

“Patio Feast Leads to Berkeley Upset at Summit!”

By Art Fredman

So, there I sat, yesterday...munching at the cornucopia of delicacies so generously shared by Coach Bernie, when I overheard his pained yet positive comment, “This job is getting to me. I have one more match, a makeup at Summit, and I can’t field a team. Man, I hate to forfeit. I just hate to do that.” Later on, he revealed, “I’m supposed to play #1 with Bobby, but I’m hurt and I have a 10 am lesson.” The man was beleaguered by the tennis devils, having endured a sleep-deprived season dealing with neurotic, apathetic, and pathetic coaches from this existential men’s summer league.

I couldn’t take it any more. “Bernie, if you need someone at 5th doubles, I can’t walk or run very well and haven’t played on the team for a few years of knee pain and aging joints.” Bernie’s response: “Great Art. I’ll pair you with a new guy. Great news!” as only Bernie could be excited at recruiting from the geriatric tennis set remaining at BTC, most barely able to walk and chew gum. I can still hear, “Art, that’s great. I also heard from their coach that #5 is very weak.” That was not necessarily accurate. The coach was gaming always ethical Bernie.

Around 9:30 am, I arrived at the pristine, Har-Tru Summit Tennis Club and noticed our #4 team worming up. They were last-minute entries, Stuart and Tom M. I joined them, slugging as hard as I could and pretending to be back in 1980-90 form. I then went over to Bernie and asked about my partner. He told me he put the fellow at #1 with Bobby. Bernie was hurt. Duh? “Don’t worry, I called Barbara Q, and she’s on her way.” Wow, I would team with the #1 lady at Berkeley. Since we would play a ‘weak’ team, we won’t miss a shot and soon enough swagger off the court in about an hour.” Ha!

We met our opponents and, during warmup, they hit everything back. One was ‘older’, in good shape, around 6’ tall. His partner, about 5’8”, was about 35-40, excellent shape, and I could see he was very fast. Neither was extraordinary, but both were defensive artists and had fast hands. The young guy, Matt, had a sizzling forehand.

Barbara and I were confident. Heck, at Berkeley we could beat most if I were playing ok. We know, she’s a rock on the run. Set #1 started and they were hitting unexpectedly hard and accurate, passing me twice down the alley and forcing BQ back almost to the fence. It was 0-3. I told BQ, “No problem, they can’t keep this up.” I think she believed me. What a competitor! But, we were being wiped up and had to stop the bleeding immediately. No luck. They beat us decisively at around 6-2. We had the feeling of leaving a party, drunk and dazed, wondering how we would get home. Who would drive?

Set #2 started a bit better. It was nip and tuck for about 8 games. The older man had no offensive shots, but he was a wall, returning just about everything by blocking the ball. Matt, the younger guy, had a terrific forehand and overhead. We kept reminding each other, “Don’t hit to the blue shirt.” On a few occasions, surprisingly, they tanked key shots. I was missing too many net shots, although they were calibrating on me with a variety of attacks. I did manage to use quick hands on a few occasions, surprising them and myself. Barbara was impeccable as she covered the entire baseline, returning with surgical lobs and a variety of others. I would mess up my share

of putaways – trying too darned hard. Meanwhile, my right knee started talking to me. The new knee was fine.

It was pure grit that brought us to a 6-4 win at Set 2. They might have been tiring, a bit. The young Matt, on several occasions, dashed to the fence to return a Barbara lob, back to the net. Once, he returned a seemingly impossible lob, swinging backwards with a sky high return lob which I got under about 6 feet from the net. I framed it. Embarrassed.

Now, in our 3rd set, I started to wonder whether I could last. We started around 10:15 and it was around Noon and muggy. We elected to play it out with a 3rd set. We blew the first game, then won the next 4, for 4-1, ours. By this time, Stuart was sitting on the nearby bench encouraging us. Hal, the older player, asked him most deferentially to be quiet. At 4-1, we could see the finish line. Then, either we let down or they dug very deep or Stuart brought back luck. It was 4-4, 3rd set. I thought of my dog pacing in the house. “Dad said he would be back soon.”

Well, the fates and the portable Berkeley energy vortex seemed to take charge. Barbara served and they netted a couple of shots. Somehow, we took her game. To this point, every game seemed like a set. I often grew impatient and slammed at the ball, too often missing my mark. There were circus-like back-and-forth exchanges between Hal and me at net. I think he won more of them, although I wasn't that bad. The key was that Barbara must have been their living nightmare, patiently and accurately lifting up her returns, forcing them to hit overheads while I patrolled the net, trying to distract them. Like an “I” formation.

Matt served it out, and we returned with unexpected precision. It was a quick game. Relieved and pleased, we accepted the final set at 6-4 as Stuart could be heard, “I knew you would win!” in earshot of the deflated opponents. I think the match took over 2 hours, maybe 2 and a half. I will relax for a long time (days), smiling and reflecting that if I hadn't been grubbing Bernie's food yesterday, I might have been hiking in the Reservation with Lila, then watching the Mets or Giants or, even better, relaxing at Berkeley with Lord Eddie Eleazer, who made a cameo appearance. Hal and Matt, from Summit, were slightly better for most of the match, but they didn't realize they were up against two very stubborn, ornery Berkeley-ites, who on August 28, absolutely refused to lose.

As an addendum to this tennis missive, I must mention our team warriors and their heroic play. Sadly, my view of the other teams was peripheral, but I must, nevertheless, give you some expression of pride in their performance. Also, add to this pastoral tennis scene that Coach Bernie Jones was cheerleader, advisor, energizer for our players.

I noticed new member Sean McCourt and Bobby Cunningham dueling with one-time Berkeley star, Keith Ramig and his partner. Sean's strong game synched with Bobby's classic and murderous strokes – hands that are quick beyond belief. That match was a near-upset, with our guys fighting against Summit's #1 doubles team from it's A Team. (This was supposed to be it's B Team!) That match went to a sudden-death 3rd set. A major upset was missed by a hair. Sean and Bobby were valiant, but dropped to a team that plays regularly and is #1 on Summit's A Team. Bravo Sean and Bobby...Berkeley's Best!

From my vantage, in between points, I noted David Giles and Enrique Carrera in a marathon on the next court. David was typically steady and consistent; Enrique roamed the net, occasionally putting away an overhead. Their opponents seemed flawless and resourceful. The match went into a 3rd full set which seemed to last for hours. Our guys hit with precision and, if you know them at Berkeley, they do not give up a single point easily. As they walked off, I thought they won, but soon learned otherwise. They have become a terrific duo as a result of their 2022 play as a team.

President Matthew Mehr and Paul Salvatoriello were landing winners and moving well against another very steady duo from Summit. It seemed as though Summit's quite slow Har-Tru surface fostered steady, defensive, position players as opposed to our bigger hitters. Matthew hit more than a few of his big forehands; Paul tried hard to set up the opponents with his fierce strokes from either side. Unfortunately, Matt and Paul were outlasted by much steadier Summit guys. It's certain their tough skirmishes and fighting attitudes will be long remembered at that club.

On the other side of our court, I had the advantage of a clear view of our #4 team, Tom Maloney and Stuart Ward. They played the Summit Coach and possibly the Co-Coach. Both seemed overly serious, and both sported wounds. They had knee braces, wrist and other supports. They might have been 60-70. The Coach seemed possibly to have come from another place, time, and century. The other man, quite verbal, claimed to have know Coach Bernie Jones and played a match with him years ago. They were soon to discover they were walking into the jaws of the Berkeley dragon. Tom and Stuart made short shrift of them, 6-0, 6-0, combining strong ground strokes with competent court movement. I envied them, as we struggled for every single darned point. That Coach and his sidekick were in tennis shock, having been exorcised of their pre-match court swagger. I must add that every time I glanced over there, Tom was using his racquet like a Maine hunting knife, piercing them with precision and power. Of course, Stuart also penetrated their positions, leaving them to figure out his slice from his flat winners.