

LEPER COLONY

HOW VINCE LOMBARDY'S GHOST SAVED ME FROM.....

by

Bob Tracz

DELRAY TENNIS CENTER, DELRAY BEACH FLORIDA

A beautiful night for athletic competition. High school football? Little league baseball? Sure, but not here! You are in Delray Beach, Florida, a formally quaint sea-side village now stuffed with refugees from the northern winter cold. The main drag, Atlantic Avenue, is dominated by a grand tennis stadium that hosts nationally-rated pro events. And every Friday evening amateur players from all over Palm Beach County test their mettle on the some 20-odd courts that surround the arena used by the pros. “Social tennis players”? Sporting the best equipment and wearing rakishly elegant sportswear, every one of the contestants would not take kindly to be labeled as such. Most spend money on tennis lessons, belong to at least one club, considering success in their sport a paramount element in their lives. Most are not young. The “Baby Boomer” generation dominates, mostly retires chasing the sweet bird of their lost youth. Some successfully cage the illusive creature; others will fall to defeat as their aging bodies can

no longer stand the onslaught of youthful vigor embodied in lightening speed and savage net play.

It is almost time to start. The coaching staff looks upon the some 40-odd contestants who paid \$15 each to compete in three games of mixed doubles. Some are 80-year-olds; others are firebrands in the thirties and forties, and the majority is comfortably ranked right in the middle. Most players will know at which courts they will play. They will be assigned a partner and two adversaries of about equal ability. Hopefully, the competition will be tight, with all four players having “fun.” The winners will move up a court and face tougher players; the losers will descend a notch, facing a pair who just lost their set. Usually the system works. Everyone has “fun.” But sometimes a player keeps losing and losing. He winds-up in the last of the twenty courts--a place I christened *The Leper Colony*.

Yours truly, a 62-year-old seriously-minded South paw, rated 3.5 (about average in ability), is finding himself exiled to the Leper Colony all too often. Why? He believes he is playing well. He blames a series of partners who are either too old or too inexperienced to give him a fighting chance. Crestfallen, he feels the system is betraying him. Almost always, Robert’s latest partner, who is responsible for his team’s defeat, must “split,” now set to play *against him* and a new partner in the next round.

The once-beaten gal or guy who played so poorly with Robert rejuvenates into an awesome force. Robert and his new partner are attacked with 100 mph+ serves and savage net play. Maybe a slight exaggeration, but you know what I mean. Bob goes down again—the golden lights of number 1 court, Shangri-La, mock him as he takes a step closer to the last of 20 courts...*The Leper Colony*.

Last Friday night, Robert found himself *assigned to the last court at the start of the contest*. Obviously, after seeing his frustrating performance the week before, the Delray coaches exiled him to battle with neophytes and 80-year-olds. Robert loses his motivation, concentration. He loses matches too—again and again. He can not fight his way out. He is catching the disease! He is humiliated, depressed. If he could use his Wilson N1 to kill himself, he would. He may settle to just smashing it to pieces. But he has another idea. Why not just go home early---walk-off and out? Robert knows he is leaving an odd-number of players, throwing a monkey wrench into the system he believes betrayed him. His last view is of an old geezer shouting at him to return and play. Too bad old fart: “You’re not going to have Robert to kick around anymore.”

THE NEXT WEEK: ANOTHER NIGHT-TIME “MIXER” BOYTON BEACH,
FLORIDA

Robert wallows in misery. In a way he enjoys it. “Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.” But feeling sorry for himself is self-defeating. He has been playing tennis for almost half a century. He’s a good golfer and used to *race motorcycles on the dirt track*. He survived heart surgery and a host of shoulder operations. Really quitting the sport he loves is not an option. Not yet, anyway.

He was warned that Delray Tennis Center hosted super-competitive competition. If he returned to the dangerous sport of motorcycle racing after breaking his leg, he can at least try to return to this candy-ass sport. Delray is not the only game in town. Back in New York, he was the #1 seed in his doubles league. My god! Was it really 10 years

ago?" he questions himself. Now even bending over, trying to tie his shoe laces can be a challenge. He's slowing down. Should he substitute *tiddlywinks* for tennis?

He finds that he is not suffering alone. Sometimes gregarious and fun-loving—especially when he does chalk-up a victory or two, Robert learns a lot about his competition by just talking with his fellow athletes. There's the 75-year-old ex-army *ranger* whose fiercely competitive nature is being destroyed by players ten years his junior. And then Robert discovers that the geriatric *Ubermensh* (*Superman* as by defined by Nietzsche) who beats him up on the singles court, was a highly ranked college football and swimming star. Robert did not compete in college sports. He studied.

"It's all about winning for me: "*Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing.*" That's what Vince Lombardi said... a quotation that Robert uses to remind his fellow players about the nature of competitive sports in modern culture. "*Americans love winners*" is another pop anthem that the frustrated tennis player brings up every time he is told that he is taking things *too* seriously.

"But Bob, you are here to have fun and exercise. Who cares who comes out on top?"

"Easy for you to say. You're rated 4.0. Having to shake your hand after you destroyed me 6-love is humiliating and degrading." I answer adding, "do you know how terrible it is assigned to play old men who can't walk, no less run?" The debate usually goes on, proving nothing except the fact that water seeks its own level. My skill or lack of it will determine with whom I will play. To the superior adversary I will always be nothing else but canon fodder. In the meantime, keep a stiff upper lip and do not be a cry baby. And don't forget to shake the hand that just destroyed you.

OK. I'm here to play. I do not tell anyone except my coach (my father figure?) what happened in Delray. They would not be interested anyway. Tennis players are totally self-absorbed. Let's try again. I will behave myself, the 3.5 ranked Lefty whispers. Then the 20-odd contestants scamper off to their appointed courts. They're all here: the boomers-- the geriatric wonder boys," the sexy totally fashionable 40-year-old ladies showing-off their "killer legs;" the highly-rated youngsters who consider their over-the-hill opponents necessary evils. And then there's little old me: deliberately garbed in an anti-tennis lower-class skuzzy-looking mismatched outfit: A shirt holding the advertising logo, *Corona Extra*, and military-style shorts, frayed and tattered. "I'll play anyone for a beer," I repeatedly announce, trying to lighten things up. In fact I am scared to death, facing another humiliation. I was never so scared when I risked life and limb aboard a fire--breathing motorcycle in the heat of serious competition where I could get seriously hurt or killed.

Ron Shapiro Tennis Coach Emeritus, who despite his height-deprived physical status, is heads and shoulders above any tennis coaches with whom I have worked with, supervisors the players like a mother hen. Often you will find him at the *Leper Colony* doing what he should be doing: giving encouragement and playing advice to the unfortunate denizens cursed with a horrible—but temporary disease.

After competing in several intensely grueling matches, Robert is beaten again. At least scores were close, but remembering Vince Lombardi's immortal words, Robert is again crestfallen. A loss is a loss no matter how close it is. His head held low, walking like a condemned felon-- toward his baleful, but deserved incarceration.

The usual shadows surrounding the far court appear darker, more intense than usual. Upon crossing the doubles alley, Robert is overwhelmed by an immense darkness. A cold chill, a refrigerator-like environment replaces Florida's tropical humidity. Robert shudders. His white Wilson tennis racket is covered with frost. "Ohmygod. I must be dead. Please! ...not the final *Leper Colony*. Not now..."

The black clay has transformed itself-- replaced by viridian greenish grass, holding spots of dirty-looking frost. Barely visible is a gridiron, on which stands alone a short bespectacled man wrapped in a camel haired coat. His body is immobile, except for feet nervously bending heel and toe, giving his brand-new Florsheim loafers quite a break in.

"Relax kid. You're not dead," the mysterious figure speaks.

"You....are...Vince...." Robert inquires, incredulously, totally aghast.

"Let's say I'm his spirit, Sports Fan. Tennis? What gives? This is a game for sissies. You used to race motorcycles? You flat trackers are just as crazy as football players. But tennis? Why?"

"At least it's *mano a mano*. Believe it or not, my killer net play gives me the same rush the speeding bike gave." Robert replies, now enjoying the sports talk, forgetting the fact he is communing with a ghost.

"Why are you here, Coach Lombardi," I ask.

"Bob, you are just another numbskull spoil-sport using my words to justify your poor sportsmanship."

" Didn't you say, "*Winning isn't everything... its....the... "...only thing.*"

“I was MISQUOTED by some headline-grabbing reporter my young man. I really said, winning isn’t everything, *but making the effort to win is.*” YOU, my poor misguided boy, are not making anything near the effort to win. The apparition has moved close to me. Its arm encircles my large broad shoulder. Unbelievably, his body is warm--even comforting. His breath is foggy in the ice-cold air. He continues, his smiling but agitated face filling my entire field of vision:

The price of success is hard work, dedication to the job at hand, and the determination

That whether we win or lose, we have applied the best of ourselves to the task at hand.”

“Hey! No way, coach. I work out, take lessons...” I plead.

“Yeah. But not enough to win. You are overweight. Not really in shape. You can change this if you want to. Winning, like losing can become a habit too. You must want it enough. No other team in the NFL worked as hard as mine. They hated me, until they started to win.”

“I’m too old...injuries...” I reply, fishing for excuses, knowing that the legendary coach just struck a nerve.

“Then be happy *losing.*” He retorts, his teeth gleaming, a sagacious tip to his head, and a bright shuffle to his feet as he lets the warm arm that has been holding me fall to his side.

“OK. I must play better, I can do it,” I gleefully pronounce, as Lombardi’s ghost starts to become more transparent by the minute.

“I almost forgot. Be a sore loser. But don’t show it. Shake that hand, pay homage when it’s due. Work harder to win next time out.”

The green vacant green seats covered with hints of snow—what must have been Lambeau football stadium, is rapidly being replaced by waving palm trees silhouetted against the deep purple windswept sky. Coach Ron appears. He’s real. Flesh and blood! “Problem, Bob?” he inquires.

“No coach. Just thinking...You know me...”

“Yes I do; by the way, I’ve been watching you, Bob. Had some tough draws. Your strokes are fine, but you are being out-maneuvered. There are exercises that can help you move around the court faster. Try Thursday’s night clinic,” he retorts, as if having been privy to my ghostly visitation.

Many years later. To Robert and the other old timers, the time flies by

Robert is 87. He still plays tennis just a little. He can’t move much, but any ball near his space at the net is dead meat. He is liked and respected for being a true sportsman.

Mr. Lombardi was right about many things. Robert did work harder at his game and he never found himself in the *Leper Colony* again. As he got older, Robert tried his hand at coaching. After all, he was a fine teacher for many years. Several of Robert’s students reached the state junior finals. One, a feisty teenage girl who used to have a self-defeating temper problem, is now nationally ranked. Her coach straightened her out.

“It’s time, Bob. Or should I say sportsman, father, artist, teacher, coach, and nice man,” the smiling Vince Lombardi whispers, hand held-out, standing at the front of Robert’s hospital bed. Another spirit temporarily encased in mortal body will now experience eternity’s sunrise.

“Is there tennis in heaven, Coach? Oh... I did make it? Not the *Leper Colony* down *there...*”

“Relax! You made it Bob....just take my hand....”

The End