



Tennis, anyone?

Hetero or queer, the rules are the same and the aim is always love-love

During the second year of our relationship, my partner, Berdell, and I took up a new "sport." We call it relationship tennis. The object of relationship tennis is to serve and return in such a way that the other player is able to receive and make a successful return, keeping the ball in constant play—and holding the score at love-love.

What? A relationship with no score? Is that possible? You bet your autographed Martina Navratilova sweatband it is.

Of course, I'm talking about the way we interact with one another. Berdell and I discovered that poor serves elicit poor returns, and so on, until one partner stops the game and begins again with intent to serve a returnable ball. Arguments ensue when shots are too wild to respond to.

Struggling relationships—those with daily conflict—struggle because of repeated wild shots. The partners serve the ball without thought as to its returnability. Eventually, players intend to make one another miss. *Intent* is what's important here. When intent is honorable but your partner *accidentally* hits it wild, the two of you will agree to start again at love-love. But when intent is dishonorable, points begin to add up. And in this game, points mean you both lose.

Successful relationships—those with only occasional conflict—succeed because they make a conscientious effort to keep the ball in the court, *intending* for a partner to successfully receive and return, again and again. As with any practiced sport, the longer two people play relationship tennis, the more skillful they become. Eventually, each can serve and return more challenging shots, making the relationship, and each other, infinitely stronger, more creative, and thus, more interesting.

So, how about a practice game?

Martina and Chris love one another, but there is constant conflict between them. Let's listen in and find out what's happening:

"Chris, what did you do with the sugar?"

"Nothing!"

"Well, it's not where it's supposed to be."

"Oh, well."

"Don't say, 'Oh, well.' Help me find it!"

"Why should I have to help you find it? Find it yourself."

"Why do you always have to make a federal case out of everything?!"

Yikes! Let's analyze their game:

"Chris, what did you do with the sugar?"

Poor serve—assumes the missing sugar is Chris' fault.

"Nothing!" Poor return—answers the question, but remains unhelpful.

"Well, it's not where it's supposed to be."

Poor return—states the obvious and again implies it's Chris' fault.

"Oh, well." Wild return—sarcastic and useless.

"Don't say, 'Oh, well.' Help me find it!" Mediocre serve—finally asking for what she wants, but poor in how it is said.

"Why should I have to help you find it? Find it yourself." Wild return—useless question, mean-spirited statement.

"Why do you always have to make a federal case out of everything?!" Out of court serve—lost ball.

Let's help them out:

"Honey, I can't find the sugar. I'd like to borrow your eyes for a minute." Good serve—states the problem, requests help without demanding it.

"Oops! I was baking last night and left it in the cupboard with the flour. I apologize—I want to become more conscientious about putting things back where they belong." Good return—humble admission, the apology acknowledges the pain that was caused, and the statement of intent to fix the chronic problem shows willingness to grow and change.

"Thanks, honey. I really appreciate that. Hey! Let's go rent *Desert Hearts* to watch tonight!" Good return—acknowledges Chris' positive effort and creates a new positive focus.

Obviously, many other variables could enter into the picture, but I think you get the idea. The object is to overcome the urge to win points with the urge to win love. You'll be surprised at how differently your partner will react to you when you begin serving something that can be received and returned successfully.

It's been 15 years since Berdell and I played our first match, and my heart still beats faster and flies a little higher when she walks onto the court. Relationship tennis is the ultimate exercise for lovers.

■ THE REV. CASEY CHANEY is senior minister of The God Connection in Beaverton, Ore., and a practitioner of couples "coaching."

Pottymouth

No femme façade can protect this lesbian mom from kids' crude ways

Frunkly, one of the things I was thinking of least when considering the ultimate compatibility of the wife and me as parents was our grossness tolerance level. Certainly there was the obvious: Who will be changing the diapers (and will she retch each and every time)? Does either party sneer at spit up? Have difficulty with blood or blanché at mucus?

Of course, we were both pretty weak in the stomach department when we were starting out on the parenting voyage eight years ago. My wife (whose true nature will soon be revealed) has always admitted to being easily disgusted. However, when getting down to brass tacks on who would be popping and changing babies, we knew it would be the one who used to clean a pet store for a living—me.

Ten thousand diapers later, it's true. It just doesn't have the same thrill. Any disgust you harbor in the early days is quickly numbed by fatigue. Besides, how dare one be picky after the natural glory of childbirth? Which is not always easy for me—not being picky, that is.

Despite my aforementioned willingness to be elbow deep in rodent cages or diaper pails, I'm a pretty prissy gal in most ways. There were only sisters in my family and our mother was born of a woman with only sisters. Her mother was born of a woman with only sisters, and so on through the lineage. All of them were—here I'm doing some speculating—the same kind of hypersensitive, flatulence-avoiding, too-cerebral/etheral-for-my-body kind of women. Basically, born Victorians. So, despite breaking masses of molds—coming out, clomping around in cowboy boots and not much else (the early years!)—still I am my mother's daughter and I like things a little more refined, thank you very much.

My wife, as seems the natural order of things, is my polar opposite. She's a military brat and has a more realistic, proletariat—some might say childlike—attitude.

This has all come to a head because of three things: One, we have a Boston terrier who snorts, burps and brings all sorts of bodily functions to the foreground. Two, we have a seven-

year-old boy who comes home from school singing songs about exterminating Barney and is dying to try some uncivilized behavior at any juncture. And three, we have a girl who can break wind at will, punctuating her comments with truly comic flair. Add these together, mix with a mother who is "the fun one" and wallows in this stuff, and we have a simply disgusting state of chaos around here.

On a recent car ride to the video store I tried once again to draw a line in the sand by delineating the difference between "at home behavior with family only" versus behavior in front of any other adults. Our daughter started in with some pretty typical three-year-old potty talk while our son pretended to burp in rhyme.

So I got serious. I brought out the threat of the "cuss jar." This brought tears. Our son doesn't like to let go of his cash, not even for a few well-timed objectionable adjectives. He swore on my grave that we didn't need to take his quarters to get him to change his ways.

Days later, we were basically rehashing the same subject for the same reasons. This time I told them I thought it was their Mama's fault just as much as theirs. She was encouraging them and I'd have to get her to stop since it was causing them grief. You should have seen the tears.

"But that's what makes her Mama! That's what makes her so fun!" they wailed. Faced with two distraught children who thought they were going to be robbed of their partner in crime, I caved. I admitted, indeed, that was what made her Mama, and so much fun. After all, it would be no fun to have two mothers who were just the same—especially two like me, even if I do get to be "the love one."

Which leads me to the fact that during a recent kids' video party I found myself surrounded by seven- and eight-year-old boys belching the alphabet in unison around our kitchen table. And I was smiling.

Years from now, when our children bring home prospective mates, who will be subjected to a jaw-rattling round of rude noises and doggy-snort imitations in sentimental memory of our experiences together, it'll be a good proving ground. Let them learn a lesson from us. Get this issue on the table first, or you never know what may be happening at your table 20 years hence.

■ BEREN DEMOTIER is Portland-based writer whose columns appear nationally.

