HOW TRACY AUSTIN BROKE MY HEART

Because I am a long-time rabid fan of tennis in general and Tracy Austin in particular, I've rarely looked forward to reading a sports memoir the way I looked forward to Ms. Austin's *Beyond Center Court: My Story,* ghosted by Christine Brennan and published by Morrow. This is a type of mass-market book — the sports-star-"with"-somebody autobiography — that I seem to have bought and read an awful lot of, with all sorts of ups and downs and ambivalence and embarrassment, usually putting these books under something more highbrow when I get to the register. I think Austin's memoir has maybe finally broken my jones for the genre, though.

Here's *Beyond Center Court*'s Austin on the first set of her final against Chris Evert at the 1979 US Open: "At 2–3, I broke Chris, then she broke me, and I broke her again, so we were at 4–4."

And on her epiphany after winning that final: "I immediately knew what I had done, which was to win the US Open, and I was thrilled."

Tracy Austin on the psychic rigors of pro competition: "Every professional athlete has to be so fine-tuned mentally."

Tracy Austin on her parents: "My mother and father never, ever pushed me."

Tracy Austin on Martina Navratilova: "She is a wonderful person, very sensitive and caring."

On Billie Jean King: "She also is incredibly charming and accommodating."

On Brooke Shields: "She was so sweet and bright and easy to talk to right away."

Tracy Austin meditating on excellence: "There is that little bit extra that some of us are willing to give and some of us aren't. Why is that? I think it's the challenge to be the best."

You get the idea. On the upside, though, this breathtakingly insipid autobiography can maybe help us understand both the seduction and the disappointment that seem to be built into the mass-market sports memoir. Almost uniformly poor as books, these athletic "My Story"s sell incredibly well; that's why there are so many of them. And they sell so well because athletes' stories seem to promise something more than the regular old name-dropping celebrity autobiography.

Here is a theory. Top athletes are compelling because they embody the comparison-based achievement we Americans revere — fast*est,* strong*est* — and because they do so in a totally unambiguous way. Questions of the best plumber or best managerial accountant are impossible even to define, whereas the best relief pitcher, free-throw shooter, or female tennis player is, at any given time, a matter of public statistical record. Top athletes fascinate us by appealing to our twin compulsions with competitive superiority and hard data.

Plus they're beautiful: Jordan hanging in midair like a Chagall bride, Sampras laying down a touch volley at an angle that defies Euclid. And they're inspiring. There is about world-class athletes carving out exemptions from physical laws a transcendent beauty

that makes manifest God in man. So actually more than one theory, then. Great athletes are profundity in motion. They enable abstractions like *power* and *grace* and *control* to become not only incarnate but televisable. To be a top athlete, performing, is to be that exquisite hybrid of animal and angel that we average unbeautiful watchers have such a hard time seeing in ourselves.

So we want to know them, these gifted, driven physical achievers. We too, as audience, are driven: watching the performance is not enough. We want to get intimate with all that profundity. We want inside them; we want the Story. We want to hear about humble roots, privation, precocity, grim resolve, discouragement, persistence, team spirit, sacrifice, killer instinct, liniment and pain. We want to know how they did it. How many hours a night did the child Bird spend in his driveway hitting jumpers under homestrung floodlights? What ungodly time did Bjorn get up for practice every morning? What exact makes of cars did the Butkus boys work out by pushing up and down Chicago streets? What did Palmer and Brett and Payton and Evert have to give up? And of course, too, we want to know how it *feels,* inside, to be both beautiful and best ("How did it feel to win the big one?"). What combination of blankness and concentration is required to sink a putt or a free-throw for thousands of dollars in front of millions of unblinking eyes? What goes through their minds? Are these athletes real people? Are they even remotely like us? Is their Agony of Defeat anything like our little agonies of daily frustration? And of course what about the Thrill of Victory — what might it feel like to hold up that #1 finger and be able to actually *mean* it?

I am about the same age and played competitive tennis in the same junior ranks as Tracy Austin, half a country away and several plateaus below her. When we all heard, in 1977, that a California girl who'd just turned fourteen had won a professional tournament in Portland, we weren't so much jealous as agog. None of us could come close to testing even a top eighteen-year-old, much less pro-caliber adults. We started to hunt her up in tennis magazines,

search out her matches on obscure cable channels. She was about four foot six and eighty-five pounds. She hit the hell out of the ball and never missed and never choked and had braces and pigtails that swung wildly around as she handed pros their asses. She was the first real child star in women's tennis, and in the late Seventies she was prodigious, beautiful, and inspiring. There was an incongruously adult genius about her game, all the more radiant for her little-girl giggle and silly hair. I remember meditating, with all the intensity a fifteen-year-old can summon, on the differences that kept this girl and me on our respective sides of the TV screen. She was a genius and I was not. How must it have felt? I had some serious questions to ask her. I wanted, very much, her side of it.

So the point, then, about these sports memoirs' market appeal: Because top athletes are profound, because they make a certain type of genius as carnally discernible as it ever can get, these ghostwritten invitations inside their lives and their skulls are terribly seductive for book buyers. Explicitly or not, the memoirs make a promise — to let us penetrate the indefinable mystery of what makes some persons geniuses, semidivine, to share with us the secret and so both to reveal the difference between us and them and to erase it, a little, that difference . . . to give us the (we want, expect, only one, the master narrative, the key) Story.

However seductively they promise, though, these autobiographies rarely deliver. And *Beyond Center Court: My Story* is especially bad. The book fails not so much because it's poorly written (which it is — I don't know what ghostwriter Brennan's enhancing function was supposed to be here, but it's hard to see how Austin herself could have done any worse than two hundred dead pages of "Tennis took me like a magic carpet to all kinds of places and all kinds of people" enlivened only by wincers like "Injuries — the signature of the rest of my career — were about to take hold of me"), but because it commits what any college sophomore knows is the capital crime of expository prose: it forgets who it's supposed to be for.

Obviously, a good commercial memoir's first loyalty has got to be to the reader, the person who's spending money and time to access the consciousness of someone he wishes to know and will never meet. But none of *Beyond Center Court*'s loyalties are to the reader. The author's primary allegiance seems to be to her family and friends. Whole pages are given over to numbing Academy Award–style tributes to parents, siblings, coaches, trainers, and agents, plus little burbles of praise for pretty much every athlete and celebrity she's ever met. In particular, Austin's account of her own (extremely, transcendently interesting) competitive career keeps digressing into warm fuzzies on each opponent she faces. Typical example: Her third round at 1980's Wimbledon was against American Barbara Potter, who, we learn,

> is a really good person. Barbara was very nice to me through my injuries, sending me books, keeping in touch, and checking to see how I was doing. Barbara definitely was one of the smartest people on the tour; I've heard she's going to college now, which takes a lot of initiative for a woman our age. Knowing Barbara, I'm sure she's working harder than all her fellow students.

But there is also here an odd loyalty to and penchant for the very clichés with which we sports fans weave the veil of myth and mystery that these sports memoirs promise to part for us. It's almost as if Tracy Austin has structured her own sense of her life and career to accord with the formulas of the generic sports bio. We've got the sensitive and doting mother, the kindly dad, the mischievous siblings who treat famous Tracy like just another kid. We've got the ingenue heroine whose innocence is eroded by experience and transcended through sheer grit; we've got the gruff but tenderhearted coach and the coolly skeptical veterans who finally accept the heroine. We've got the wicked, backstabbing rival (in Pam Shriver, who receives the book's only unfulsome mention). We even get the myth-requisite humble roots. Austin, whose father is a corporate scientist and whose mother is one of those lean tan ladies

who seem to spend all day every day at the country club tennis courts, tries to portray her childhood in posh Rolling Hills Estates CA as impoverished: "We had to be frugal in all kinds of ways . . . we cut expenses by drinking powdered milk . . . we didn't have bacon except on Christmas." Stuff like this seems way out of touch with reality until we realize that the kind of reality the author's chosen to be in touch with here is not just un- but anti-real.

In fact, as unrevealing of character as its press-release tone and generic-myth structure make this memoir, it's the narrator's cluelessness that permits us our only glimpses of anything like a real and faceted life. That is, relief from the book's skewed loyalties can be found only in those places where the author seems unwittingly to betray them. She protests, for instance, repeatedly and with an almost Gertrudian fervor, that her mother "did not force" her into tennis at age three, it apparently never occurring to Tracy Austin that a three-year-old hasn't got enough awareness of choices to require any forcing. This was the child of a mom who'd spent the evening before Tracy's birth hitting tennis balls to the family's other four children, three of whom also ended up playing pro tennis. Many of the memoir's recollections of Mrs. Austin seem almost Viennese in their repression — "My mother always made sure I behaved on court, but I never even considered acting up" — and downright creepy are some of the details Austin chooses in order to evince "how nonintense my tennis background really was":

> Everyone thinks every young tennis player is very one-dimensional, which just wasn't true in my case. Until I was fourteen, I never played tennis on Monday. . . . My mother made sure I never put in seven straight days on the court. She didn't go to the club on Mondays, so we never went there.

It gets weirder. Later in the book's childhood section, Austin discusses her "wonderful friendship" with a man from their country club who "set up . . . matches for me against unsuspecting foes in later years and . . . won a lot of money from his friends" and, as a

token of friendship, "bought me a necklace with a T hanging on it. The T had fourteen diamonds on it." She was apparently ten at this point. As the book's now fully adult Austin analyzes the relationship, "He was a very wealthy criminal lawyer, and I didn't have very much money. With all his gifts for me, he made me feel special." What a guy. Regarding her de facto employment in what is technically known as sports hustling: "It was all in good fun."

In the subsequent section, Austin recalls a 1978 pro tournament in Japan that she hadn't much wanted to enter:

> It was just too far from home and I was tired from the travel grind. They kept offering me more and more money for an appearance fee — well over a hundred thousand dollars — but I said no. Finally, they offered to fly my whole family over. That did it. We went, and I won easily.

Besides displaying an odd financial sense (she won't come for $100,000+, but will come if they add a couple thousand in airfare?), Tracy Austin seems here unaware of the fact that, in the late Seventies, any player who accepted a guaranteed payment just for entering a tournament was in violation of a serious tour rule. The backstory here is that both genders' player associations had outlawed these payments because they threatened both the real and the perceived integrity of pro tennis. A tournament that has paid some star player a hefty guarantee — wanting her in the draw because her celebrity will help increase ticket sales, corporate sponsorships, TV revenues, etc. — thereafter has an obvious stake in that player's survival in the tournament, and so has an equally obvious interest in keeping her from getting upset by some lesser-known player in the early rounds, which, since matches' linesmen and umpires are employed by the tournament, can lead to shady officiating. And has so led. Far stranger things than a marquee player's receiving a suspicious number of favorable line calls have happened . . . though apparently somehow not in Tracy Austin's experience.

The naïveté on display throughout this memoir is doubly confusing. On the one hand, there's little sign in this narrator of anything like the frontal-lobe activity required for outright deception. On the other, Austin's ignorance of her sport's grittier realities seems literally incredible. Random examples. When she sees a player "tank" a 1988 tournament match to make time for a lucrative appearance in a TV ad, Tracy "couldn't believe it. . . . I had never played with anyone who threw a match before, so it took me a set and a half to realize what was happening." This even though match-tanking had been widely and publicly reported as a dark consequence of skyrocketing exhibition and endorsement fees for at least the eleven years Austin had been in pro tennis. Or, drugswise, although problems with everything up to cocaine and heroin in pro tennis had been not only acknowledged but written about in the 1980s,* Austin manages to move the reader to both scorn and pity with pronouncements like "I assume players were experimenting with marijuana and certainly were drinking alcohol, but I don't know who or when or where. I wasn't invited to those parties, if they were happening at all. And I'm very glad I wasn't." And so on and so on.

Ultimately, though, what makes *Beyond Center Court* so especially disappointing is that it could have been much more than just another I-was-born-to-play sports memoir. The facts of Tracy Austin's life and its trajectory are almost classically tragic. She was the first of tennis's now-ubiquitous nymphet prodigies, and her rise was meteoric. Picked out of the crowd as a toddler by coaching guru Vic Braden, Austin was on the cover of *World Tennis* magazine at age four. She played her first junior tournament at seven, and by ten she had won the national girls' twelve-and-under championship both indoors and out- and was being invited to play public exhibitions. At thirteen she had won national titles in most junior

* AP reporter Michael Mewshaw's *Short Circuit* (Atheneum, 1983) is just one example of national-press stuff about drugs on the tour.

age-groups, been drafted as a professional by World Team Tennis, and appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* under the teaser "A Star Is Born." At fourteen, having chewed up every female in US juniors, she entered the preliminary qualifiers for her first professional tournament and proceeded to win not just the qualifying event but the whole tourney — a feat roughly equivalent to someone who was ineligible for a DMV learner's permit winning the Indianapolis 500. She played Wimbledon at fourteen, turned pro as a ninth-grader, won the US Open at sixteen, and was ranked number one in the world at just seventeen, in 1980. This was the same year her body started to fall apart. She spent the next four years effectively crippled by injuries and bizarre accidents, playing sporadically and watching her ranking plummet, and was for all practical purposes retired from tennis at age twenty-one. In 1989, her one serious attempt at a comeback ended on the way to the US Open, when a speeder ran a red light and nearly killed her. She is now, as of this writing, a professional former sports star, running celebrity clinics for corporate sponsors and doing sad little bits of color commentary on some of the same cable channels I'd first seen her play on.

What's nearly Greek about her career's arc is that Tracy Austin's most conspicuous virtue, a relentless workaholic perfectionism that combined with raw talent to make her such a prodigious success, turned out to be also her flaw and bane. She was, even after puberty, a tiny person, and her obsessive practice regimen and uncompromising effort in every last match began to afflict her with what sports MDs now know to be simple consequences of hypertrophy and chronic wear: hamstring and hip flexor pulls, sciatica, scoliosis, tendinitis, stress fractures, plantar fasciitis. Then too, since woe classically breeds more woe, she was freak-accident-prone: coaches who fall on her while ice-skating and break her ankle, psychotic chiropractors who pull her spine out of alignment, waiters who splash her with scalding water, color-blind speeders on the JFK Parkway.

A successful Tracy Austin autobiography, then, could have afforded us plain old plumbers and accountants more than just access to the unquestioned genius of an athletic savant or her high-speed ascent to the top of a univocal, mathematically computed hierarchy. This book could actually have helped us to countenance the sports myth's dark side. The only thing Tracy Austin had ever known how to do, her art — what the tragic-savvy Greeks would have called her *technē,* that state in which Austin's mastery of craft facilitated a communion with the gods themselves — was removed from her at an age when most of us are just starting to think seriously about committing ourselves to some pursuit. This memoir could have been about both the seductive immortality of competitive success and the less seductive but way more significant fragility and impermanence of all the competitive venues in which mortal humans chase immortality. Austin's story could, since the predicament of a dedicated athletic prodigy washed up at twenty-one differs in nothing more than degree from that of a dedicated CPA and family man dying at sixty-two, have been profound. The book could, since having it all at seventeen and then losing it all by twenty-one because of stuff outside your control is just like death except you have to go on living afterward, have been truly inspirational. And the publisher's flap copy promises just this: "The inspirational story of Tracy Austin's long struggle to find a life beyond championship tennis."

But the publisher's flap copy lies, because it turns out that *inspirational* is being used on the book jacket only in its ad-cliché sense, one basically equivalent to *heartwarming* or *feel-good* or even (God forbid) *triumphant.* Like all good ad clichés, it manages to suggest everything and mean nothing. Honorably used, *to inspire* means, according to Mr. American Heritage, "to animate the mind or emotions of; to communicate by divine influence." Which is to say that *inspirational,* honorably used, describes precisely what a great athlete becomes when she's in the arena performing, sharing the particular divinity she's given her life for, letting people witness

concrete, transient instantiations of a grace that for most of us remains abstract and immanent.

Transcendent as were Tracy Austin's achievements on a public court, her autobiography does not come anywhere close to honoring the promise of its flap copy's "inspirational." Because forget divine — there's not even a recognizable human being in here. And this isn't just because of clunky prose or luxated structure. The book is inanimate because it communicates no real feeling and so gives us no sense of a conscious person. There's nobody at the other end of the line. Every emotionally significant moment or event or development gets conveyed in either computeresque staccato or else a prepackaged PR-speak whose whole function is (think about it) to deaden feeling. See, for instance, Austin's account of the moment when she has just beaten a world-class adult to win her first professional tournament:

> It was a tough match and I simply outlasted her. I was beginning to get a reputation for doing that. When you play from the baseline, perseverance is everything. The prize money for first place was twenty-eight thousand dollars.*

Or check out the book's description of her career's tragic climax. After working for five years to make a comeback and then, literally on the way to Flushing Meadow's National Tennis Center, getting sideswiped by a van and having her leg shattered through sheer bad luck, Tracy Austin was now permanently finished as a world-class athlete, and had then to lie for weeks in traction and think about the end of the only life she'd ever known. In *Beyond Center Court,* Austin's inspirational prose-response to this consists of quoting Leo Buscaglia, reporting on her newfound enthusiasm for shopping, and then giving us an excruciating chapter-long list of every celebrity she's ever met.

* Or listen again to her report of how winning her first US Open felt: "I immediately knew what I had done, which was to win the US Open, and I was thrilled." This line haunts me; it's like the whole letdown of the book boiled down into one dead bite.

Of course, neither Austin nor her book is unique. It's hard not to notice the way this same air of robotic banality suffuses not only the sports-memoir genre but also the media rituals in which a top athlete is asked to describe the content or meaning of his *technē*. Turn on any post-contest TV interview: "Kenny, how did it feel to make that sensational game-winning shoestring catch in the end zone with absolutely no I mean *zero* time remaining on the clock?" "Well, Frank, I was just real pleased. I was real happy and also pleased. We've all worked hard and come a long way as a team, and it's always a good feeling to be able to contribute." "Mark, you've now homered in your last eight straight at-bats and lead both leagues in RBIs — any comment?" "Well, Bob, I'm just trying to take it one pitch at a time. I've been focusing on the fundamentals, you know, and trying to make a contribution, and all of us know we've got to take it one game at a time and hang in there and not look ahead and just basically do the best we can at all times." This stuff is stupefying, and yet it also seems to be inevitable, maybe even necessary. The baritones in network blazers keep coming up after games, demanding of physical geniuses these recombinant strings of dead clichés, strings that after a while start to sound like a strange kind of lullaby, and which of course no network would solicit and broadcast again and again if there weren't a large and serious audience out here who find the banalities right and good. As if the emptiness in these athletes' descriptions of their feelings confirmed something we need to believe.

All right, so the obvious point: Great athletes usually turn out to be stunningly inarticulate about just those qualities and experiences that constitute their fascination. For me, though, the important question is why this is always so bitterly disappointing. And why I keep buying these sports memoirs with expectations that my own experience with the genre should long ago have modified . . . and why I nearly always feel thwarted and pissed when I finish them. One sort of answer, of course, is that commercial autobiographies like these promise something they cannot deliver: personal and

verbal access to an intrinsically public and performative kind of genius. The problem with this answer is that I and the rest of the US book market aren't that stupid — if impossible promises were all there was to it, we'd catch on after a while, and it would stop being so profitable for publishers to churn these memoirs out.

Maybe what keeps us buying in the face of constant disappointment is some deep compulsion both to experience genius in the concrete and to universalize genius in the abstract. Real indisputable genius is so impossible to define, and true *technē* so rarely visible (much less televisable), that maybe we automatically expect people who are geniuses as athletes to be geniuses also as speakers and writers, to be articulate, perceptive, truthful, profound. If it's just that we naively expect geniuses-in-motion to be also geniuses-in-reflection, then their failure to be that shouldn't really seem any crueler or more disillusioning than Kant's glass jaw or Eliot's inability to hit the curve.

For my part, though, I think there's something deeper, and scarier, that keeps my hope one step ahead of past experience as I make my way to the bookstore's register. It remains very hard for me to reconcile the vapidity of Austin's narrative mind, on the one hand, with the extraordinary mental powers that are required by world-class tennis, on the other. Anyone who buys the idea that great athletes are dim should have a close look at an NFL playbook, or at a basketball coach's diagram of a 3–2 zone trap . . . or at an archival film of Ms. Tracy Austin repeatedly putting a ball in a court's corner at high speed from seventy-eight feet away, with huge sums of money at stake and enormous crowds of people watching her do it. Ever try to concentrate on doing something difficult with a crowd of people watching? . . . worse, with a crowd of spectators maybe all vocally hoping you fail so that their favorite will beat you? In my own comparatively low-level junior matches, before audiences that rarely hit three digits, it used to be all I could do to manage my sphincter. I would drive myself crazy: ". . . but what if I double-fault here and go down a break with all these folks

watching? . . . don't think about it . . . yeah but except if I'm consciously not thinking about it then doesn't part of me have to think about it in order for me to remember what I'm not supposed to think about? . . . shut *up,* quit thinking about it and serve the goddamn ball . . . except how can I even be talking to myself about not thinking about it unless I'm still aware of what it is I'm talking about not thinking about?" and so on. I'd get divided, paralyzed. As most ungreat athletes do. Freeze up, choke. Lose our focus. Become self-conscious. Cease to be wholly present in our wills and choices and movements.

It is not an accident that great athletes are often called "naturals," because they can, in performance, be totally present: they can proceed on instinct and muscle-memory and autonomic will such that agent and action are one. Great athletes can do this even — and, for the truly great ones like Borg and Bird and Nicklaus and Jordan and Austin, *especially* — under wilting pressure and scrutiny. They can withstand forces of distraction that would break a mind prone to self-conscious fear in two.

The real secret behind top athletes' genius, then, may be as esoteric and obvious and dull and profound as silence itself. The real, many-veiled answer to the question of just what goes through a great player's mind as he stands at the center of hostile crowd-noise and lines up the free-throw that will decide the game might well be: *nothing at all.*

How can great athletes shut off the Iago-like voice of the self? How can they bypass the head and simply and superbly act? How, at the critical moment, can they invoke for themselves a cliché as trite as "One ball at a time" or "Gotta concentrate here," and *mean* it, and then *do* it? Maybe it's because, for top athletes, clichés present themselves not as trite but simply as true, or perhaps not even as declarative expressions with qualities like depth or triteness or falsehood or truth but as simple imperatives that are either useful or not and, if useful, to be invoked and obeyed and that's all there is to it.

What if, when Tracy Austin writes that after her 1989 car crash, "I quickly accepted that there was nothing I could do about it," the statement is not only true but *exhaustively descriptive* of the entire acceptance process she went through? Is someone stupid or shallow because she can say to herself that there's nothing she can do about something bad and so she'd better accept it, and thereupon simply accept it with no more interior struggle? Or is that person maybe somehow natively wise and profound, enlightened in the childlike way some saints and monks are enlightened?

This is, for me, the real mystery — whether such a person is an idiot or a mystic or both and/or neither. The only certainty seems to be that such a person does not produce a very good prose memoir. That plain empirical fact may be the best way to explain how Tracy Austin's actual history can be so compelling and important and her verbal account of that history not even alive. It may also, in starting to address the differences in communicability between thinking and doing and between doing and being, yield the key to why top athletes' autobiographies are at once so seductive and so disappointing for us readers. As is so often SOP with the truth, there's a cruel paradox involved. It may well be that we spectators, who are not divinely gifted as athletes, are the only ones able truly to see, articulate, and animate the experience of the gift we are denied. And that those who receive and act out the gift of athletic genius must, perforce, be blind and dumb about it — and not because blindness and dumbness are the price of the gift, but because they are its essence.

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