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Lowell House Student Speaker Series
“Why I Love Tennis”
(advised by Sandy Alexander)

The umpire had just called “time,” signifying the end of the changeover between games. I was down 2-5 in the state championship match against Toledo St. Johns, playing a big guy almost six inches taller than me. Our teams had split matches, which meant it all came down to my match at the top singles court. And I was getting crushed. The silence of our fans and the dejected look in the face of my coach were hardly sources of reassurance. The taunts of the fans from Toledo didn't make things any better. And yet, it was exactly in that moment when my back was against the wall and my chances of winning nearly dashed to the asphalt beneath my feet that I rediscovered why I love tennis. On that blazing summer day at the Ohio State tennis center, I realized that I was by myself on that court, and that my fate was in my hands alone. And it was precisely that realization – something that I have felt to be true throughout my tennis career – that was utterly and sublimely empowering.

I like to think of playing competitive tennis as being like driving a bicycle. You have to do a lot of pedaling and make a lot of decisions about where to turn and what speed to ride. But no matter what you do, you are doing it.

A few moments before, I had been aced to go down 1-5, at which point I buried my face in the cloth of my towel and screamed at the top of my lungs. This was the match that I was supposed to win. Coming into high school, I was one of the top ranked junior tennis players in the country. My school had never won a state tennis title, and many people thought that I would be the one to help them do just that. I was frustrated, angry, confused, and disappointed, but at 1-5, I had to set aside those emotions and figure out how to stay alive. It was my serve, and I unleashed four of the biggest ones I had ever hit. I won the game – which meant that I had just bought another 60 seconds to think while on the changeover between games before I had to face my opponent's booming serves in excess of 120 miles per hour.

I sat down on the bench and covered my head with an ice cold towel to remove myself from the heat of the 90 degree day. I blocked out the chants of the fans from Toledo. I ignored the throbbing pain in my leg from my injury the day before. In that moment, I was plugged in – ready to make a change, and determined to figure out how.

I started to replay the exact sequence of events that was taking place every time I lost a point. My opponent hits an aggressive ball to a corner and approaches the net. I hit the ball flat down the line or rolling short cross court. He cuts off the angle and places the ball in the corner opposite to me. I chase it down. And he smashes away the easy winner. It was like clockwork – and it seemed to be working for him every damn time.

What confused me was why it was working. Usually, my passing shots are the strongest part of my game. So why was it working so well for him this time? And then, it hit me. Because my opponent was so tall and had such a huge wingspan, he was able to reach my angle shots with ease while at the net. I realized I had to try something new – hit the ball directly at him, and try to jam him up.

The 60 seconds were up, and I had a new bounce in my step. I was pumped up and ready to go. As my opponent served up a bomb and approached the net, I punched my shot straight back at his knees. He dumped the volley into the net, and confused, scratched his head. The next point, he tried the exact same thing, and I replied in the same way – flat and into the body. Again, another error from my opponent. 2-5 became 3-5, 3-5 became 4-5. I won seven games straight and gradually saw frustration and nervousness take over my opponent. Before I knew it, it was match point for me. One final forehand error from my opponent, and it was over. We had won.

In the celebration that ensued as my teammates, coaches, and fans carried me on their shoulders on the court, all I could think of was how glorious were the 60 seconds of solitude that I had on the sideline when I was down 5-2. I was in a hole. I found a way out of that hole. And that's why I love tennis.