

Seeking Your Inner Federer, if the Muscles (*Groan!*) Allow

By HARVEY ARATON • Wesley Chapel, Fla.



DIFFERENT STROKES Practice at Saddlebrook Resort near Tampa, Fla.

TECHNICAL commands were sprayed with the same tormenting frequency as the fluffy yellow balls: “Move your feet ... racket back ... turn ... turn ... turn!”

A tangential pop quiz was sprung: “Who adapted the song from the Book of Ecclesiastes?”

I didn’t turn enough, bounced a forehand into the net and scampered back to the center of the court. “Dylan?” I gasped, while bending to touch the strategically placed cone on the service line with my racket.

“No, Pete Seeger,” my instructor said. My punishment was another ball into the corner.

The Florida morning was postcard perfect, not a cloud in sight, humidity low, the nearby pool mostly empty and inviting. I was a two-day prisoner of Stephen Getchell’s group in the Saddlebrook Resort’s adult tennis program and of my own athletic vanity.

Not for the first time in such a vacation-land setting, I had volunteered for the privilege of being drilled five exhausting hours a day, of having my game deconstructed stroke by stroke, with all the axiomatic hectoring — “Coil to uncoil!” — that was not conceived with the 57-year-old body in mind.

A fair question, I suppose, is why? Because after 30 years of trying to release my inner Agassi, I have come to accept who I am as a recreational tennis player. Alas, during my first three-hour session with Mr. Getchell, with only one other group member — a doctor, what luck! — I discovered that in all likelihood I am not even at the level I thought I was.

“What’s your rating?” Mr. Getchell asked, referring to the statistical measure of a player’s ability.



Tony Shibusawa, left, instructs Karl Cockcroft of San Antonio, Texas



No camp songs, just tennis. Carol Devlín of Toronto returning a shot.

From the many adult camp choices, my wife, Beth Albert, and I chose Saddlebrook, 30 miles north of the Tampa airport, with condominium lodging, a pool, spa and restaurants. There are two Arnold Palmer-designed golf courses, but I don’t play — my symbolic resistance to middle-age concession. I am thrilled to still be bouncing (some) on my toes, working up a fast sweat. Mr. Getchell, 41, was impressed by my quickness, the one part of my game he actually rated a Floridian’s 3.5.

During the tennis boom years of the 1970s and ’80s the sport was typically promoted as a game for life, which many baby boomers grew to lament as a life of aches, pains and risk of blowing out a knee. Golf not only became a safer alternative but a trendier one too, once Tiger Woods brought new-age athleticism to the P.G.A. Tour.

There were holdouts, of course, like Doug Shear, who visits Saddlebrook twice a year and was stretched out by the pool after the morning session with a body that appeared to have not consumed a single doughnut in its 58 years. The look was misleading. Mr. Shear — a home-construction contractor in Middletown, R.I. — had a hip replacement 10 years ago following a motorcycle accident. Three weeks before he flew to Tampa, a metal plate that was inserted after surgery to treat spinal stenosis was removed from his neck.

The procedure was minor, he said, but he reduced the length of his stay from five days to two. That was his compromise, less tennis, the closest he said he will ever get to a round of golf.

“I always say tennis is a sport, golf is an activity,” Mr. Shear said. “The best way I can put it is that if you take the best amateur golfer in the country on his best day, he can keep up with Tiger Woods. But if you take the best amateur tennis player in the country on his best day, there is no way he can play with Roger Federer.”

According to a recent survey by the Taylor Research and Consulting Group for the United States Tennis Association and the Tennis Industry Association,

tennis has experienced a recreational upswing across all age groups, especially among blacks and Hispanics. This year participation in the country rose above 30 million for the first time in more than two decades. Between 2003 and 2008, before the recession, youth racket sales rose by 50 percent.

“If you look at the people playing professional tennis, they are fit, they are healthy and they are good looking,” Jolyn de Boer, the executive director of the Tennis Industry Association, said in a telephone interview. That most of the current stars, with the exception of the Williams sisters, are not Americans counters the notion of another boom in the United States. But there is no question that the sport has crashed a perception barrier. Advancements in racket technology along with bigger, stronger and fitter players have created a ferocious brand of shot-making and recast tennis as more macho, hipper, no longer the essence of country-club chic.

“When you look at how hard the ball is being hit, the level of athleticism and skill that’s required just to return it, you can understand why kids would be more attracted to it,” said Howard Moore, Saddlebrook’s tennis director.

Can’t speak for the young ones, but I will venture to say that Mr. Federer, Rafael Nadal and company have become the pride of graying boomers who didn’t lay down their rackets, who cling to an action sport and will pay good money for the grind of adult boot camp, motivational taunts and all.

Mr. Getchell was seldom at a loss. As more ground strokes went awry on the morning of Day 2, he reminded me: “There is no such thing as a bad ball feed, only bad footwork.” The hard evidence was soon presented for my viewing displeasure.

At Saddlebrook everyone has a private video session with Nona Wagh, the adult program director, a former college player from Mumbai, India. Warning to long-time players and first-time campers: This can be jarring. Was that really me, hitting forehands and backhands with my racket drooping on its follow-through like water-starved vegetation and stiffly moving forward to drop flat-footed volleys into the net?

Never have I fancied myself as Mr. Federer, the master of fluidity and the holder of a record 16 Grand Slam titles, but I certainly thought I was more athletic looking than the imposter on screen. At Ms. Wagh’s suggestion I dismissed it as camera fright and chided myself to move my body and feet when I returned to the court.

By the end of my stay Mr. Getchell did manage to eliminate the hitch in my serve, and in a private session Mr. Moore had me confidently smacking my normally timid backhand. But when I returned home and put it to the test of doubles match play the next day, I resumed slicing or pushing the ball back and hating myself for being a wimp.

As a relatively new player my wife is still at the point of believing that one or two pieces of technical advice will unlock the game’s competitive mysteries. I will no doubt be a New Jersey 3.5 until my body begs to differ. And that’s the whole point. The real satisfaction of adult tennis camp is rooted not so much in self-improvement but in self-actualization. Why do we subject ourselves to it? Because we still can.

Saddlebrook Resort (saddlebrook.com; 800-729-8383) is in Wesley Chapel, Fla., 30 miles north of Tampa International Airport, one mile east of Interstate 75 at Exit 279. Transportation to and from the resort can be arranged for a fee by reservation. The resort offers tennis and golf packages for adults and juniors and guarantees no more than four players in a group. Rates are seasonal. There are also packages for spa and fitness treatments.

WHERE TO EAT:

Although there are a variety of family restaurants in the area, the resort offers options: Dempsey’s Steak House has a costly menu but a well-stocked salad bar available along with lighter fare at the adjacent T D’s Sports Bar. Tropics Restaurant and Lounge at Saddlebrook offers a varied and more affordable lunch and dinner menu and is where breakfast (which is included) is served. There is also a poolside cafe and bar.

WHAT TO DO:

Saddlebrook is a short drive from a number of family amusement parks like Busch Gardens and Adventure Island, and it is a 90-minute drive from the Orlando theme parks. Baseball spring-training workouts and exhibition games are available during February and March, including the New York Yankees at George M. Steinbrenner Field in Tampa. Gulf beaches are about a one-hour drive from the resort.