

The Asian Reporter

Volume 24 Number 19
October 6, 2014
ISSN: 1094-9453

The Asian Reporter is published on
the first and third Monday each month.

Please send all correspondence to: The Asian Reporter
922 N Killingsworth Street, Portland, OR 97217
Phone: (503) 283-4440, Fax: (503) 283-4445

News Department e-mail: news@asianreporter.com
Advertising Department e-mail: ads@asianreporter.com
General e-mail: info@asianreporter.com
Website: www.asianreporter.com

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Publisher **Jaime Lim**
Contributing Editors

Ronault L.S. Catalani (Polo), Jeff Wenger
Correspondents

**Ian Blazina, Josephine Bridges, Pamela Ellgen, Maileen Hamto,
Edward J. Han, A.P. Kryza, Marie Lo, Simeon Mamaril,
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Illustrator **Jonathan Hill**
News Service **Associated Press/Newsfinder**

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MY TURN

■ Wayne Chan



On this tennis court, a different kind of love game

My weekly tennis match with the guys was just the other day, and believe me, I was prepared.

No, I hadn't practiced my serves, my groundstrokes, or even my volleys. I wasn't even trying to build up a psychological edge to overcome my opponents. Actually, my preparation had very little to do with playing tennis at all. Instead, most of it involved coming up with friendly insults to spew forth at the most opportune moments during the match.

You see, as most guys know, whenever a bunch of married men get together, particularly if the occasion involves sports, pizza, or beer, the bulk of the evening is spent less on the stated activity itself and more on our ability to degrade each other in the most inventive ways possible.

It helps that we all like each other.

Our tennis evenings usually entail the following series of steps:

1. Play a point as best we can.
2. Follow up the point with a witty insult, usually involving someone's manhood using repartee as visually descriptive as possible.
3. Play another point.
4. Follow the insult with a creative way to link your opponent's poor play to the lack of said manhood as described in step number two.
5. Repeat process until someone is declared the winner.

To some, it may sound like a bit of misguided machismo in action by a group of middle-aged men trying to escape the daily grind of life. I'd love to debate that point with you but, what can I say, it's kind of hitting the nail on the head.

But my last tennis outing was different.

Since my wife Maya was travelling on business and my son Tyler was busy with an early evening class, I had no one to watch my other son and daughter, Ethan and Savannah. There wasn't enough time for me to find a babysitter, so instead of cancelling on the tennis group, I decided to bring Ethan and Savannah with me.

As some of you know, Maya and I have triplets. Ethan and Savannah are autistic. Tyler is a typical 16-year-old.

Ethan and Savannah are two of the most good-natured and gentle kids you'll ever come across. They love music and swimming and usually go through the day with smiles on their faces. They certainly have their challenges, but the ability to love life isn't one of them.

I had taken Ethan and Savannah out before to

see if they liked playing tennis and they did not show much interest. I suspect it has something to do with the inherent need to be competitive when you're playing tennis. As far as I can tell, neither Ethan nor Savannah has any impulse or need to beat someone else at anything.

Having said that, I knew Ethan and Savannah would be just fine watching their dad play tennis for a couple of hours, just enjoying the cool evening breeze.

That night, our group played on three courts — four players on each court. I was on the middle court; Ethan and Savannah were sitting one court away near a fence on some folding chairs I had brought for them.

As I walked onto the court, as I sometimes do when I'm entering a social interaction where I'm trying to avoid any possible misunderstandings or mixed messages involving the kids, I mentioned to one of the guys that Ethan and Savannah are my kids and they are autistic, so if he spoke to them and they didn't respond or didn't respond appropriately, he would understand why.

My friend smiled, looked at me, and said, "Oh, I know! Hi, Savannah! Hi, Ethan!" — easy enough.

For the next hour, everything was routine and we played our matches. There was maybe a little less witty repartee seeing as there were impressionable minors on the court, but that was to be expected.

It's what happened next that came as a surprise.

Being a special needs family, I've noticed a typical reaction when we're in a social setting with people who have not had experience with it; they tend to show compassion and patience, but do not interact much. I can understand it; they don't know exactly what they should do, so they keep their distance. It's almost a cordial indifference.

But in the middle of my match, as I got ready to serve a point, I looked over to the court next to me and saw Ethan and Savannah on the court, holding racquets, with two of the guys standing behind them, clapping and cheering them on.

"Go, Ethan! Hit the ball! You can do it!"

"Way to go, Savannah! Hit the ball!"

Two of the other guys were across the net, with big smiles on their faces, just as eager to cheer the kids on. Ethan and Savannah, for their part, were laughing with glee and jumping up and down, not knowing exactly how to hit the ball, but happy all the same just to give it a try.

Turning back to start our game again, I missed

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