my only teacher and inspiration.)

There were few things more exciting for this nine-year-old boy in 1963 than to pile into the Chevy Impala with Dad, my brother and other neighborhood pals and be driven to Shedd Park to play my father’s game. Dad had caught the tennis bug again but good, and on adjacent courts Kevin and I—and Mike and Barry and Jimmy and whoever else came along—were happily being infected. Tennis became my game because it was Dad’s game. I’m sure you understand.

Dad would take us to tournaments. We’d go to both the national amateur doubles and the U.S. Pro at Longwood. Dad even took Kevin and me to the mid-winter pro round-robin in Boston Garden. Every year that event was the same: A few hundred people showed up to watch Laver, Rosewall, Ralston and one other player I can no longer remember, reach the semis, then Laver would beat Ralston and Rosewall would beat the other guy and then Laver would beat Rosewall 10-8. Since the whistlestop tour drew nothing but flies to the cavernous Garden, the players would obligingly sign autographs for all who hung around after play ended. Laver proved himself the epitome of a good sport when, one year, I handed him my program opened to the page with Rosewall’s picture—and he signed.

“Hey, Laver’s going to play in New Hampshire,” Dad announced one morning, as he scanned his *Globe* sports page. “Up in Bretton Woods.”

I’m sure I said, “Cool,” and I’m sure Kevin asked, “Can we go?”

We knew Bretton Woods from skiing, and we knew it was a schlep from our house, but we had to ask. And of course Dad and Mom said, “Sure.”

Considering the informal, shirttail-out, no-sweatband angle from which we approached the game, the tournament that would become known to us as the Volvo was, from the get-go, our favorite event. It was New Englandy, first of all, in a homey, not taciturn, way. It was a pine-scented, wildflower-colored, Bean-boot-wearing tournament. It was more than a little bit oddball, especially in its earliest years. When it was at the Mount Washington Hotel, I remember, we would sit on the hillside and watch Laver and his pals have at it. It was very much like we were at a tennis party in Rod’s backyard. There was a naiveté to it that, say, sophisticated Longwood couldn’t (and wouldn’t care to) approach. One warm afternoon in Bretton Woods, Dad made his way gingerly down the hillside to our blanket carrying a paper cup full of booze. He had asked the young girl at the concession stand if she knew how to make a martini. She had said yes and had proceeded to give him a dozen ounces of gin and a splash of vermouth. I think Dad took a snooze through Laver-versus-Emerson.

In the garden-party atmosphere of Bretton Woods, the players—even the prickly ones like Connors—couldn't behave any other way but cordially and casually. They had to mingle and chat and be an integral part of the festivities because, well, there was simply no place for them to hide. They became touchable to the fans, especially to the kids. Some of those Aussies were extremely short individuals, and seen in the context of Bretton Woods, rather than on a telecast from Wimbledon or Forest Hills, they were humanized—and revealed as fine fellows, indeed. And Bretton Woods allowed some New Englanders to taste the wider world. By my senior year in high school I had never seen a person as exotic as Vijay Amritraj, never mind Arthur Ashe, but one day I found myself sitting on the hillside right beside him, the two of us watching Connors beat someone. Okker, maybe. Maybe Emmo. Vijay was a charming young man, not much older than myself at the time, and to this day I think well of India because of him, and his graciousness that afternoon.

I went to college in New Hampshire and the Volvo went to North Conway; both of us were growing up. I got a job teaching tennis in the summers at a club in Franconia, and would annually drive my beater of a car through Crawford Notch for a Volvo reunion with my folks. We would sit in the stadium and catch up with one another, then Mom would do some shopping while Dad and I would roam the grounds, rubbing elbows with the players. There was that great buzz the year Chrissie showed up with her Jimmy, and always that bizarre buzz of the helicopter shuttling players from the Red Jacket to the stadium. Sure, the traffic could be tough in North Conway at tournament time, but I always figured the copter was one of those eccentric Volvo touches that solidified the tournament's reputation as... different.

The players knew it was different. You could tell this at the loosey-goosey softball games, and in the shops and restaurants around the village. North Conway is, even in summer, a ski town, and there's a strange dynamic in a ski town where you might see four or five or six folks—be they strangers or friends—morning, noon and night. You see their face at breakfast, then on the slopes, then at the bar or maybe the movie theater. The phenomenon made North Conway a particularly entertaining place during the Volvo, with all those celebrity tennis players around. You'd see Eddie Dibbs out for a morning jog, then he was down there on the clay playing his match, then you'd bump into him at Carroll Reed's, then he was waiting in line at that terrific ice cream stand. By now, the two of you would be exchanging nods of hello, since this was getting embarrassing, and frankly, truth be told, by now you were getting sick of Eddie Dibbs. The next day, it would be someone

else. Vilas, maybe. Or Tiriac. One evening at the Scottish Lion, Ilie Nastase made a grand, sweeping, Sir Walter Raleigh-esque display of opening the door for my mother. Years later, I was doing a story on Nastase in his native Bucharest, and, during a visit to his own mother's home, I recalled the earlier incident for him. "My Mom had always thought you were a terrible guy," I told him. "But after that, she loved you. No matter how badly you behaved, she rooted for you." Nastase blew a kiss to the air and said, "Please take that home to your mother, from me."

The Volvo, in the midsummer-dream White Mountains and later in the equally fairy-dusted Green, had many such magical moments. It was a beguiling, innocent, undressed tournament. Players would sometimes walk the grounds shirtless, players would buy you a beer in the saloon. Even as the money increased, you sensed the players were taking a week off during the Volvo: a week away from the Opens, Wimbledon—all that. One day I was passing an inn and saw one of the European pros sunning himself bare chested in the wire chair outside his room. His toddler played at his feet and his wife read a paperback. On a third chair were the guy's tennis whites and socks, laid out to dry. At the Volvo, the pros did their laundry in the sink, and dried it in the mountain breeze.

I moved from New Hampshire to New York City in 1980, but still took a week's vacation each summer to attend the Volvo with my parents. There was a year I could sense things changing for both myself and the tournament. I was assigned to do a story on John McEnroe's return to the court after an absence of some length, and his comeback was to be launched at Stratton. Of course my parents came over to Vermont, but now I was working the tournament rather than simply enjoying it, and I didn't see them as much as I would have liked. Also, the national press had poured into Stratton to document the McEnroe story. As Mac made his way to a showdown with the Young Turk, Boris Becker, pressure mounted—big time, world class, McEnroe-fueled pressure. This didn't seem like the Volvo I had known. The tennis might have been even better than the tennis of earlier years, but with the tension and McEnroe's aloofness from anything but the business at hand (his quarters, wherever they were, were said to be under guard!). Well, people just weren't *enjoying* themselves as much as they once had.

In Stratton, though, there were still the occasional, small lovely moments. For instance: We, being from Massachusetts, were big fans of Big Tim Mayotte. One afternoon, Mom came and got Dad and me and told us, "You've got to come over to Court Two. Some child is beating up on Tim." This was the orange-haired teen from Vegas who no one had ever heard of, a kid named Agassi. He, for a few years, would re-infuse the Volvo with vigor and enthusiasm, as he bought into the whole

idea of this being a “different” tournament. On this particular day, he was introducing himself to the world by dismissing Big Tim. After the match, a tide of teeny bopper fans followed Agassi across the grounds. We stood and watched Tim slump in his chair. He wasn’t sure what had hit him, only that it had come from the forehand side. He looked up, and saw us staring at him. We mumbled a few words of encouragement, and told him he was a credit to the Bay State. He smiled wanly, back on his feet now, and made a little joke about his age and Agassi’s. It was one of those unguarded moments that perhaps happen elsewhere, but always happened more often at the Volvo.

I read in *The Times* one day that the tournament was moving to New Haven, and was caught completely off guard. By this point, Jim Westhall had become a friend, and I almost called him up and asked him what was going on. Jim had always been not only the Volvo’s keeper of the flame and preserver of tradition, he was the guy who had formed and nurtured this lovely tournament. He was its father and mother, its protector and defender. I thought to get him on the horn and say, “Jim, what gives?”

Then I thought better of it. I figured, he’s got his reasons. He’s probably getting squeezed somehow: money, TV, the Tour—all that junk must figure into it.

New Haven. *Jeezus*.

I willfully avoided the Connecticut version of the tournament; my final Volvo match was in Stratton. The way I saw it, last time I looked, New Haven had no mountains, no ski village, no charm at all. It had—what? Pizza? They could call it the Volvo in New Haven if they wanted, but it wasn’t the Volvo.

By not attending in the tournament’s autumnal years, which I’m sure were full of fine tennis matches, including several featuring Agassi, I was able to preserve my memories of, and affection for, the tournament that I had known. The little one. The quirky one. The one in the mountains where the chivalrous Nastase and the ubiquitous Dibbs and the striking Amritraj and, way back, the Foster’s-chugging Aussies had played.

Big time sport is seldom about “games” anymore and it is even more seldom about simply having fun. But I am convinced that, one and all, winners and losers, everyone had fun at the Volvo each summer. They enjoyed themselves, and enjoyed the bonhomie of those around them.

I know I did. And Dad... I know he did, too.

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