

“There are tears in my eyes as I finish this book. It is wrong to say I enjoyed it. I loved it! John Gruberg has captured the very soul of a teaching pro. It is my story too. Gruberg’s imagination and deep understanding of tennis makes for a true celebration of the game’s inner workings, and of life. I just wish I could express the emotion I’m feeling right now. Wow, I am really stunned!”

... Roger Kahn, *USPTA*

* * *

“I really enjoyed this book. I can relate to it. Great tale!”

... Peter Smith, *Men’s Tennis Coach, USC*

“Fantastic ... this is a lot of what I experienced back in the day, and a lot of what I am experiencing right now!” ... Chris Magyary

Teaching Professional and Former Touring Pro

* * *

“I’ve read lots of sports books, biographies, and novels ... but I have not found a great tennis novel. Until now!” ... Gary Glassman

Stony Brook University, *Women’s & Men’s Tennis Coach*

The Author

John Gruberg considers himself a small-time writer/inventor/tennis pro type of a guy. He has been mentioned on the *Tonight Show* and in *Playboy Magazine*, the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Encyclopedia Brown's Book of Wacky Sports*. Gruberg is a former junior coach for Aruba in the Netherlands Antilles. Originally from Berkeley, he was a longtime teaching pro at Fresno's Roeding Park. He lives in Monterey and Fresno with his wife, Meijing and his dog, Ulysses.

John Gruberg's credits include:

Net Results
Inside Tennis
Valley Tennis
Florida Tennis
The Fresno Bee
Colorado Tennis
The Center Line
Crosscourt News
Advantage Magazine
Monterey County Herald
San Mateo County Times
The Fresno Sporting News
KVPR Valley Public Radio
International Tennis Weekly

* * *

— for any kid who likes to hang out at the playground
or on a sports field or court of any kind
my heart goes out to each of you
and to any adult who in times past
was one of those kids
JG



Is This A True Story?

Much of this book is autobiographical, and much of it is fictitious. Those who know the author personally will have an easier time noting these sometimes subtle differences. And so, this is a memoir that has been derailed; and not just by the facts, but by a sport that pulled the author off the tracks of his life when he was a teenager and never let him back on board.

Actual people and events match the historical record as closely as possible (although occasional liberties are taken with regard to precise dates.)

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Tennis Hobo

by John Gruberg



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A Derailed Memoir

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Times have changed —

*“It’s not enough to practice. These days you’ve got to practice
faster than the next guy.” ... Steve Docherty
Champion of the Pacific Northwest*

Chapter Zero

Familiar Flatlands

Tennis, like the sun, leached into my restlessness, even on a rainy day. It came dressed in the perfect backhand of an old school chum. We talked about girls and played ping pong in his basement; then sometimes I'd get lucky and Spiegel would drag me off to a rundown court in Richmond or El Cerrito where he would beat the tennis pulp right out of me. If it was a weekend, we might take the long hike up to Tilden Regional Park to play there. At the time, Spiegel was taking lessons from Tom Stow, the guy who had coached world champion Don Budge, and occasionally I'd get to tag along as a punching bag. But for the most part, my tennis took place on the rear wall of my father's little office building on University Avenue. There, on the blacktop of the parking lot, I tried to emulate Spiegel's perfect backhand. Nothing else was back there but a warehouse with boarded-up windows, so the noise of the tennis ball didn't seem to bother anybody, except my dad, who dressed in his white smock, would stick his head out the back door now and then.

"So, your tennis shenanigans are more important than your schoolwork?" That's what he wanted to say, but he never said a word. He just stood there with various looks of puzzled exasperation.

My father was Theodore Dubitski, M.D., a bespectacled Berkeley doctor whose patients included the actor Robert Culp and Mario Savio, leader of the Free Speech movement. "He's just a regular family man," my dad would tell my mom at the dinner table every time Mario was in the news, or if my dad had dropped by on a house call. My father always wanted me to be a doctor, too, and if possible, a great Russian novelist on the side. He certainly expected me to become more than just a tennis gigolo, as he would come to call it (and there was always a nervous edge to his voice.)

Soon, the interplay of mind and medicine caught the interest of Dr. Theodore Dubitski, and he became a psychiatrist, partly in an attempt to figure out his three children, especially me. But he offered too long a leash, and I ended up with a headful of tennis balls and a pen at the end of an overdeveloped right arm.

Now I was practically middle-aged and still hanging around Berkeley. I had a little pad way down on 2nd Street next to a railroad crossing. I drove over those tracks every day. Or, I might be on foot in the neighborhood and negotiate the long thin rails with carefully placed steps.

The freighter came only occasionally during daylight, but in the middle of the night its far away horn moaned along the flats of the bay; then came the clanking crescendo of rolling metal and I knew it was three in the morning and I was being awakened so at least something could whisper a loving good night to me. Then that forlorn moan would sound again, this time faint, and I would go back to sleep satisfied.

Sometimes after the freighter woke me I would think about my old pal Spiegel; I hadn't seen him in years. I heard he became a successful corporate attorney in Southern California and that he played tennis with an occasional senator or congressman (no doubt displaying his perfect Tom Stow backhand.) Of course, I always knew Spiegel would be successful — he was so smart. He was the only guy I ever met who got psyched up for final exams the way a football player might get pumped up for a home coming game. He couldn't wait for the day of those damn tests! (And he did a great job of passing on his keen intelligence — for a couple of decades later, Spiegel's son would create Snapchat, a company Facebook would offer to buy for three billion dollars!)

Three billion dollars would have been a difficult figure for me to fathom back in those days, even though I was well into my thirties and supposedly an adult. Hell, the most I ever had in my bank account was about seven hundred dollars. Besides, the only time I ever heard a number in the billions was when Carl Sagan was on TV; and he was talking about stars, not dollars. Anyway, my TV wasn't working half the time, probably something to do with the antenna.

I was definitely in a rut, stuck in those all too familiar Berkeley flatlands. And my playing days were pretty much over; not that they ever amounted to anything. Come to think of it, I hadn't amounted to much of anything either. I was just a small time tennis teacher. And sometimes I did feel like a gigolo. I probably should have listened to my father. I should have become a doctor, or at least a lawyer or a dentist. I

was thirty-seven years old and teaching tennis to housewives. It was at a little club in Lafayette, out near Walnut Creek. At least it was sunny there. Anyway, that's where I'd be headed in the morning after the freighter rocked me back to sleep.

Chapter One

The Feel Of An Overhead

It was a cloudless day with blue sky and a sun the color of a new tennis ball. The warm weather made me feel good all over, kind of tingly, as I strolled towards the pro shop. Of course, it was always nice out here in Lafayette where the tennis club was. In the flats of Berkeley where I had come in from, it was dismal before I left and the sun in the overcast sky looked like the most worn-out ball in my teaching basket.

But here in Lafayette all the neighborhoods were sunny! I entered the pro shop confidently and got my shopping cart from a storage area in the back. I liked the solid feel of the cart as I rolled it away from the shop; it was weighted down with a couple hundred tennis balls. At the bottom of the cart were pale old balls that had lost their bounce, but near the top the balls were alive and well; and some were brand new yellow, just like that feel-good sun above.

"Dubitski! Hey, Stefan, wait a minute," the girl at the front desk came running after me. "There's a message for you." She was slightly out of breath as she handed me the note.

Apparently, Evonne Lutzborg had called to confirm her ten o'clock lesson. (Hardly an emergency, but the greater message was that the girl was reliable.) Evonne was my newest tennis student. She was single, nice looking, intelligent. Also athletic, which was like icing on the cake; or maybe that was the cake and the other was the icing. The distinction could be difficult at times.

Evonne was a brunette, though all of her sisters and others she knew of Swedish descent were blond. "So I always felt a little odd," she confessed

Author's Note

As with most books, many people lay hidden within these pages, completely unobserved by the reader. However, Bill Carroll as Carroll William, Bob Fenton as Old Bob Fentayne, Camilla Sutherland as Southerly, and Mabel Gong as Mei Mei, are more easily discovered. They appear in loose, fictionalized form.

Various individuals contributed unwittingly to the content of this manuscript. Among them are Chuck Bleckinger, Dan Bleckinger, Paul Aloojian, Wendell Pierce, Bill Leslie, Dennis Harbert, Don Fulton, Todd Wilson, Scott Borowiak, Jim McLennan, Susanne McAlister, and Larry Jones.

* * *

An especially loud call of thanks
goes out to
Dick Squires, Marian Allison, and Alan Hager
but still, it will not reach them
Hopefully, everybody else is still here

Acknowledgments

Meijing Gruberg — Editorial assistance was gleaned from a great many people, but nobody suffered that cause more honorably over the years than my wife. Sometimes her lips would turn up at the corners briefly, a twitch as if by reflex, and then I knew had written something absolutely hilarious. When she frowned, which was her norm after the twenty-second reading of the manuscript, I knew all was well and that so long as her nose didn't scrunch up there was nothing to worry about. My wife's recommendations always turned out to be best and consistent with those of whatever scholar I might on occasion trouble for a second opinion. I owe her a great deal and for a lot more than just this book.

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