Winning While You’re Losing

Many beginning fans of tennis are genuinely puzzled by the way score is kept in a tennis match, and to a certain degree, it’s easy to understand why. In theory, it’s simple enough: each game consists of four points and a player has to win by two. So, why don’t they just count out zero to four points instead of saying Love, 15, 30, 40, Deuce, Ad In, and Ad Out, you ask? Well, because the game of tennis might actually be over two thousand years old, perhaps 500 years older than chess, and was originally invented by hyperactive monks to keep themselves entertained during very long outdoor religious ceremonies. No one can be sure when or how the scoring names evolved and century-old sports traditions die hard. Some say the English came up with the scoring system we use today, basing it on the faces of two clocks whose minute hands were moved 0, 15 30, 45 (later shortened to 40 because its easier to say) and 60 to show the audience the score. Zero might have been changed to “love” because if you were scoreless, you were obviously playing “for the love of the game.” Other sports historians argue that “love” is a variation of the French word “l’eouf” which means “the egg” which resembles the shape of a zero, and also say the French are responsible for the term “deuce” which originally was the word “deux” (“two”), meaning at deuce, you still have two more points to win. Try explaining all this to half-frozen fans at the Skowhegan Tennis Courts loyally huddled under blankets on lawn chairs and you’ll soon see the same contorted facial expressions you find at field hockey games when someone to tries to explain why the refs are constantly blowing whistles.

What’s essential to understand about tennis scoring is this: it all but eliminates luck as the reason why one player defeats another. When two players are at deuce, the odds of hitting two lucky shots in a row to win are astronomically high. Factor in that players who are serving have to alternate their serves from both the right (duece) court to the left (ad) court, and then have to change ends on odd numbered total games, it is easy to conclude that skill and only skill is what it takes to win in tennis. Conceivably, two equally skilled players could play forever, and the recent 11 hour match at Wimbledon attests to this. That is why high school tournaments use tie-breaks, to end the match with two points rather than have to wait for a player to win by two full games after surviving three sets. This week, the first three team matches the Skowhegan Girls played ended in third set tie-breaks, under the lights, close to five hours after the start time. Our first singles player, second singles player and our first doubles teams, riding on fantastically exciting wins by third singles and second doubles, fought it out with the best players from Brewer, Bangor and Oakland. All this skill from a team who went 0-12 last season. Unbelievable. Simply unbelievable, and less than a dozen frostbitten fans can claim the honor of seeing their achievement.

After beating Brewer in the season opener, fans and players expressed sadness after the two close defeats that came later in the week, some claiming they were too heart-breaking, a few worrying that the losses might psych out our team and cripple their belief that they can win. Hogwash, I say. Pure hogwash. Teams who lose in a third set tie-break really never lose, unless they foolishly accept that they’ve lost. Sure, sure, the scorecards, or the
clock faces, whatever, tell one story, but the final score is only a small footnote to the bigger, more important story. All of our players who clawed their way to a third set tie-break got there by coming from behind, with the most notable come back story being the first doubles team, who rose up from a set down to tie it up in the third set. Lucky, you say? Hardly. Coming back in tennis happens because players willfully raise and hold their skill levels above their opponents for extended periods of play. This happens only because players muster the confidence to push themselves beyond whatever is limiting their play at that moment, and it is without question the most difficult mental challenge in the game. To call a player who loses a third set tie-break a loser is to miss the whole point of why we play tennis in the first place, for the love of the game and what it can teach us about ourselves. Tennis, like life, is a game we can win while we’re losing, and this week our girls did just that. Congratulations.