

Journey to the Truth

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This story is about a journey—a journey to find tennis truth. It took me 2,000 miles from my home in Minnesota to Tampa Bay, Florida. When I reached my destination, I met a man who had the character of tempered steel, the life knowledge of a great-grandfather, and the tennis expertise of a master. In my week of being around him for over 12 hours a day, my daughters and I learned a great deal about tennis—the best instruction that I believe exists, but what I learned the most is that to make a great tennis player, the starting point is the character, inspiration, and desire of the athlete.

Truth Doesn't Come with a Billboard

When Jesus of Nazareth walked the earth, there wasn't a billboard on the road to Galilee that pointed truth seekers to his exact location. His operation involved a small band of disciples surviving on a low budget in virtual obscurity led by a man who made miracles happen. If you wanted to find the Messiah and the truth that would set you free, a quest of asking and searching would have been the only way.

My journey to Steve Smith and the truth about tennis started by chance. Steve's name was mentioned in a conversation with a tennis pro in St. Paul, Minnesota, and was followed by a Google search and a visit to Steve Smith's website. It makes me wonder what would have happened had the Internet been around when Jesus was here—a video of a healing gone viral.

After watching a few clips on his website, I was interested. He showed a young man with a goofy-looking swing, hitting forehands and then one month later, a total transformation—beautiful strokes that were compact and on balance. Then with several years of reps, this same player was taking the number one ranked pro in the world to five sets at the U.S. Open on Arthur Ashe Stadium.

I'm a researcher by trade, so I had to find out more about this system. I signed up for the website membership and sat down in front of my computer for the 25 hours of video training that was available on the site. It all made sense and I was excited—finally, I had found the holy grail of tennis instruction. “Tennis Intelligence Applied,” was an appropriate title for Steve Smith's course. He quoted Vic Braden throughout the videos on his website: “Physical laws and court dimensions dictate stroke production, not any coaches' unique theory or opinion.” It all seemed scientific and logical.

I was anxious to have my daughters learn the system; they both played tennis on the local high school team. It was winter in Minnesota, and we were confined to shadow swinging in our living room and hitting balls against a wall in a local gym. When I pulled out a cone for them to practice hitting on, they laughed. They called it the “Cone of Shame” as they put it on their head like a dunce cap. As the girls protested against the rigor of Steve's system—the shadow swinging, hitting off a cone, self-drop hitting, and practicing the serve by swinging a sock with tennis balls in it, my enthusiasm for the system began to fade. I could see the value of the system, but my daughters picked at it like broccoli on the edge of their plate—their minds were not ignited to pursue the truth. We started the journey, but we didn't stay on the road for very long.

This is the way it is with truth—once you get a hold of it, it is usually followed by hard work and difficulty, and the uncommitted and uninspired fall by the wayside.

New life was breathed into my journey to realize tennis truth when I called the website to ask a question about my subscription and Steve Smith answered. Steve asked a few questions about my daughters' tennis game and how I came upon the website. I mentioned that I taught writing and had written a couple of manuals for grammar and history. He said that his organization was in need of a writer to capture what he was teaching. I was interested, so I sent him samples of my work. After numerous phone conversations and emails, Steve told me that I needed to come down to Tampa and experience the program first-hand to truly get a sense of what he did.

This seemed like a good opportunity to me—a week on a tennis court with a teacher who Vic Braden said, “Only a handful of individuals, worldwide, possess the tennis teaching and coaching skills of Steve Smith.” I asked if my two daughters could come and participate as well. He said that would be fine. So we booked flights to Tampa Bay, Florida—not really knowing what we would experience. My daughters were excited to go to Florida. “Will we get to go to the beach?” was their first question. My reply was a confident, “Maybe.” Little did we know.

Meeting Steve Smith

The first time I saw Steve Smith was when I walked into a side room of an old golf and tennis club in Tampa. He was in the front of the room dressed in khaki shorts, a peach, long-sleeved sweater with a polo collar sticking up out of it, sandals with socks almost to his knees, and his nose was still covered in zinc oxide. A few rows of chairs were lined up on a portable dance floor and 15 kids were seated listening to him. “Some of your friends got up today at 11:00..... You have to overcome being affluent—overcome your parents doing everything for you..... Being average is popular. Write that down.” All the kids' heads went down, and they began scribbling in their notebooks.

As I took a seat in the back and listened, I wasn't quite sure what to think. Steve's demeanor and rhetoric seemed more like a motivational speech that my dad might have preached at me when I was a teenager than a tennis lesson. He waved his racquet about, mimicking strokes unusually close to the noses of the kids in the front row—the students didn't even flinch. “Do what you don't want to do. Champions are made when no one is watching..... Do you want to be a champ or a chump?” He spoke with passion and intensity that could be felt in his eyes as he looked from student to student—Steve's eyes seemed sharp and discerning. It was as if he was on a bigger stage, with a bigger crowd—but there were only 15 kids sitting in front of him and the noise from the golfers at the bar, separated by a vinyl curtain, was competing with him just a few feet away.

When Steve talked, he rubbed his fingers over the top of his bald head and scratched what was left of his hair right above his ears. “Genevieve, come up to the front.” A skinny, brown-haired girl no older than 12, came to the front with her racquet. For the next five minutes, he had her shadow swing over and over. As she did, Steve made minor adjustments, but he

continued to talk about fundamentals not being fun and how repetition was the mother of skill and success.

After his session ended, the kids dispersed, and Steve walked to the back of the room to meet me. I tried to make sure to look him in the eye and shake his hand firmly. I knew that he was from the old school and the first impression would be crucial. “Nice to finally meet you in person after talking to you on the phone so many times,” Steve said. He smiled and I seemed to be lost in the moment of meeting a legend. I told him that it was my pleasure and that I had been looking forward to this for a long time. “Do you have your tennis gear? We’d like to videotape you right away.” I apologized for not being ready to play and sheepishly told him that our luggage had been lost at the airport.

We were dressed like tourists—the girls in flip-flops and I was dressed in casual shoes and a golf shirt. “That’s okay; we’ll get you on the court somehow and get you filmed. We like to film everyone right away before they receive any instruction.” Inky, dark clouds to the west added another layer of urgency to the situation, as we had to beat the incoming rain that arrived on schedule each day.

Filming the Unsuspecting Tennis Player

As my daughters made their way onto the courts, one of Steve’s assistants arrived with a pair of shoes with new socks. In a few minutes, the camera crew was in position, and another assistant with an Eastern European accent appeared to feed balls. My daughter, looking like she was on her way to go shopping at the mall with clown shoes, was ready to hit groundstrokes at the baseline.

Steve had done this thousands of times—capturing the visiting tennis players at the beginning and saving it on film to compare to the new and improved at the end. I was enjoying all of this until Steve said, “Papa Bear, we’ll film you as well.” Little did I know that Steve already knew, knowing without knowing, that our strokes needed work. Like a doctor, he wanted to stop the bleeding as soon as possible.

So there I was, laboring to hit groundstrokes and overheads—I could feel that my form was not right, but I whacked away anyway. Like clockwork, the camera person filmed every shot at a forty-five-degree angle, then directly from the side, and finally from the back. He was very particular about what he was doing. “Steve likes to have the balls served at this rate... Steve likes to have you fed balls appropriate to your level of play.” I felt like a lab rat by the time that I got done. Somehow this wasn’t going to go well for me.

In addition to the filming, each member of “Team Minnesota,” as we were called, took Skills Test #1, also called the tie-breaker test. It involved hitting volleys, groundstrokes and overheads to targets on the other side of the net. You had to hit six different targets in a row to get a point. If you missed one of the six, the house got one point. The game was to seven points and team Minnesota ended up with three goose eggs on the day.

Our first session ended with the girls filling out a sheet detailing their goals in the sport of tennis and life. Quite a bit of data had been collected about the new visitors in one hour.

After our filming and testing session and while there was a complete downpour outside, we went back inside to the banquet room of the golf club. The room had large dance mirrors on the wall next to the portable dance floor—I wondered if little girls with tutus would be arriving soon for their weekly lesson. The end of the banquet room was open and behind that were tables where club members were playing bridge and drinking beverages. There was a sea of country club activities going on around this island of tennis instruction. I found it odd at first, almost distracting, but as time passed at the camp, you became more and more focused on the tennis and Steve’s motivation, advice, and instruction—everything else became a blur, distant noise.

Steve had a large flat-screen TV in the front of the room, and soon our strokes were out there for everyone to see. “Video doesn't lie,” was all that he said after showing my first groundstroke—he made a long pause for effect. “What do you see about his ready position?” Hands shot up all over the room. A twelve-year-old girl with chocolate brown hair and skin to match went on about my elbows not being out and my racquet being too high and my posture being too hunched over. And so it continued for 20 minutes; kids that were 12 to 16 years old analyzed “Team Minnesota’s” swings with ruthless detail.

In all of this, there was something of a scientist collecting data. Steve’s assistant had albums full of video discs of players’ strokes before and after their experience at Tennismith. “Andrew, do you have the disc of Peter from last week?” Andrew leafed through pages of discs until he came upon the right one. It was as if Steve was collecting proof to show his guests and the world that what he was doing was working.

There was something else at work here as well—the psychology of realizing reality. To see yourself as you really are and to be assessed, by twelve year olds, is a powerful experience. It jerks you from the myth of your mind’s view of your own prowess. Like Steve said, “Video doesn’t lie.” It’s hard on your ego as well. My eyes were beginning to be opened—twelve-year-olds who knew more about the swing than I did. As a certified teaching professional, this was a bit humbling. “Certification doesn't mean education,” Steve quipped during the week.

Steve spoke of “emptying your cup.” The testing, videotaping, and scrutinizing were part of the emptying process—there was no other way. When confronted with the bitter truth in an indisputable form, one is forced to swallow the pill. “Awareness, acceptance, commitment”—these three words were repeated by Steve throughout the week. One needs to be aware that you are not on the right track, accept that there is another way, and commit to the truth that has been presented. The process had begun.

“Practice Before and After You Practice”

After the afternoon’s filming session and critique, the clay courts at the club looked like a pond, so I figured that the tennis crew would call it quits for the day and go back to their house and relax, watch some television, and play some table games. I was ready to get to the pool at the hotel and put my feet up. After a quick snack, the two minivans were loaded up and we were back to the courts. This time, we went to the local public hard courts that had 6 enclosed racquetball courts adjacent to them. The hard courts were wet but we found out it was not a

factor. The technical work following our technical evaluations in the classroom would require no running.

As soon as we got there, the students filed out of the vans and Steve instructed 6 players to go through their backboard routines inside the racquetball courts—less than a minute later you could hear tennis bounces echoing inside the enclosed cement courts. When we neared the entrance to the tennis courts, I joked to Steve that my daughter thought we were going to get to the beach today. “This is a little different evening than what we anticipated,” I said. Steve laughed.

Once on the courts, we began the evening exercises with shadow swinging. The shadow swinging always went the same: the players with the best strokes would be put in the front and the players that knew the least would be in the back—Team Minnesota was always in the back the entire week. There were seven strokes total as part of the routine—forehand volley, backhand volley, forehand groundstroke, backhand topspin groundstroke, backhand underspin, the overhead, and the serve. They would be done in that order and as we went through the strokes, Steve and his top assistant Roberto, a Peruvian who escaped that civil war-torn country in the 1980s, would make corrections throughout the entire process. “Breathe out... get lower... stay on balance... hit out and up... better Isabella.” It was like a dance, a military drill, and a karate class rolled into one.

“There are no shortcuts. This might look mechanical because we are working on mechanics. Have your own inner voice!” All through the shadow swinging the crew was being critiqued and lectured. Listening to Steve while you were shadow swinging made you want to practice so that you could be great. “To accomplish your dreams, you have to go through a nightmare of work,” he called out to inspire the troops. Ten players breathing out at the same time, swinging the same strokes in unison, with an intensity like their lives depended on it, caused the exercise to take on an atmosphere of importance.

I thought about how far this situation was from the everyday world that I had left back in Minnesota: the daily life of the average middle-aged man is saturated with mediocrity—he breathes it and it is stifling. This situation compared to mine—world-class athletes striving for tennis greatness from morning until night—created a stark contrast. Steve represented a total commitment to excellence—this was his life.

As soon as the shadow swinging ended, we were off to the next activity—self-serving balls and hitting them across the net to a partner who caught the ball and self-served it back. Steve and his assistants would comment on everyone’s swings from across the court, “Get lower, Vicki. The knees are uncharted territory for most players. Relaxation skills are as important as racquet skills.”

Looking across the court, there were top-rated junior players from Canada, Russia, Germany, and the United States, all doing the same basic things alongside kids who were relatively new to the game. My daughters who were hitting off a cone next to world-ranked players thought for the first time in their lives that they too could climb the mountain and become great.

It was basics, over and over all day long; I mean all day long. “Fundamentals aren’t fun. It takes 10,000 hours to make an accomplished tennis player—3 hours per day for 10 years. 6 hours a day equals 20,000 hours. Practice before and after you practice.” On and on the session went as every detail of the seven swings was drilled into the players. Vic Braden called Steve “The Observer’s Observer.” Meticulous—it was as if he could take in all the players swinging at one time and tell you what each was doing right and wrong. It reminded me of a video I saw one time of Bobby Fischer playing 25 people at once in chess—walking from board to board making brilliant moves while the amateur was left to ponder. “If you are going to do it, do it right! Pride yourself in doing it right. Technically superior swings grooved by hours and hours of practice—that is the goal.”

Steve had the ability to bring the essence of sport to every drill. “Work harder than everyone else on the right stuff and you will become great.” Team Minnesota was starting to drink the Steve Smith Kool-Aid—you can’t help it when you are in the presence of such a powerful force as Steve Smith teaching tennis.

At points through the practice, he would stop everyone and call the crew to the back corner of the court to inspire them. “You are on a journey with no destination— to be the best you can be. When will you reach that point?” He quotes John Wooden. “Don’t mistake activity for learning.” His corner talks always have a historical or sports figure. He warned everyone about putting in “empty hours.” “Just because you are doing the activity, doesn't mean you are getting better. You have to focus, close your eyes, and feel what the stroke feels like; you have to have desire.”

Steve continued to talk about Wooden’s Pyramid of Success. Everyone is told to Google it and study it and put it into their notebooks. He ends the corner session with a statement to ponder: “You will not have skill without will.” With these words, we were back to practicing—inspired, more determined, focused. Steve has that effect on you.

As darkness covered the court and delayed the practice until morning, the crew picked up the balls and racquets and headed for the vans. As we left the parking lot, Steve turned to the back seat where Isabel was sitting and said, “Isabel, I’m sorry we didn't get to the beach today; maybe we can get there tomorrow.” Nobody in the van believed him—the situation spoke of two different worlds in one ironic sentence. Isabel, who has spent much of her life as Steve says, “On vacation,” was being introduced to a world of excellence by the route of practice and hard work and devotion to technical superiority.

For most American kids, truly working hard at something is a foreign concept—unable to be grasped in their reality of video games, movies, trips to the mall, and constant comfort. For Steve Smith the reality that he creates for these kids in his tennis world is that of practicing tennis like it is the same part of their life like walking and breathing—it is what you do. I rode in the van with Steve. " Pappa Bear you are with me."

I rode shotgun and found out that was one of the many rules—No one runs to the van and yells shotgun. There is no tolerance for immature and annoying behavior. On the ride back, Steve told me the Fed was initially taught with the type of practice we just went through. Steve has a

book translated to English from Swiss-German, and in the book Lynette Federer, Roger's Mother, shares the story of her young son taking one-hour lessons standing in one spot on balance for hours. We just put in two hours but it seemed like twenty minutes because there was no way to escape. There was no wandering off. We were kept on task minute by minute.

A Late-Evening Visitor

After the evening practice, we piled into our hotel room, showered, turned on the TV, and put our feet up. There was a knock on the door. It was Stewart, an Ivy League college assistant who had biked over from the Tennis House. "Steve wants me to go through the swings to make sure you guys are on the right track." The girls looked at me with wide eyes that spoke of disbelief. My appetite for tennis instruction and practice is insatiable—so I thought, but as my wife said later that evening when I talked with her on the phone, "I think you have met your match." Steve called these weeks, "Immersion Weeks," because tennis was the water for the baptism.

So there we were out by the pool in the dim light of the patio—shadow swinging—as Stewart rattled off one detail after the other about our form. As my eyes closed to sleep that evening, it only registered images of me swinging a vertical swing, on balance, elbow up, knees bent, then lifting just like the young girl was demonstrating in our first classroom session.

Wimbledon—Sunday, July 8

At 6:00 A.M. on Sunday morning, the tennis players piled out of the vans onto the club parking lot and made their way onto the clay courts. It was a big day—the men's Wimbledon final—so we practiced two hours earlier than normal, and we then headed back to the Tennis House to watch the match.

As Steve assembled the crew on the tennis court, he gave his speech about how lucky everyone living right now is because they all have a chance to watch Roger Federer play tennis. "When Fed wins, it's a win for fundamentals." As he said this, he repeated the one-handed backhand over and over. The one-handed backhand is Steve's favorite shot, "The most aesthetically appealing shot in tennis," he says. It was the first thing he changed about my game—"A one-handed backhand for you, Papa Bear. You need to be more supple in your upper body to hit two-handed." So there I was this morning of Wimbledon, shadow swinging a onehanded backhand with plenty of cone work to go with it.

Near the end of practice, he sent out one of his assistants to the store for bagels and strawberries and cream for everyone—the tennis crew couldn't help but overhear these instructions to the assistant and the workout took on an air of anticipation. The standard fare of the tennis house inhabitants of cheerios, pasta, and sandwiches would be interrupted with ' strawberries and cream.' We were going to be served the traditional breakfast that the British fans have on the sacred grounds of Wimbledon.

As we walked into the Tennis House, the sound of the commentators jabbering on about Murray and Federer greeted us as well as a kitchen table that was filled with grapes and strawberries and bagels and cream cheese. Next to the strawberries was a large silver bowl of

white, fluffy whipping cream. It didn't take the players long to load up their plates and begin eating and watching Murray and Federer. The kids were excited, maybe not so much about the tennis match, but about the break from practice, fresh fruit, and a chance to watch television with their friends.

As Steve entered the TV room, he walked to the front and turned down the television. He gave the kids the speech about having respect for the game. "When I watched hockey with my dad, nobody talked. There was a reverence for the game." The strong imprint of growing up with a hockey mentality in Upper New York permeates his worldview. His expectation for the crew involved silent reverence— "You are watching two artists at work."

Once the food was gone and the initial interest in the match wore off, the kids began falling asleep. For Steve, it was like the disciples falling asleep while Jesus prayed in the garden. A big moment in the history of tennis—greatness going on right in front of them—and the youth sleep. He momentarily gave up the fight of teaching respect for the game and joined me out in the main living room to watch the match on another TV. As I looked over at him, I thought to myself that this is quite a scene in my life—I'm watching Federer play the Wimbledon final with Steve Smith. I won't ever forget this moment.

The match started with Murray winning the first set. Steve alluded to the time when Murray was a child and his school building was attacked by a gunman who killed an entire classroom of young elementary children. He said that Murray refuses to speak about the incident. As rain began to fall in the second set, the play stopped as the Wimbledon Stadium roof was retracted.

During the delay, the network showed a segment on the tragic event from Murray's childhood—images of distraught parents outside a school building along with first-hand interviews. Looking over at Steve, his eyes were moist from emotion; his reaction said it all. This man has a love for the game, but his admiration encompasses every person who has the discipline and skill to climb the mountain to become great. During the rain delay, the tennis crew was back practicing in the Tennis House garage that has been converted into a gym— shadow swinging, jumping rope, hitting balls off a cone—all while the Wimbledon coverage played on a television on the back wall.

Once the roof of the stadium was closed, the match continued. "Federer has the advantage now," Steve said. Sure enough, the match tilted in Fed's direction and his penetrating strokes pressured Murray into mistakes. "He's going to serve wide here," Steve said offhandedly. The next serve went wide and Murray was left stretching for a ball out by the bleachers. I asked him how he knew this and his reply was, "You just know."

I didn't say much for the rest of the match. When I did say something I felt like I was speaking nonsense—my knowledge of tennis is shallow compared to the ocean of experience that was sitting next to me. This man has taught in over thirty countries, over five decades and has and continues to study every nuance of the game alongside master teachers. My comments during the match were like a child talking to Einstein about his theory of relativity. Depth of knowledge—Steve says, " There are two levels of ignorance; you don't know and you don't know

you don't know.” Until you experience this depth of knowledge firsthand, you don't realize what this line means. For an hour, we sat in relative silence as the brilliant play of Federer and Murray washed over us.

In his comments the next day, Steve said that he had gone back and watched the match over again that evening. It was like the curator of a museum staring at a masterpiece after the crowds have left for the day. Steve says that he has worked a long, long time to develop a Tennis Mind. On every level, scientist, historian, technician, tactician, statistician, artist, and even comedian—Steve studies the game. For one Sunday morning watching Wimbledon, I had the chance to experience the artistry side of tennis with a person who appreciates tennis art like no other person in the world.

Another Day at the Office

On Monday morning bright and early the vans arrived at the golf and tennis club parking lot. They always parked in the back corner under the shade of two willows. I asked Steve about this decision of choosing the far corner of an empty parking lot to park the vans. “The shade,” was his first comment, but he let me know it was not on his list of reasons. “Anything to do with comfort and convenience is not a plus. Most car accidents happen in a parking lot, so avoid them. You get more exercise. It is faster. It is more efficient. Plus you never have to remember where you parked your car. Lastly, some lazy kid will complain about the increased walking distance and you create another way to teach character.”

This operation, from when the players got up in the morning to when they went to bed, was designed as a testing center to expose the players' character.

Steve got out of the van dressed in his normal attire, white polo, orange long-sleeve shirt, and high athletic socks in sandals—I'd like to look at his wardrobe sometime. I'd imagine there would be a long rack half filled with a dozen of the same long sleeve shirts and the other half of the rack would be filled with white polo shirts. Underneath the rack of shirts and sweaters would be a large chest filled with kaki shorts and long athletic socks. On the floor of the closet would be a few pairs of sandals and a pair of black and white tennis shoes—untied.

As Steve made his way across the parking lot, it was hard to keep up with him—long determined strides outpaced the kids. He greeted the groundskeeper and made small talk with him. He headed straight to the far side of the courts. Throughout the morning, he worked the courts from the shade provided by a line of trees along the fence—the years of being beaten by the sun has made him fear its direct rays.

Weekdays at the tennis camp involve more players because the locals from Tampa participate and the age range of the group becomes much broader. On the courts, four-year-olds meet alongside college-age players. There are tennis camps all around the area, and I wonder how parents could be driving past one of the great tennis teachers in the world to take go to a program where Steve says, “They hit and giggle. They pretend, they do not contend, Rocky 1.”

Steve loves the Rocky movies and he claims to be one of the foremost Rocky experts in the world. Steve has the same marketing department that they had for the gym where Rocky

trained in South Philly—no department. I asked Steve about the shortage of locals. His explanation was classic. “Their circle of influence is too small. Who do local parents talk to at local tournaments? Other Locals. Who is the smartest person at a local tournament? The parent of the local winner. That is dangerous. The word ‘local’ almost sounds like ‘loco’ which means ‘crazy’ in Spanish. Watch out for the locals.” Steve is not looking for the village idiot, even if he has a checkbook. People need to find Steve Smith. He will not find you.

Each day starts the same. The kids put their bags along the far fence and begin running around the four nets. “Maxim, it’s too bad you’re so ugly; at least you can have beautiful strokes. That’s funny, laugh on my count, 1, 2, laugh.” Before the practice officially begins, Steve puts on his comedic hat. To be given a hard time by Steve is a badge of honor; it makes you feel good when he jerks your chain a bit.

A little after 8:30, he calls everyone over for the morning meeting. The crew hustles in and hugs their racquets. He singles out a boy of four years of age dressed in a blue and red Ralph Lauren Polo outfit that includes a baseball cap that is pulled low over his eyes. Liam has shaggy long, long hair that falls well below his hat. “Liam, how long have you been playing tennis?” Liam looks up at the bottom of his baseball cap and says, “Since Friday.” Liam was four and had been at Steve’s school for almost a year. Steve explained, “When you are four, every day is Friday. When you are four you laugh four hundred times a day and when you have a mortgage you laugh four times a day.”

Steve continues to use the boy for comedic relief, “Let’s have a moment of silence for Liam’s barber...he died...he was a great man.” He called Liam, “Liam Baby.” Liam looked crossly at Steve out of the corner of his eye and said, “I’m not a baby, I’m a man.” Steve smiles and laughs. “I like that. It is important for Liam to not be called a baby. He wants to be seen as a man.” Steve informed me that Liam stands for this principle, not being a baby, and the simple experience has become an almost everyday ritual between the two without Liam knowing it.

In a "ho-hum" fashion Steve congratulates one of his students. She has just returned from winning a national title. She won the Florida Open. He calls the student out to stand on the service line as the rest of us stand along the doubles sideline. "Rachel come out here."

Rachel demonstrates the balance points, the checkpoints, and the details of each essential fundamental. Steve stated that she still is off on several key points. "Her backhand volley is a bluff; her second serve is a liability, and her forehand does not have true topspin." What a welcoming party for the newly crowned champ—criticism and public critique. For the record, later that day, Steve did publicly congratulate Rachel in the classroom in front of the rest of the group and quizzed her about what happened at the tournament.

Following the critique, Steve called forward his worst listener. A neophyte player came out of the group and stood behind Rachel so he could mimic every stroke in sync with Rachel. Steve took the opportunity to reinforce fundamentals and to motivate and hopefully inspire this troubled teenage boy. The kid did amazingly well. You could have heard a pin drop as everyone watched. He told Rachel that she could beat any junior in the country if she were to be performance-oriented and not outcome-oriented.

He told the young boy that he too could be a national champion with discipline, hard work, and pursuit of a dream. It was one of Steve's favorite object lessons—he would pair a player who was working hard and achieving with another player who was at the beginning of the tennis journey. When the two were put side by side, it created a stark contrast—but it had the effect of raising the level of commitment and expectation of the player that needed work. The boy performed perfectly on stage in front of his peers. Peer pressure works. Through the drama, the boy proved he had learned the checkpoints for the fundamental base trying to be conquered by all in attendance.

Moments like this should be on the Tennis Channel—capturing grassroots tennis and illustrating how youth can be inspired to greatness. At Steve's camp, there are no levels—everyone participates in the same program. No one can be, "Too cool for school." The beginner could demonstrate the same fundamental base that Rachel could. Steve later explained to me how he is well aware of kids having the 'awefactor.' If a person thinks that someone else is awesome, he or she will never accomplish what the person they idolize has.

"Let's have the big guys out here," Steve motioned to the 4 to 6-year-old students and they all came out. "Who has heard of the Seven Dwarves?" He told the kids to follow his assistant to the side court and sing "I Ho, I Ho, I Ho, It's Off To Work We Go." The kids left skipping and singing—the mountain of hard work that lies ahead for these kids was being masked by a song at its beginning.

He had the older kids sing the soundtrack of their parents' lives: "I Owe, I Owe, I Owe, It's Off To Work I Go." Steve starts on another lesson, another solid five minutes on what their parents have to do to allow them their golden chance to play the great game of tennis. "The rest of you get to work too."

Soon, there were cones lined up all over the court and players were shadow swinging and hitting balls off the cones. "It's a job if you are told to do it... The workhorse goes the farthest." I looked at him and told him that he was in rare form today. Steve's reply, "Just another day at the office."

Everyone Say Strokes

"A system is an organized plan." Steve's entire system is built on technically bullet-proof strokes—seven of them in all. On my first full day on the court, Steve had me on a cone swinging while being guided by a 10-year-old girl. As I stood in my ready position, she pulled up on my elbows to get them out farther and pushed my racquet down so I could see over it. As I swung, she constantly stopped me and fixed my grip and arm positions. Steve's tactic is to pair up a player who understands the swings and then has that person be the teacher to the person who needs to learn the swings—this girl knew the swing amazingly well. Actually, all the kids could teach and teach well, even kids under the age of 9.

All morning, we went from one swing to the next and my little buddy was there to model the swings and correct me when I went wrong. Steve says that "Teaching is the highest form of retention for learning." As I looked across the courts, one person was working on the strokes of

another—the courts had been turned into a large classroom with the students teaching the students. “Sami and Izzy will be teaching by the end of the week,” he told me as we watched the two of them be trained by a young student who had been in the program for over a year. And they did teach at the end of the week. “Teaching is information transfer.” Steve knows the power of the third grader being challenged by a show and tell assignment. The amazing thing is seeing third graders teach tenth graders.

Steve’s system for producing fundamentally sound strokes involves first moving the body without a racquet, shadow swinging with a racquet, hitting off a cone, and then slowly adding a ball—first dropping it and then hitting it with two bounces. The introduction of a ball causes the novice to go 3 steps backwards in regards to form. That is why it has to be introduced on a cone—stationary, perfectly placed.

“Tennis players are some of the weakest people on the planet. If you go to a major league baseball practice, what are the players doing when they hit? They have the ball on a tee with a coach instructing as they shadow-swing. Why should tennis be any different?” Steve shows irritation when he talks about how tennis is taught around the world.

When speaking about shadow swinging and cone work, he says, “The pros at the clubs would get fired for doing this. Actually, I get fired for doing this. Kids leave. It is too slow. The parent writing the check usually has no consumer knowledge for tennis.”

Every movement of the body is analyzed in relation to the ball. “There is no such thing as little strokes for little folks” Steve says that if he could design a perfect tennis world, kids would train 3000 hours before they play points. He believes that they still need to develop their athleticism by playing team sports like soccer. “Competitive juices destroy a player’s form. “It is about delayed gratification—the fun comes later.” In a sentence, Steve summarizes why thousands aren’t flocking to his school of instruction. The fun isn’t immediate. There are parents who know and realize that discipline, hard work, and the correct technical foundation will produce the best player in the end.

The work all made sense. It progressed. The video analysis, the failed skill test, the feedback exchange in the classroom, the slow-motion technical work on the courts, and the success stories proved by the ‘before and after’ clips of tournament winners—caused myself and my daughters to realize by the end of the first day that Tennismith School was a totally different place.

In my case as a tennis player, there was a deprogramming process that had to occur this week. My strokes had major flaws. “It’s harder to relearn than it is to learn. Your brain picks up where it left off,” Steve said this phrase a half dozen times while we were there. I experienced this firsthand on these clay courts this week. I went through Steve’s system of programming my swing correctly—slowly starting to shadow swing and then hitting off a cone. When the first bouncing ball came my way, “Bam” my brain took over and my wrist shot across the ball—“You look like you were throwing a discus, Papa Bear.”

Slowly I had to walk my flaws to the door as my brain fought me every step of the way. I had to create new paths for my brain to travel—it wasn't easy. Steve says that the proper programming of a swing from the beginning when a child first picks up a racquet will save hundreds of hours later in deprogramming and reprogramming. It was like I was an addict in a recovery program. My mind wanted to go back to what it knew. Steve said, "It is brain memory. The muscles cannot store memory."

After a morning of work, the tennis campers left the court to go into the club's side room where the obsession with the stroke continued. The crew looked at a series of strokes by professional players on video and analyzed them—Steve constantly stopped the film to ask questions about the form. Federer was always the model held in the highest regard. The sound fundamentals and the minor flaws of the professional players from Connors to Azarinka were gone over as well. "People don't listen to science or logic. People do not really pay attention to imagery or their own video analysis. People sit up, listen, and pay attention to how the pros hit."

At the end of the session on watching professional strokes and while it continued to rain outside so heavy that water began flowing under a side door to the lounge, Steve played a game where he had a student name a touring pro, past and present, and he told a story or two or three about that player. If there was a tennis trivia contest in the entire world, Steve would contend for the championship. His knowledge was fascinating. The stories were so unique and interesting about each player that they brought those professionals to life for the students.

Steve has different variations of this game. He can have the kids name a country or a state or a college. Each time one is named, he has a story about a coach or a player that he has worked with from one of those areas. Steve believes in the power of story. He believes that it is the coaches' job to bring out the story in the player.

He tells stories about how Roger Federer's parents insisted that Roger clean all of the toilets at the academy when he had shown poor character in his matches and practice. Young Roger made fun of a Turkish girl who could not speak his native Swiss-German. Roger's Mother had him apologize with a note written in Turkish and orally in Turkish. The rich history of the game of tennis unfolded in front of these kids—narrated by a walking archive. Steve's gift to these kids is an appreciation of all things tennis—appreciation of a beautiful swing, of a well-struck volley, of a champion who sacrificed, of a player who overcame unbelievable adversity. The average person walking into Steve's camp wouldn't understand what is going on in the room—at first. He is teaching how to love something and develop a passion for it. Understand strokes backwards and forwards. Understand what other humans have done with this game so you too can write your own story. The story begins with you and your swing—a technical foundation upon which the epic of your career will rest.

When visitors come, their strokes are fair game. "What did you think, we would analyze your strokes like you were a tourist?" he told me after our session. On one occasion, a 16-year-old student of Steve's went on for 20 minutes about the swing of a visiting German pro—analyzing his strokes to shreds. After the video analysis on the screen, he has students shadow-

swing in front of the audience, meticulously going over each move of the swing. Everything is about the grip, swing, and body.

Once you have put your time into “Owning the cone” and have proved your strokes hitting balls off two bounces, you get the privilege of going to the next set of courts and playing what looks more like tennis. This didn’t happen to me until the very end of the week. By the middle of the week, I was going crazy; I just wanted to tee off on a forehand and drive it through the court into the back fence.

You start by playing tennis in the alley—you have to prove that you can hit straight-line shots and then you can progress to a game called tennis baseball. This is a game where one person catches and throws, and the other person hits off of two bounces. While this game is going on, an assistant is watching your strokes—commenting to correct and praise. “Watching a kid get better at tennis is like watching grass grow.” In Steve’s world, a player needs to repeat the strokes for hours and hours of repetition and slowly the sculpture emerges from the rock.

I tried to talk tactics with one of the assistants and his response was, “You don’t need to worry about tactics. If you have good strokes, the tactics will be second nature.” This is a far cry from any camp or clinic you would find at most clubs across the United States. Steve calls it, “Busy, happy, good.” Steve believes that just about every junior player playing the game today needs his or her strokes overhauled. Technical flaws will break down under pressure—this is a law akin to gravity in Steve Smith’s mind. Steve’s mission in life is to give each student who comes to his school and every student in the country who doesn’t have that privilege, the chance to have a technical base that will support any tactic they wish to execute for the rest of their lives.

Classroom on Wheels

“It’s hot, turn up the air,” a student in the back of the van announces. This is a buzzword for Steve to swing into action and teach a valuable lesson. “Who said that... Maxim... Genevieve...,” Steve searches the back through his rearview mirror for the guilty party. “That’s a sign that you’re weak. You are surrounded by comfort and that makes you weak.” Steve turns off the air and the windows are rolled up—it begins to feel like a sauna. “This is what it feels like when the guy on the other side of the court doesn’t miss for twenty shots—it feels like the walls are coming in on you. Can you take it? Every time you have the notion to complain about discomfort, it lowers your shot tolerance. Tennis is a microcosm of life. You get frustrated with a hot car; you’ll get frustrated on the court. Don’t look out the window when I’m talking, Isabel. This applies to all of you.” He keeps a sharp eye on the class through the mirror as he talks. “If you complain about heat, you will never be a great player.” Steve later told me that he is mellowing. I used to roll up the windows and turn up the heat. " Today we have to scale back, typically the kid of 2012 cannot take it."

Tennismith is a small operation. Steve has run large camps but says his current setup is like the old corner hardware store. “You cannot franchise coaching; it is a human relationship, not a factory of hitting balls. One kid tells me his father has told him to always ride in the van Steve is driving because you will learn more. There are no time-outs in training these kids.” Steve is constantly on the job all through the day. When the van stops at restaurants and while

players are waiting for the other kids to return, they get out their racquets and a ball and begin playing tennis inside the lines of the parking spots. These kids have all heard the quote by Jimmy Evert via Steve dozens of times— “Whoever hits the most balls, wins.” Steve spent time with Chrissie's Dad.

In the van, it's not all serious tennis training. Steve is in control of the radio. “Let there be music,” he commands. His station of choice is classic rock from the 70s. When a song comes on that Steve likes, he turns it up and his head begins to move forward and backward like a turtle coming in and out of its shell. “Everyone find a line to help them get you through the day,” he commands. “Goldman, what is your line?”

As we pull into the club parking lot, he cranks the music, opens the doors, and the other van members join in as a dance-off takes place behind the vans. Natalia, a quiet girl with exquisite strokes, is coaxed into dancing. Steve is coaching her in a way that I have never witnessed. “Her dad has done a great job; she hits the ball like she should be on top of the world, but she needs to work on her inner voice.” She begins doing the hand wave. She is joined by Roberto who is doing a slow salsa move that involves one hand in the air and the other hand rubbing his belly. Everyone is clapping to the beat.

Steve says that if this girl cannot adapt, adjust, think on her own feet, problem solve or be independent, then the strokes will not make the difference. Roberto and Natalia dance to the end of the song. There are no ordinary moments, especially for the kids boarding at the Tennis House. The locals are dropped off and picked up at certain times. Those staying with Steve and crew have no idea when the day will begin or end. “The cash register regulates the private lesson in America.” At the Tennis House, a kid asks when practice is over and they get no answer, just a look that makes them know it was a dumb question.

Happy Birthday

As the crew assembles on the court the next morning, Steve calls to the players, “Step into my office.” Steve stands in the corner of the fenced court dressed with a flap hat that drapes around his ears, sandals with socks, khaki shorts, and an orange sweater. “Rachel, come up here... It's Rachel's birthday today,” he announces. “I've got a present for you. I'm going to quit being nice to you this year,” he says with complete sincerity. “I'm going to be hard on you from now on—it will make you stronger.” There are smiles in the group, but in the back of the minds of the kids who have been around Steve for a while, they know there is some truth to it. He has always been tough on her. He is not preparing these kids for a picnic.

He proceeds to lecture the audience about Rachel's 365 days of her 15th year of life. “Billie Jean King said, ‘Just go for it.’ What are you going to do with tomorrow, Rachel? The currency of the coach is time. You could be great if you make every day count.” Steve never misses an opportunity to motivate.

The birthday festivity continues. “We are going to sing ‘Happy Birthday’ to her. Thirty kids ranging from four years old to 19 sing an anemic rendition of the song in English. “Artem, go stand next to Maxim. Sing Happy Birthday in Russian.” In unison, they sing but it is

unintelligible to the rest of the group. “Amaya, stand next to your sister. Let’s hear it in Italian.” For the next few minutes, Steve conducts a concert in 7 different languages from Polish to Spanish to Yiddish to German —each nationality that is represented in the group. Their record for singing Happy Birthday is 17 countries. Tennis is an international game. It’s a game spoken fluently in every country. Worldwide, the same court dimensions, the same rules, the same force of gravity.

“One time I taught a clinic to 75 Japanese instructors with no interpreter. No one could understand a single word that was spoken for hours. It was the deepest understanding of tennis concepts of any clinic I ever taught.” He does an impersonation of a Japanese tennis instructor, “Racquet back and down.”

Steve Smith has traveled the world and has been an ambassador for American tennis from posh clubs to public parks. Steve said the most impoverished situation that he ever witnessed was when he taught a camp in Surabaya, Indonesia, and the kids picking up the balls lived in a piano box on the other side of the tennis fence. He has taken the gospel of aesthetically pleasing form and brilliant tactics to nations all around the globe.

“Some kids on their birthday, like to go to the mall. Their parents give them twenty dollars and they meet their friends at the food court for dinner and a movie. Rachel, should we go to the food court and the movies today or should we practice for eight hours?” She shakes her head. “Let’s get back to work. Everyone on the first court for shadow swinging.”

Steve took a girl’s birthday and turned it into a cultural exchange, a motivational speech, and an opportunity to develop an appreciation for the game in just a few minutes. I wished that I had a video camera.

The Legs Feed the Wolf

In the sessions at the camp, Steve is not afraid to make examples of the students. Nobody is immune from being called out—not even the hardest workers and the most obedient. Everyone has flaws of character and Steve will certainly find them. Many children in America are never confronted with the truth about their own character by another adult—that is until they meet Steve Smith. Once in the program, Steve analyzes their behavior action by action. When the flaw is detected, Steve plots a collision course and the hapless child is thrown against the rock of bulletproof character hardened by time and adversity. “I try to find the right buttons to push, even with the perfect kid.”

He knows the type well. It’s the kid that gets in the Landrover after losing in the main draw of the tournament and skips out on the consolation bracket—the “character matches” as Steve calls them. The player is called out to the service line to demonstrate the serve, volley, and overhead. Steve turns to the rest of the players, “He is shouting inside, ‘Leave me alone.’ He wants to get out of here; he doesn’t like it. He wants to go back into the crowd where he’s comfortable. He should want to be on the stage—show off his art.” Steve doesn’t believe in diplomacy; he thinks that it wastes time.

Steve watches the player hit a serve, a volley, and an overhead. “What did he do wrong?” Steve answers his own question. “Something I told him last night. Do you think he wrote it down in his journal? Toss it in front of you,” Steve says impatiently. “He serves like he’s four foot nothing. “He’s in the million-time club. You have to tell him a million times and he still doesn’t get it.” Steve is just getting started.

“Look at you. You got a body most tennis players would die for.” The boy looks away. “Look at me when I’m talking to you. Someone is going to eat his lunch,” he informs the crowd of silent players. No one is envying the victim. Steve is talking to one player, but he intends to teach everyone the lesson. A public example is being made and the boy’s character is being thrown onto the operating table.

It’s 9:00 and he’s still sleeping, Steve continues.” He impersonates the boy with his best teenage mumbling voice, “No one told me to get up.” Steve is digging deeper, trying to expel the flaw. “Does he need a trainer from Beverly Hills to get his fanny out of bed?” The same reason he doesn’t get out of bed is the same reason he can’t hit his serve the way he’s been taught. He’s not hungry. He doesn’t need tennis to survive—he’s not a tennis animal. No one has to tell a kid to go to the fridge to get food. It’s automatic—you’re hungry. We are at the top of the food chain. Is there a hunger in this kid to be the best—a need at his core to conquer this thing?” he asks the onlookers. Steve answers his own question. “He’s not hungry. He’s comfortable. It’s easy to be comfortable.” Steve is a motivational speaker waving a tennis racquet.

“You have to overcome being affluent. You have to overcome the disability of your parents doing everything for you. This kid has been on vacation his whole life. Herb Brooks said, ‘The legs feed the wolf.’ You have to have a hunger to be your best.” Steve has used honesty and truth to chop down the crooked character of this boy’s life. He starts the work of planting something new that will grow strong and straight.

“Success is failure turned inside out. Success is a series of making the right decisions. As Andre Agassi said, ‘Start now,’” Steve tells the campers. He comes closer to the boy and says, “You’re not going to be a wimp with that serve; you are going to be a warrior with a toss in front and a power line.” Say, ‘yes’ at the hit.” The player hits the serve. “Hit it like your taught! Breathe...Sound like an athlete!” His intensity continues to draw more and more out of the boy.

It's not an easy job—shaping character when it has strayed and infusing passion where none exists, but it is the work that Steve Smith does daily. Steve says that the coach brings out the story from a person that would never have come out. The character training in Steve’s instruction is as big a part of this program as the strokes and tactics. The kids think they are learning tennis, but tennis is just the anvil upon which the student’s character is being hammered. Each player is observed for flaws and once detected by the “Observer’s Observer,” it is only a matter of time before the issue is addressed for everyone’s benefit.

Roberto Calla

Steve’s right-hand man is a Peruvian named Roberto. In the morning as the athletes run around the nets and warm up, Steve and Roberto have a high-level conference to discuss certain

players and the day's activities. Roberto is Steve's trusted confidant—Tanto and the Lone Ranger. The two of them have been together for almost 15 years. Steve says that he has trained none better. This statement carries a great deal of weight considering that Steve has trained coaches that have headed up college teams, coached top ten players in the world, and have been named to organize their entire country's tennis program. Often Roberto and Steve shout out the same thing to the same kid at the same time. It is probably the best way, of so many ways, to prove the consistency and the continuity of the instruction.

Roberto is happy in his own skin. He has a daughter named Jackie. I have not met a girl her age that is so happy, patient, and strong. I told Roberto that he had a wonderful daughter. He said that he owed so much to Steve. "I owe him a great deal for what he has done for my daughter." Jackie has been drinking the Steve Smith Kool-Aid for almost her entire life.

While Steve is on stage in front of the entire tennis crew, Roberto is in the background writing notes on a sheet of paper. Roberto is quiet most of the time, hiding behind dark sunglasses and a hat that is pulled down low with his thick black hair sticking out of the bottom of it. Roberto works the courts from the edges and interjects when needed, often parroting Steve's instructions. He gets close to you as you shadow swing and maneuvers your arms and shakes your wrist until it relaxes. "Better...that's right...very good" he says with a big smile. Gentle guidance—it is a perfect balance to Steve's intensity. Steve is forceful, talking, gesturing, confronting, and motivating—while Roberto observes and gently guides. I don't think he misses much either—he is the "Observers' Observer's Partner."

He has a quiet manner, but don't be mistaken; there is a strength of character to this man that runs deep, very deep. On one occasion, there was a boy who was new to the program who had a bad attitude that was infecting other players. "Out...Out..." Roberto roared louder than a lion as he pointed towards the tent to the side of the court. "You sit there until your mom comes. You are done playing." Like a shepherd tending the sheep, the wolf is dispelled so that the other players will continue to progress.

After lunch, one of Roberto's responsibilities is to take the crew across the street to the back of an elementary school and play a game of soccer with the group. Being from Peru, soccer is his second language. He is and was a great player. The same cones that have held thousands of balls for practice hitting now function as goals for the game. Roberto soon has nicknames for all the players, "Nishikari," "Jacksonville," "Luisy-baby." I love soccer myself—having played it in college. Roberto and I made an instant connection—soccer has that effect on people.

Roberto is nearly fifty but you would think he is thirty. As the game began, Roberto got the ball near the opponent's goal and played the ball around three defenders and tucked the ball inside one of the orange cones. His smile beamed as the corners of his mouth seemed to touch each lens of his sunglasses; there were some excited phrases in Spanish, and a healthy celebration ensued with his teammates. Roberto's passion for the game cannot be masked. The game was played with great enthusiasm and Roberto often stepped in and was the official—handing out penalty kicks generously.

As the thunder cracked above the trees and rain began to fall, the soccer game concluded and the tennis camp began again under the shelter of an outdoor gymnasium at the elementary school.

When the group returned to the tennis club and rejoined Steve, a meeting was held. Steve asked Roberto a battery of questions. Roberto answered Steve's questions as if no kids were present—another way to reach honesty was found. “Who was a cherry picker? Did Rohan run today?” Roberto answers with a loud, “No.” Steve is quiet for a long moment and then shakes his head for a longer moment. “Did anyone leave the field during the game? Who hustled the most? Who complained the most?” Often Steve and Roberto make the kids laugh but there is no laughter in this meeting. “Last question, who was the star of the day? Roberto says “Jacksonville.”.

The Tennis House

About 2 miles from the courts is the Tennis House. It is two townhouses, side by side, 6,000 square feet, and holds twenty beds. The Tennis House is located on a golf course—you can see the sand traps around the green through the screened-in porch that extends off the back of the house. On the porch, laundry is draped everywhere. The dryer broke so the inhabitants’ socks, shorts, and shirts hang from anything with an edge. The accommodations create a sense of instant community—everyone has to pull their own weight, clean, and toe the line. Actually, the tennis house is upscale but the atmosphere is spartan.

As you enter the sliding door, the dining room table is straight ahead and just to the left is the first kitchen. Each student is responsible for purchasing and cooking their own food—this adds another layer of community for the crew. Daily trips to Publix, the local grocery store, are part of the routine. Each player receives a large plastic tub to store their dry goods, and the tubs are stored in a small room that has been converted into a pantry. Nutrition is part of the course. At the back of the house is a large room that serves as the classroom for the instruction that takes place at the house. A huge tennis library covers the wall. I salivate over the titles and contemplate filling my suitcase with these books and videos. Titles by Vic Braden, Peter Burwash, Jimmy Connors, and Dennis Van der Meer line the shelves. There are more than just tennis books in this library—life stories of famous athletes from Michael Jordan to Wayne Gretzky fill the case. There are psychology books and self-help books. You can tell a lot about a person by the books he keeps. By looking at this collection, you can see Steve has a love of great tennis instruction alongside a love of the story that sport brings out of humanity. Steve is also a student of the human soul. The books that he has on the shelves help him decipher what makes these athletes tick and how he can look into their souls and change their character. “I’ve lost more books than I own because I’ve loaned them out to people.” This speaks of Steve’s mentality—he gives and gives with no thought of return.

Just off the living room area is a set of steps that go up to the rooms upstairs where the athletes sleep. I didn’t go up there, but I can imagine the scene. Steve says that people have a tough time figuring this thing out—the Tennis House. It goes on 24 hours a day; it just keeps going. When kids miss a couple of hours, it’s like missing a portion of a movie. The program is

nothing but tennis and character reshaping from when you wake up to when you go to bed. At any point in the day, he can see something in your actions and you are an object lesson for the rest of the crew. When he calls out the flaw in one person, he is speaking to everyone.

It is a bed and breakfast but the guests are instantly treated like family, not in a warm and fuzzy way, but in a way that is more like “Shut up, put up, so you can move up.” The kids have nowhere to hide. Steve’s gaze is nearly omnipresent. The Tennis House does not afford the luxury of privacy. The Tennis House inhabitant’s actions are constantly being thrown onto the scales, and when they are found wanting, Steve goes to work. Steve says that he will know a kid better in two weeks than their club pro will know him or her in two years. Fred Shero, a deceased hockey coach said, “Sport does not build character, it reveals character.” The kids reveal themselves openly and openly get set straight—right on the spot.

The Tennis House to me was an interesting component. The door was always revolving—kids came and went, but the attitude of acceptance and family stayed the same. Almost all of these players were sent by Steve's former students. Steve doesn't market to fill the beds; he just checks his e-mail and answers his phone and those who want help, get it.

Make Spaghetti

“Don’t hack down on it—move forward—Just do what you are told!” Steve watches two girls play doubles and they slice volleys wide and deep. “Do you girls know the difference between a fullback and a halfback? In doubles, you are a fullback and you plow through the middle. “Just stick it; you should have made him look like a doughnut. If you make a mistake and don’t correct it when you are told, you make another mistake...Drink the Kool-Aid and the only flavor is cherry. There is no strawberry. There is no special sauce, no secret sauce...”

During a morning session, Steve was a bit frustrated with variations that were appearing in a few players’ swings. He quoted an Eastern European tennis coach, “Tennis is like making spaghetti. You boil the water and put the spaghetti in. You open up the jar of sauce and add it to the spaghetti. That’s it. There is no special sauce or magic potion or special twist.” Learning tennis the Steve Smith way involves following the directions on the box. Get all of the foolish notions you have about putting some special twist or kick on the stroke and just follow the directions—listen closely to what Steve says and just keep doing it.

This seems easy enough but the human brain doesn’t work that way. We all think there is a secret—we all think the person with the plan has it all wrong. This is what drives parents of American tennis players to hire multiple tennis pros and pay them thousands of dollars. "One bad coach is better than ten different coaches." They think their son or daughter will be given the magic bean that will produce the stalk to the professional circuit. This is what makes players nod at Steve Smith as he explains to them in clear terms what they need to do, and then they go out and do something totally different.

When I first went through Steve’s program on the Internet and tried it with my kids, I thought that there had to be more—so I kept searching. And I searched and came up with a ton of different ideas from books and videos—all credible people claiming to have the secret. My cup

was open. Upon discussing this with Steve he said, “Most open minds need to be closed for repairs.”

There is more to this system than the seven strokes; this is just the foundation. If the foundation is not built firmly, the result is an implosion. “Basic shots win the match. Great shots make the highlight reel.” I was eventually told that there are specialty shots and emergency shots. But I needed to stay the course and get a handle on the basic shots. “Have a core. Have a foundation. The turtle wins the race, the rabbit goes in circles.” He tells the story of “The Three Little Pigs.” “Build your game brick by brick and the big bad wolf will not get you.”

We found out that we were at the 'anti-academy.' A national champ is sent to Steve. His or her game is assessed over two days and the process begins. Unlike most academies, the player is not used as a magnet to attract other players and grow the business. The national champion gets in line, maybe with a six-year-old, and works on the little things—he or she is told to follow the directions on the box. After all, the little things in the world of sport are the big things. With Steve, it is details not dollars. The money factor truly makes TennisSmith school different. There is no hustling for dollars. The hustle is on the emphasis to simply get better by listening to and performing the instruction.

Have a Favorite Word

Steve says to have a word that you love and post the word where you can see it every day. “You want to be called this word. Your mother should call you your favorite word. Maybe you have a word for each part of your life—A word for tennis. What defines you?”

Steve loves the word “tenacity”; to be tenacious. He spouts off the definition. "Tenacity is more than endurance; it's endurance combined with the absolute certainty that what we are looking for is going to transpire."

A Network of Disciples

Throughout the day, Steve's phone rings. He occasionally answers it. “Steve Smith...Ya, how'd it go?” The students on the court near him hear bits and pieces of conversations that he has with players and pros and parents all around the world. He says he has trained tennis teachers in every major city in the U.S. and in most countries around the world. It is a vast network of people who have discovered the truth and are using it.

Tennis teachers come to him from every continent to learn his system. When I first arrived, a tennis pro who immigrated from Ukraine was at his camp learning the system and bringing Steve three young students. Fabian, a former top-level German player, came to live at the house for five weeks alongside a top-ranked German youth of 12 years old. Steve prefers to train the teacher alongside the youth—he says it makes economic sense for the parents to have the child's teacher trained. He tells parents it would be better if they did not come back right away; rather, build a backboard instead.

In some ways, it seems like an underground movement of tennis instruction. The people that know the truth, use it, and then train the players that go on to become high-level players.

When I was watching a tennis match on the TV with Steve, there were scores passing by the bottom of the screen. He said that three of those people had spent time at his Tennis House and three others had been trained by teachers that he had trained. Steve isn't one to brag. He is one of the most humble people that I have met. He says these things to prove the credibility of the system. One student told me while I was there that if she was a boy, her dad never would have found out about Steve Smith—the father who told her father didn't want any other boys to compete with his son using this information. The kid's son is a national champion in his country.

In this day of “The Modern Game,” the truth has been replaced with a lie. Fundamental principles that have been learned through years of research have been discarded and replaced with an ideology that has led to confusion and failure. Steve Smith stands on the corner and delivers the message of truth, but in most country clubs and tennis centers he is regarded as a relic that has outlived his time.

So they are out there—those tennis teachers who have learned the system from Steve Smith and know the knowledge of Vic Braden and others who have gone before us. They speak a common language and adhere to the same creed. Each morning, Steve gets on his email and connects with them all over the world to encourage people to stay on the path.

He is forever breaking down film that is sent to him, and he is forever telling people that if they hear someone professing expertise about the modern game, they should put their racquets in their shoulder bag and run away as fast as possible. Steve knows that people are being hustled every day in tennis. " Buy the car without tires, you will save on air."

College Tennis is the Goal and the Professional Tour is the Dream

Throughout the week, we listened to Steve extoll the virtues of achieving the goal of playing college tennis. “There are three things: your GPA, your SAT, and your level of play.” Steve talked about the value of sitting in the front of the class at school, having conversations with teachers in order to get to know them, and starting early to prepare for the SAT Test. Steve preached the message that if you work hard and follow the course, playing higher-level college tennis is a reachable goal.

He asked the kids to name 10 universities in the country and Steve was 9 for 10. The kids found out that Steve had either trained a coach or a player from almost every college in the country. He is usually ten for ten with this exercise.

“Only 3% of high school players play college tennis,” Steve quotes. “Start now!” He told the kids in the room that the number one player from UCLA, Robin Anderson, is coming at the end of the week for five weeks. Robin, like a lot of juniors, spent part of her senior year in high school refining her game with Steve. “I saw her play at the NCAA Tournament last month and she has work to do. She will be drop-hitting balls alongside all of you next week.”

Steve says that kids regulate kids and it is a bonus to have an accomplished player like Robin around. He was also quick to point out that she was highly ranked before coming to him. He acknowledges Robin's father for having coached her. Steve gives credit where credit is due and by no means does he want to be classified as a recruiter. Steve Smith is a developer.

"Do you know who Tim Tebow is? Steve asked the group. "He was on the cover of Sports Illustrated three times during his college career, and now for the pro level he has to change his throwing mechanics." Steve asked for eye contact and then he asked kids, with great intensity in his voice, " Do you get it." His point was that players need to get themselves on the right technical path and stay on it to give themselves the best chance to reach the highest level.

As Steve rattles off all the people that he knows in college tennis and the contacts that he has, he tells the kids that contacts only matter if you are going to be a ' project player.' If you are going to be a scholarship athlete, contacts don't help. Kids listen more intently to the stories of college players and teams than they do about strokes. Steve's own son plays Division I college tennis for a top-five team, Ohio State. The Ohio State team recently lost 4-3 to USC in the national indoor championship. His son, Connor Smith, is an All-American. Connor ended his junior career ranked number 1 in Florida and number 2 in the US.

The week I was in Tampa, his son won a pro doubles title with his partner and teammate Peter Kobelt. I had just missed Peter. He is six foot seven and he was at Tennissmith School before me shadow swinging with kids that were six and seven.

Steve sells hope that it is possible to make it to the promised land of college tennis if you work hard and "Be obedient to yourself." College tennis is the goal and pro tennis is the dream. Steve keeps the potential of playing college tennis in front of the kids on a regular basis.

It's Easy To Be the Hardest Worker

"There are no shortcuts. The most successful person is the one who works hard and needs no thank you. Don't put in time, put in effort. If you are going to do it, do it right. The workhorse goes farther than the racehorse, especially in tennis. Do what you don't want to do. You can't rest if you want to be a great player. People will remember you by your work ethic. We've met the enemy and the enemy is us." I could go on for pages about all of the quotes Steve recited to the players about working hard and practicing with intensity and accuracy. By the end of the week, I was hearing his ' mind vitamins' repeated over and over.

As you practice, Steve has the gift of saying the thing that will inspire you to intensify what you are presently doing to achieve greatness. It could be an activity as trivial as picking up tennis balls on the court and Steve will call out, "Run to pick up those balls like you are an Olympian." So you pick up your knees higher, land balanced on the balls of your feet and you are inspired. I think if I had a tape of Steve Smith saying these words and I played them as I practiced tennis and even as I worked in my office, I would strive for excellence.

Our brains want the easy way out. As soon as Steve stops talking, the sweat, the fatigue, and the desire to keep striving begins to send messages to the brain to slow down. "You have to love the grind," Steve says and then you are back to work. "Anyone can be the hardest worker—that's easy." I think about that and it is so true. The person with the desire, the engine that keeps running to do the thing that everyone else won't do—that is the person that will go the farthest.

People Have to Think Backwards

“Kids just expect that they are going to have food and clothing. They think it’s just going to happen.” We were driving around in the rain doing errands at lunch in one of his minivans, and Steve was explaining his philosophy on accomplishing things and getting somewhere in life—Steve trying to explain the inner workings of a child’s mind and spirit. I liked going on errands with him—he opened up quite a bit to me and revealed things about himself.

Steve has generosity and compassion for people that runs deep into his core. He was brought up that way. This generosity and compassion is balanced with his knowledge and experience that tells him the reality of situations he has seen a million times. “I don’t have a crystal ball to tell this kid’s future, but I have something that is pretty close.” What Steve has that is pretty close to a crystal ball is decades of teaching experience—decades of training kids and watching the results. “It’s amazing how people go through life and have no thought of where these actions are going to take them. People just think it is going to happen—regardless of what they do. You won’t get what you expect, but you will get what you deserve. You tell 100 people to shadow swing and only a handful will do it. What does that tell you? The number one thing that people must have is commitment.”

He is always telling people to read certain books to help their children gain commitment. *The Talent Code*, *Talent is Over-rated*, *Bounce*, *Outliers* – these were a few books that Steve mentioned that emphasized the concepts of working hard at the right things and how that would lead to greatness.

Steve knows what it takes to accomplish something in the world of tennis—but so few are willing to do the work. The road to tennis success in Steve’s world is a narrow one. So few have the inner drive. For every success story that Steve tells, there are probably 100 stories that he could tell where “The operation was a success, but the patient died.” This means that the instruction was right and the activities were right and the student learned, but when the player left the camp, they didn’t work at it and stick with it.

People can’t work backwards in time from the championship that is in their dreams. They are only consumed by the obstacle of hard work and discipline in front of them—they are governed by their feelings that have been saturated by comfort.

This is the parable that he tells to everyone who comes to his place—it is a message wrapped up in his description of what the player will face after he leaves Steve. “Are you committed to doing the work? Are you committed to following the path and hit the ball the way we have told you? Do you have the character that will cause you to work when no one is telling you to do it?” These are the questions that have to be answered before greatness will be found, and Steve puts them to every player, every day. “People figure out life before they die but very few figure out tennis before they die.”

Vicki Duvall

One of the things that impressed me the most about this entire operation was the fact that four-year-old boys who “started on Friday” were on the same court as top-ranked juniors who were playing at junior Grand Slams and national tournaments. Vicki Duvall, a 16-year-old girl

with a Haitian background, came to spend part of the spring and part of the summer with Steve. The summer before, she reached the quarters of Wimbledon and the US Open Juniors and had recently won matches on the WTA tour.

Vicki, who is mature beyond her years, told her mother, Nadine, that her present game was not going to take her to the next level. She knew that she had to fix the flaws in her swings or else she would reach a ceiling and not be able to go any higher. A Polish coach who was at the camp that watched Vicki's pre-tape of her serve said, "Your serve was horrible." Vicki was secure enough to just laugh.

Steve had never worked with Vicki prior to May—that was just two months before our arrival. Prior to her family moving to the Miami area, one of her brothers lived in Tampa with his uncle and was taught by Steve. So, Vicki checked into Tennismith School on her own accord and was ready to change. Vicki went through the same filming procedures that I did with my daughters. We were shown her progression by viewing her "before and after" film. Most importantly, she had to change her serve and she did.

One afternoon while we were waiting for the courts to dry after the daily rain, I sat down with her and asked her a few questions about her life and her experience with Steve Smith. For the record, I would like to say that this girl was exceptional in her demeanor. Her smile was infectious, her spirit was lively, and her passion to compete was intense—there was an inner giant in this girl that was apparent to anyone who would watch her compete in tennis. Steve had her help instruct other students at the camp and he even paired her up with me on one occasion to help teach me the backboard routine. Her squeaky voice kept telling me "Relax...you are too tense...quit trying to hit the ball so hard." I have that habit when I hit. She patiently tried to coax it out of me. She had the Steve Smith lingo down.

I asked her how she would compare Steve Smith's instruction to the other coaches that she had worked with in her life— she had worked with some of the biggest names in American tennis coaching. She said that by far, Steve was the most knowledgeable tennis coach she had ever worked with and that he knew how to speak to her and bring out the potential in her. Steve always talked about the coach bringing a story out of a player that could not be told otherwise. Steve treated Vicki like he treats everybody: she was a student who needed to pay attention and simply work at getting better. Vicki had a story to tell. Her family was from Haiti. When Haiti experienced an earthquake, her Dad was still there practicing medicine. He was buried in his office and his body was crushed by the rubble. Her Dad managed to get out of the collapsed house, but was in grave danger due to his injuries. Thankfully, a wealthy friend of the family paid to have Vicki's Dad flown out of the country to the United States where he could receive medical attention. She has sat by while her Dad has endured a great amount of pain because of his crushed arm and other injuries. When a kid experiences adversity, it can have the effect of creating perspective that could not be achieved otherwise. A tennis match does not become the end-all for a player who has experienced adversity firsthand.

Throughout the sessions, Steve would always ask Vicki, "How many days to San Diego?" Vicki was looking forward to the U-18 US national championships. If she won, she would get to

play in the main draw of the U.S. Open. To hear Vicki talk about having the chance to play in the U.S. Open — hearing the excitement in her voice as she stomped her feet with excitement, made the hair on the back of your neck stand up. The thought of a 16-year-old having the chance to play on Center Court — it seemed like an impossible dream. At the end of the summer, Vicki did compete in San Diego and became our national US junior champ. She went on to play Kim Clijsters in a nationally televised night match in the largest stadium in the world. It was just a month and a half after we left Steve’s camp. And to think she was in line shadow-swinging with me! Wow! It works! Now my daughters will hit off the cone. They get it.

The Word Picture Method

Steve has created his own list of images and pictures to learn all the strokes. An experience that best sums up Steve's work was watching and listening to a player of Vicki Duvall's caliber recite and demonstrate the 'word picture method' for the serve with a first grader. It went something like this: “Stand on a skateboard pointed to the deuce court, a skateboard pointed to the ad court, put your hands in handcuffs, like a baseball player taking the ball out of the glove, weight on bathroom scale one, shift and rotate to bathroom scale two, hang onto the toss like a glass of water, make a letter 'J', toss to one o'clock, stir paint, comb the hair action, salute, talk on the phone, give the giant the high five, make the letter 'X', touch your pocket.”

All the individual parts of the serve that have an image to go with them make up the whole. It is done in sync. Steve says the serve is like a car warming up and then going fast. “As you coil, you breathe in; as you uncoil, timed with the hit, you breathe out. It is so simple.”

Yet Steve does not believe in the KISS method--Keep It Simple Stupid. "Braden taught me not to underestimate the capacity of the learner." Steve cannot let a kid be a hacker. " I would rather hear fingernails scratched on the blackboard than watch a kid serve who has been taught the myth of scratching their back on the serve." The program is academic. Each move with the word picture method is supported with scientific and logical rationale.

“I, I, I, Me, Me, Me”—The Junior Tennis Player Theme Song

Steve says that he has been fired by hundreds of 12-year-olds. “In America’s culture of affluence, the parents cater to the child and the tail wags the dog. John McEnroe says his kids have ‘affluenza.’”

The year before our visit, Steve's crew went to the national 12's and filmed 50 boys' and 50 girls' serves. Over 95% had some version of palm up, the patty cake motion. The crew also randomly charted 1000 points and only 7 overheads were hit.

Steve will often start a session by saying, “Now let’s sing the ‘Junior Tennis Theme Song’.... ‘I, I, I, me, me, me.’” In Steve’s world, the biggest obstacle to greatness is the protectiveness of the parents and the selfish impulses of the children that he hopes to teach.

“If I could have a kid work for 3,000 hours on form before he or she played a point, that would pave the way for a great tennis player to be created. I also would have them become an

athlete by playing team sports like basketball and soccer. And as a tyke, they would be in gymnastics."

Most junior players would not last 3 hours in Steve's system of shadow swinging, hitting off a cone, and the meticulous attention to detail in the swing. The junior would soon be complaining to mom and dad and the parents would pack up their future tennis star and drive him across town to a location where they would have "fun." This situation is almost funny. But before I can begin to laugh Steve states, "Comedy is often tragedy with time." Steve once said that the best place to train a tennis player in America is an orphanage—there are no parents to get in the way.

"To accomplish your dreams, you have to live through a nightmare of work." Most kids are not willing to live through that nightmare. America's affluent parents give their child what will gratify them. Parents want to be liked, appreciated for providing their child with the things they didn't have as a kid. The child is so accustomed to being on the center stage and getting the attention and the toys that he or she is stripped of the opportunity to be hungry. Nothing has to be conquered—there is no struggle, no hardship. In the end, the child is crippled by comfort—crippled by receiving something that didn't come from hard work. The children of the affluent have been blinded by the reality in their world that things just appear. It is not just the affluent in America that protect instead of prepare their child. The rate of crime and the media blitz that now covers crime, scares us into over-protection. Rightfully so, but we must both protect and prepare." Steve loves Bobby Knight's quote, "It is not the will to win but the will to prepare."

Steve always talks about how adversity in the life of a child is a blessing—a stimulant to accomplish something great. Steve often tells kids, "It's too bad that you can afford that." Affluent children don't make the relationship that to accomplish great things, hard work, understanding, knowledge, and persistence will carry the day. Steve is in the business of teaching these things—but most parents aren't in the market to purchase Steve's product of hard work and discipline. They want a hitting partner for Johnny that speaks the language of the "Jockocracy," – "Killer forehand, Johnny...Pop it...You're grooving that serve now, kid."

Steve doesn't waste time with diplomacy. Johnny comes into Steve's program and is met head-on with the reality that he is not in charge—there is a new sheriff in town—and Steve is barking orders to get to work and be part of the program. "America is an individualistic society and the parents have blown it. The individual becomes bigger than the program."

Steve says that it is too bad there is no bench in tennis. "When you play hockey and a kid doesn't do what his coach says and gives 100 percent, there is the bench. When you sit on a bench and watch, it makes you change really quickly. In tennis, if a kid loses in a tournament, the parents get out their checkbook and sign their kid up for the next tournament. The kid doesn't learn anything that way. There is a connection with the brain and the bench." Steve tells his group that they will have to get to college tennis before they are in the locker room. "Trust me, the locker room is different than the backseat of your mommy's car."

As Steve sarcastically leads the players at his camp in the "Junior Tennis Theme Song," everyone in the group knows a certain kid that they have met who sings this song as a way of

life, and it makes them work all the more with an attitude of determination. Steve says that he asks the parents of the players who come to his camp for PPP—Parental Permission for Pounding. Parents are told quickly where to park the helicopter. Steve says that every time the helicopter parent comes to the rescue to save the victim that is their child, the victim becomes weaker. “Helicopter Parents produce Boomerang Kids—kids that come back; they always come back. They come back home at age 25 being a dependent person and probably not gainfully employed.”

I can confidently say that I have not met a person who has the ability to shape the character of a child like Steve Smith. Steve should write a parenting book that speaks about the details of how he instills discipline, work ethic, passion, commitment, and character into the lives of the kids on his court every day. Better yet he should have a reality TV show where he turns spoiled kids around in one week.

“You want to be your child's friend when they are an adult; don't be their buddy now.” He explained the two types of pain—The pain of discipline and the pain of regret. “Make your kid peel their own banana. They should pack their own bag and carry their own bag. If a kid is fourteen and Mom is applying sunscreen to their kid and running Gatorade out to them on the court, forget it; the kid has no chance to be competitive in tennis and unfortunately competitive in life. Unless we change the work ethic of the youth in America, we are in trouble.”

The Observer's Observer

“You can usually tell by the way a kid walks that he's lazy.” Steve said this to me while I was sitting next to him in a chair in the corner of a court. We were looking at a player through the windscreen. “Watch your two daughters over there; see how long it takes them to get back to work. It says something of their work ethic.” What I knew about my daughters from being around them for 15 years Steve nailed in 15 seconds of close observation.

“Sometimes I just hide and observe. Sometimes we film kids practicing and watch it later just to show their work ethic.” In just a few minutes of examining the court, he gave me an inside clue about his craft—telling me how the details he observes speak volumes about what is on the inside of a player. “See how they follow each other and talk when they pick up balls. They are not serious about getting better.”

Steve has learned how to use the data that a player is giving him and use it to construct an analysis of him or her— physically, emotionally, and mentally. “See that boy over there; he knows a lot about tennis, but he doesn't know much about himself. See that girl playing on the end court; she knows a lot about herself, but she doesn't know a lot about tennis. She is a winner on the inside.” I felt privileged to hear Steve think out loud for 5 minutes. An entire world opened up to me that I hadn't seen or thought about before.

One of the first things that his assistant told me when he picked me up from the airport was that Steve doesn't miss much. That can be intimidating. Steve is like Sherlock Holmes with a tennis racquet. Every detail that takes place on the court is fed into his computer and out spits the truth about what is going on inside a person. When you realize that someone knows your

flaws, it can be a bit unnerving. I sensed this throughout the week. He operated by giving the test first and the lesson second.

Be Managed By Stats Not By Score

After a match where Vicki Duvall beat Luis, a grumpy Luis complained that Goldman didn't spell his name right on the stat sheet. "Become great and you won't have to worry about people spelling your name wrong." Steve was disgusted at Luis's worrying about the wrong things. "He should be worried about his game, his fitness, and his competitive spirit."

"'Yes' is the word. The opposite of breathing is choking." Steve often speaks in two or three-word sentences. "Everyone chokes. Choking is a positive. Be fearless. The two keywords for evaluating a match are 'aggressive' and 'percentage.' Did you play aggressive-percentage tennis?"

The veterans of the program get to go to courts away from the club to play matches. The matches are charted by the other students and when they return, the rest of the players watch as the charter explains what happened in the match as a result of the stats. "Be stat-driven," Steve said before the explanation occurs. Goldman, a high school student who has been in the program for a long time, began explaining what happened in the match. Steve said that Goldman knows more about the game and can break down a match better than most college coaches. I believe it. After 20 minutes, Goldman had covered everything from net points won to the number of times the players changed the direction of the ball in the rally. He explained with clarity why Vicki won and why Luis lost the match. "Did Vicki win the match or did Luis lose the match?" Steve asked. By looking at the chart, the students in the classroom stated that Luis lost the match.

After Goldman's complete description of the match using stats, Steve came up to the front and explained stats to everyone and what they meant. Here is how he explained things so everyone could understand: "Luis was not willing to take a risk. Even when he had a 'green light point'—he was up in a game by two or three points. The math was on his side to be aggressive. Singles is not like chess, it is like checkers—a simpler game. Tennis is a board game, you just happen to be standing on the court as a life-size figure. Luis still does not understand the 'aggressive-error margin,' when you go to the net and ideally win two out of three points. If you win 2 out of 3 that equals 4 out of 6 and 8 out of 12. If you consecutively won 2 out of 3 points, theoretically, the score ends up 6-0, 6-0."

Tennismath students were told by Steve that almost no one understands stats. "If people understood stats, then they would go the net." Steve then proceeded to give a small history lesson: "The last time Pete Sampras played an official match, he went to the net 104 times in four sets. Yet no one copies Pete because everyone wants to win right now; starting at the youngest levels. The improved racquets and string are reasons why there is less net play today than in previous eras. But in my opinion, the reason for net phobia is 'brain memory.'" Kids do not develop the instincts to go forward. People do what people do. If you do not go forward early in your career then it is a safe bet you will not go forward late in your career."

Another historical point was tied in with this development. " Martina Navratilova won Wimbledon nine times. It is tough to name nine players who have hit one-handed under-spin backhand approach shots since she retired. It makes sense that if everybody wants to win now, they should be working on skills for long-term development.

Some of Steve's descriptions of this scenario are not going to win him a place in the ' good ole boy network.' " Everybody is playing the same one-dimensional way of hitting from the baseline—in a way, tennis today amounts to clones being taught by clowns." This entire monologue by Steve was another example of how he tries his best to share the truth with people, but it often falls on deaf ears.

I didn't understand everything that was going on in the charting department, but it all seemed to make sense. Another one of Steve's hats is that of statistical analysis. Steve knows that stats don't lie and that if you want to know what to practice and what to fix tactically, look at the stats. He teaches this truth to everyone who comes to his classroom. "Bill Jacobson is the electronic pioneer of charting. Brilliant man. I used his CT120, a laptop for charting for seventeen years. I know stats like I know strokes. Actually, stats and strokes are one in the same." With Steve and his staff, facts rule the day.

The Junior Tennis Whisperer

"Control their eyes," Steve told me when I asked him how he did it—the kids eat out of his hand. Steve likes three nicknames that he has been given by his students in the tennis world. One of those nicknames is "The Junior Whisperer" and by the end of the week, I knew why that name was given to him. To watch Steve work with a kid when he is getting down to brass tacks with a player who lacks discipline is a sight to see. It reminds me of a time when I went to see a horse trainer break a colt. When the horse trainer walked into the circular ring, the horse had nothing to do with the trainer—turning his back to him and looking outside the ring. But as the trainer began cornering the colt and then controlling his eyes, yes without a whip, the horse magically began following the trainer around the arena. Before long, the trainer was riding the horse and it seemed happy to be under its master's control.

It seemed like Steve had a whip but it was his eyes and his voice that reached the soul of the players. There is a TV show, where the dog whisperer just walks in the room with the 'glare and stare' tactic, and the dog instantly stops barking for the first time in its dog life. With Steve, children stop whining. juniors stop rolling their wrists, and more importantly, they stop rolling their eyes.

When Steve Smith gets a kid on the court, it's forty years of tennis experience brought to bear upon a twelve-year-old—a small plant trying to stand up to an avalanche of knowledge and expertise. "Look at me when I'm talking to you," Steve will bark as he moves closer to a student who is trying to wiggle away from his correction. Stern insistence is not the only tool in Steve's bag; he uses anger, he uses silence, he uses humor, he uses a challenge, he uses history. Before a player knows it, he is following Steve around the ring, smiling and doing everything possible to follow directives. In a sense, Steve is an artist, painting a work ethic, skill, and a passion for greatness onto the canvas of a child's life. It is a gift.

Steve breaks down the empowered and entitled attitude of the player. The practice sessions seemed more like those from the football culture than from tennis circles. "Whatever you do, don't be a tennis kid."

"The Junior Tennis Whisperer", "The Observer's Observer" and the third is "The Fountain." Steve is motivated by ideas, info, and insights. A key to any success is to become a lifetime learner.

The Chicken Was Involved, But The Pig Was Committed

"The next time you have bacon and eggs for breakfast, remember the chicken was involved but the pig was committed." In my life, I have never met a person so committed to anything as Steve Smith is to tennis. From when he emerges like Clark Kent—showered and shaved from the bathroom at the crack of dawn—to whenever he finally turns out the lights in the Tennis House and goes to bed, Steve Smith lives and breathes tennis all day.

Sitting in the living room at the Tennis House, he jokes with me about Braden's Prayer. Steve started out in a Catholic school with the nuns cracking his knuckles. He hums a chant like a monk and says, "The dimensions of the court and physical laws dictate stroke productionnnnnnn—Hmnnnnnn—not any coaches unique theory or opinionnnnnnn." I picture Steve with a monk's hood over his head reciting this chant with candles around him inside a monastery. If tennis was a religion, Steve Smith would be the Pope. Steve told me if there is a tennis heaven, he knows a lot of coaches who will not get in because they did not do the right thing by working and learning to give the kid a chance to be a solid player. Far too often, they just wasted the kid's time and took the parent's money.

To see someone as passionate as Steve Smith is about tennis and to see how hard he has worked to turn his mind into a tennis computer is inspirational. In 95 percent of Americans' lives, we live in mediocrity—it is the norm. If you push your kids to something above the norm, you are a fanatic. In Steve's world, it is the norm—mediocrity sticks out like a sore thumb. To experience Steve and his determination to get every detail right combined with the sheer volume of hours the entire crew puts in—the shadow swinging, the jumping rope, the cone work, wall exercises—all under his watchful eye—it is unbelievable unless you see it. Billie Jean King said, "If you can see it, you can be it." It should be a yearly prerequisite for tennis teachers and coaches to watch him teach and train players.

If there is anything average, he is on it. He talks to the kids about being "Tennis Animals." "You need tennis to survive—be a tennis animal." If he sees two kids doing volleys improperly, he stops everything and talks to the entire crew about wasted, empty practice hours and the consequences of practicing something the wrong way. "Do it right. Pride yourself in doing it right."

There is nothing else on the docket for the day for Steve Smith and everyone in his world except tennis. Nothing else exists except the pursuit of flawless strokes hit over and over and over again. This is the total commitment he gives and expects out of his disciples who seek

greatness in the sport. In his mother's kitchen growing up, there was a motto in a glass frame hanging on the wall, it read, "Don't Accept Mediocrity."

Hockey

There were not many pictures on the wall at the Tennis House, but interestingly enough, there were as many hockey photos as there were tennis photos. Below a huge photo of the Tampa Bay team with the Stanley Cup was a picture of Steve as a college hockey player. That photo was flanked by his two sons as hockey players. "There is nothing better in life than watching a great skater and my son Macale was a great skater. Connor hated back-checking, but he loved to shoot the puck." I instantly knew that Steve Smith loved hockey. He is a hockey guy.

"My youngest should have been a hockey player." Steve's kids played hockey. "One of my sons was on a team that won the provincial championship for six-year-olds when I lived in Toronto. His team played the final in the Maple Leaf's Garden. Both played for the organization, Little Caesars. This youth hockey organization was out of Detroit and it has put more American players in the NHL than any other organization."

Growing up in Minnesota, I was a Minnesota North Star hockey fan from when I first watched the games through the spokes on my crib. In my youth, my 3 brothers and I played countless games of hockey with our friends on our pond on a rink that was shoveled by hand and goals that were made out of two-by-fours and white canvas. I love hockey and it was a common ground for Steve and me.

Steve Smith grew up playing hockey in upper New York state along the Canadian border. Hockey players are a distinct breed—it is not a game for the meek. In this game, you need to put your head on a swivel or you are going to get it knocked off. In a hockey town, there are the men that walk around with the hockey knowledge that has been passed down to them by their fathers who got it from their fathers. The knowledge is accumulated through the generations. These hockey men instill something in their boys. The locker rooms of hockey arenas are incubators that breed toughness. If there is weakness, it will be expelled in these rooms that have heavy doors and tight lips.

To understand Steve Smith, you have to understand the hockey culture that exists in the northern United States. Steve says that "Hockey is in my blood." Toughness, anger, endless practice, pain and injury, profanity, fighting, teamwork, speed, ice and sweat all at the same moment - these are the words that begin to capture what it is like to live in that culture.

Steve said in hockey, if you cannot skate you cannot play. And in tennis, if you cannot hit the ball you cannot play. So you skate and skate, cut, accelerate, glide, and cut some more----as hard as you can until you have fallen so many times your hips are bruised. Pretty soon, your blades, the ice, and your body act as one and you pass over the ice like a ghost. There are not too many greater thrills in sport than to skate fast and turn on a dime.

Steve said when he was a kid he thought a tennis court was a perfect place to play street hockey. When asked about how he found tennis, he said it was a story of circumstance, just as Malcolm Gladwell explains in his book, *Outliers*. "The summer before I went off to an expensive

New England prep school, my father told me that I needed to learn how people on the other side of the tracks lived. I became a dishwasher at a camp in the Adirondack Mountains. Next to my cabin were tennis courts and that was the first time I saw tennis played. I started hitting the backboard every minute I could.”

He explained the other circumstances, “The tennis boom of the '70s, Billie Jean King versus Bobby Riggs in the Battle of the Sexes, the tiebreaker allowing tennis to be put into a time capsule, that put the game on TV caused everybody to play tennis. The idea of becoming a teaching pro came from the good fortune of meeting one. I met Dave Eddy, a teaching pro who lived on the same road as my parents. I never realized that you could study tennis, teach tennis, and use tennis as a way to see the world. I transferred my passion from hockey to tennis; I went from one drug, hockey, to another drug, tennis.”

Steve's father was a student of hockey. He loved college hockey. He was intrigued by the success of the Russians and this was before the Russians shocked the hockey world in 1972. Steve explained how he and his brothers were rushed by his father from his grandfather's house to watch a Russian hockey team practice and play an exhibition. “The word system was often used when hockey people talked about the Russians. So, when I got into tennis, I thought that there must be systems to learn. I thought there had to be the Russian way of hockey in tennis to be searched out.” Steve Smith was on a mission to put together a system to learn how to play tennis. Mission accomplished.

Steve said that he knew he wasn't going to make the Montreal Canadians, so playing college hockey was the end of the line. This realization began his journey into the world of tennis.

Understanding the hockey culture helps you understand Steve and how he approaches the game of tennis with his students. Steve hasn't discarded his hockey past. Being a hearty northerner, I came to realize and understand that the hockey culture both defines and explains the way Steve Smith acts and thinks on and off the court. Tennis people should know this upfront before having their children work with Steve.

When asked what the three things were that he got from his father, Steve said, "His hairline, his voice, his intensity, a principled approach, and a love for hockey—that's five, pick any three. Hockey people are BS proof and tennis people are not. "My father always said the cream comes to the top but so does BS if you stir it."

Steve told me one of his brothers had been the GM of three NHL teams. "His job was scouting for the best players in the world and then giving them millions of dollars. In tennis, I would like to scout for the best parents of four-year-olds and then train and travel the world with them. The project would cost money but not millions of dollars." Steve has searched out the nuts and bolts and the X's and O's of tennis and combined them with the grind and guts of hockey. This makes for an unusual and perhaps unmatched combination found in the world of tennis.

The Game Needs More First Base Coaches

Steve has previously and currently serves as a clinician and consultant for tennis academies. I was told it is not uncommon for Steve to be at a tournament and he is wearing a sweat shirt with the name of another academy. Some junior academy coaches are walking billboards. During the time I was there, he was upset with one of his former players for instantly starting his own tennis academy and hanging out at local tournaments—handing out his business card to recruit already established players. Steve feels the game of tennis needs more ‘first base’ coaches and there are too many ‘third base’ coaches. "It is so sad— local coaches are fighting over the kid who is about to win the local tournament." That is Steve's version of the third base coach; the coaching of the kid who is about to score versus teaching the beginner to get started.

He also calls his version of a third base coach in tennis a, " Merchant of Flesh." The game needs teachers to give kids a great start. Welby Van Horn, one of Steve’s mentors, had a statement that captured this: "Teach fundamentals that will stand the test of time." Welby was a top ten player in the world who created his own instructional system; it was based on balance. Steve mentions Welby day in and day out in his instruction. “Welby is still alive and in his 90's. I go back to the “Well” and visit Welby and the guy is still studying the game. I watched an entire pro match on TV with him in April."

Steve does have a brochure. It is in a cupboard and never gets handed out or mailed out. On the cover are three photos with three captions. One reads, “Decades of Studying Tennis.” The other reads, “Decades of Teaching Skills” and the third reads, “Decades of Success Stories.” The brochure’s lack of circulation is proof that Steve is not in the recruiting business.

Steve has a long list of mentors. He puts Vic Braden on the top rung and says Uncle Vic has the most information and is so misunderstood. Steve made me a student of Braden. He tries to make everyone a student of Braden. I went to study under Steve and he told me to study Braden.

“Here's a couple of Braden-isms for you. ‘Can you teach the kid who puts the ice cream cone in the middle of their forehead? Do you measure the quality of instruction based on the worst player in a program?’ Academies are forever recruiting ‘already made’ players and claiming their level of achievement through a system of marketing not a system of development. The parents of college-bound players should research how many players climbed from the 12th spot on a team to the 6th spot and be in the line-up.” Steve informed me that most college players leave college tennis with the game that they came in with because they do not do any ‘first base’ work.

The Tennis Hall of Fame

Prior to leaving on Saturday, we watched the Tennis Hall of Fame induction ceremony. Steve was not going to miss it. So, without a choice, we were all brought into the TV room. Steve says he takes no complaints and no excuses. The crew assembled in front of the television and talking was not allowed. The TV was turned down during the commercial and Steve told stories about each new hall of famer. Steve could have talked for half an hour on each person. In fact, he did. Steve used this opportunity to instill a love of those people who had paid the physical and emotional price to play tennis at the highest levels. Steve painted respect and

anecdotal pictures of the characters that were inducted—Jennifer Capriati, Gustavo Kuerten, and Manuel Orantes.

As an emotional Gustavo Kuerten came to the microphone dressed in a light blue suit and a head of big curly brown hair; you could easily see the passion of this man and his love of life. Guga talked in broken English about how his father had bought him his first wooden racket and how he had given him the greatest gift—the love of the game. He talked about a coach named Larry that made him believe that he could be the best player in the world. Guga spoke about how his family was very poor and how the house, car, and piano were mortgaged or sold to give Guga a chance. It was like all the lessons that Steve had talked about during the week on the courts were being embodied by this player’s speech. The retired professional was standing in front of us at a podium as a living object lesson. Guga stated it best with this sentence: “My life is not all about tennis, but tennis is in every part of my life.” Steve informed us that Guga had a brother who had recently died and that his brother was never capable of leaving his bed in his entire lifetime. No wonder Guga handled the game as a game.

Watching this ceremony with Steve and feeling the energy in the room amongst the other players and coaches as this spectacle was on display, gave tennis another facet for me and my daughters to appreciate—the facet of the players of the game, their struggles, their passion for the game, and how tennis puts their humanity on display.

"Legendary players get in. Legendary teachers and coaches should get in. Vic, Welby, Dennis should get in," Steve told the room of players and coaches.

Saying Good Bye

“Team Minnesota has to go now. Everyone listen up.” The tennis crew assembled around us and Steve said, “Does anyone have any last words for Team Minnesota.” This moment gave me the feeling of leaving the mountaintop to go back down to the people in the valley below. A tall college student who had done much to teach me the game said, “Take Steve’s system to the people back in Minnesota.” A boy that I had spent a good amount of time hitting balls off a cone with during the week said, “Own the cone.” A girl said, “Do what you don’t want to do.” “Find a backboard...Shadow swing in the morning and at night.” It was distilled wisdom from veterans who had been through a nightmare of work—disciples speaking to followers who were leaving the master’s presence and encouraging us to keep the faith.

Even though we had experienced the magic of Steve’s system firsthand, it would not be easy for my daughters upon their return. The lure of comfort—the friends calling to go to the movies, the television and iPods, sleeping in, and just not feeling like practicing would all attempt to steal away the seed that Steve and his followers had planted. As Steve would always say when someone was leaving, “The operation was a success, but the patient died. We give kids the technical know-how and the tactical base and show them the work ethic required, but after that, it’s up to them. Build your game, brick by brick.”

We all gathered for a picture and I made sure that I was next to Steve—for posterity. Steve had the boy in front of him in a headlock and was rubbing his hair with his knuckles. After

the picture was taken, Steve said, “Everyone get back to work. I’ll be back in a little bit.” We left this community, but I would have loved to stay longer. More so, I would have loved to have my daughters stay even longer.

Steve at the Airport

After saying goodbye to the crew, Steve drove us to the airport. We talked a good deal along the way. He shared his vision with me about improving tennis instruction worldwide, creating a non-profit foundation, and having a first-class center to teach students and train teachers. I told him I thought his vision was noble and if carried out, would do much for the game. It seemed almost impossible to have something as good as what we experienced this week to be such a secret in the world.

A lot of people have heard of Steve, if they hadn’t, I would have never made the connection living 2000 miles away. But not enough people know Steve Smith and his story. With all the discussion on improving American tennis, it would be great to have a 'system', an organized way to study what Steve has studied and teaches. Watching his videos and talking on the phone with him was nothing compared with meeting him in person—to feel his presence and to have him turn everyday situations into extraordinary moments was life-changing. It was as close to experiencing what Jesus did on this earth as I will find in my lifetime. How Jesus could take a widow putting a penny into an offering plate and turn that into a story that would be repeated for centuries was similar to how Steve could take how a boy hit his a backhand and turn it into a lesson that would inspire greatness in the minds of everyone watching.

I felt like a movie camera could have been turned on at any point during the week and that scene could have been put right onto the big screen at the cinema. On our way to the airport, Steve said, “A picture is worth a thousand words, but you guys just saw a movie.”

Before I knew it, we were at the curb and our luggage was sitting on the sidewalk next to the minivan. Steve gave my daughters a hug. He had done something to the character of my two kids. Before they came to this camp this week, they knew little of what it meant to truly work hard at something—little of complete devotion to a cause. They knew little of being inspired to greatness and to go on a journey to be the best that they could be. They left Steve Smith with souls that had been purged of many of their spoiled traits.

“Give me a hug, Papa Bear.” Steve opened up his arms and I gave him a big hug. It felt good to have someone of this caliber accept me into his life and tell me his story and share his vision. I told him that this was one of the best weeks of my life—it was good for my soul.

Vic Braden

When I got home, I went to Amazon.com and ordered all of Vic Braden’s books. I was shocked that they were selling for only \$.50 apiece. They came one by one in the mail—First, Quick Fixes then Tennis 2000, Teaching Children Tennis the Vic Braden Way, and then Psyching Yourself Up. Reading them was like listening to Steve Smith. The logic, the strokes, the strategy were all there just like Steve had been preaching to the kids all week on the courts at his school in Tampa.

Steve knows Vic the man and Vic the resource. Steve was at first a long distant student of Vic's—reading and watching everything Vic ever put out. He worked for him at his headquarters in California and at all his tennis schools in Europe. He traveled to location after location with Vic to conduct clinics. Steve says Vic's work was the backbone of the comprehensive curriculum and degree program he designed for students seeking a career in tennis at a junior college in Texas. Steve used his books as the textbooks at the college. Steve continues to work with Vic through two of the coaches he has mentored. They work with Vic on a daily basis. “I was lucky to connect with Vic early on. But for five years prior to meeting Vic, I practiced marathon hours with the same bad info people are still getting every day in tennis instruction today.”

In more than one conversation, Steve said that without Vic's influence, he could not have accomplished what he has in tennis. Steve told me he calls Vic immediately after one of his players wins a national title. The player would not have won without the Braden-Smith connection. I felt to truly understand Steve's tennis system, it would be a good piece of the foundation to read everything that Braden had written. I haven't been disappointed. I believe that I would not understand Vic Braden in depth if I hadn't seen Steve Smith in action.

For someone not in the tennis industry, I have read a good deal about tennis strokes and tactics—probably more than 90 percent of the pros teaching tennis. I devour tennis books and videos by the boxful. Reading Vic Braden was like a monk finding a copy of the New Testament in a medieval library and dusting it off and being inspired by the distilled, forgotten truth. Everything Vic says is backed up by his slow-motion research. Vic's simplicity combined with teaching methods that give students a chance to feel what the correct motion involves makes his truth accessible.

Steve said this about Vic's ideas: “For us, Vic is the Christmas tree to what we do and all the others that have contributed are the ornaments.” Steve is still adding to the tree and his coaching tree is second to none.

Somehow, the truth of Vic Braden has been replaced with a lie. Kids are now taught to swing the racquet like a merry-go-round instead of it being like a Ferris wheel. Instead of teaching kids the correct swing from the beginning, they are told to just hit the ball and do what comes naturally — playing the game.

Understanding and appreciating Vic Braden requires an acquired taste—many would call him old-fashioned and outdated. I don't think it works like that with physics. The ball is still round, gravity is still on the planet, and the court size is the same as when Jack Kramer played. “Physical laws and court dimension dictate stroke production.” You can't get around that—Vic and Steve have the slow-motion footage to prove it. It's not the special sauce that is being advertised in every tennis video and book on the Web, but this truth will get you to your destination with the least amount of backtracking.

After I got through the Vic Braden Books, I started on the ornaments to the tree. Peter Burwash's Total Tennis gave me first-hand information about parts of Steve's tactical system. I went on to order The Talent Code which explained much about how Steve's system helped to create tennis bio computers of his players through deep practice and the slow motion swinging.

Steve Smith explained that he takes Vic's work and combines it with others. He says that he takes the Braden method and uses the Welby Van Horn system of balance, the Dennis Van der Meer method of progressions, Jacobsen with stats and Don Leary and his word-picture method. Steve has rubbed elbows and traded ideas with some of the greatest tennis minds in the world. He has thoroughly studied the Spanish method of teaching tennis. He is motivated and interested to learn more ways to teach tennis better. What he has collected in his mind and offers to the students that he teaches each day is an encyclopedia of the world's best ideas about tennis.

A Package in the Mail

Once we returned, the girls kept the faith for a month and a half—until the high school tennis season started. For three to four hours a day, Sami and Izzy would go to the court down the street and they would hit off the cone, shadow swing, and toss balls to each other. We purchased a backboard and the girls hit against it daily. I was overjoyed. Like Steve said, “It’s a job if you are told to do it.” The kids were going to the courts on their own. Another thing that happened that I appreciated was that they were eager to teach other kids. There were kids sleeping over at our house and joining my daughters’ tennis camp the next day.

The kids at the high school couldn’t believe the difference in Isabel’s game when she showed up for preseason camp. She left the cellar of the junior varsity team to winning nearly all of her matches at singles on the varsity team this season. Sami played at first singles again, but her serve has improved 100 percent and her strokes look much better. She is coming to the net with confidence and her volleys sound like volleys. More importantly, both girls know that they have the right information that will make the difference in their tennis careers. There is no wondering if they are doing it right. At the end of the season, Sami made it to the final four in the district playoffs—and played a girl tough who she never thought she would have a chance to compete with.

Once the tennis season started, the daily Tennismith practicing was replaced a bit with the high school tennis practice. As school started and homework and matches crowded out the practice time, the girls’ habits began to fade. I coached soccer at the high school, so my attention was sidetracked as well.

Halfway through the season, I got a package in the mail. It was our stroke reviews from Steve. It was our video from when we first showed up at Steve’s program. As we watched our strokes on the TV, Isabel, Sami, and I commented on how bad our strokes looked in the pre-camp tape—running around the clay courts in borrowed shoes. Steve froze a video of me hitting a backhand our first day and it looked like I was strangling my racquet and I was about to club a wild beast that was attacking me. I had to laugh. All the while, there was Steve’s voice telling us that we had improved so much and that we should keep practicing.

It was diagnostic: what was the flaw, what was the cause, what was the cure? The rationale was provided in three segments: core information, a narrated slow motion analysis and finally Steve on screen reviewing both the 'before and after' tapes. The practice prescription was also personalized. It was a great reminder to the girls that they had started their season, but that they needed to keep following the pathway of logic and reasoning.

Steve told us to watch the tape three times minimum. Our progress was on file. He said that our game needed to be straightened out just like an orthodontist straightens out teeth: thoroughly and professionally.

When we watched the post-camp video, the difference was obvious. It was dramatic. The girls commented on how much they had learned and how glad they were that they knew the right way. Watching the videos and writing down the comments energized me and both of my girls to stay on the path, keep the faith, and get back to owning the cone. Steve assigned homework; we had to list in logical and sequential order our flaws and e-mail them to him—forever the teacher.

The videotapes make Steve an 'Outlier.' On almost a daily basis he is putting himself in front of a camera. In his studio at the Tennis House, there is a tripod and a camera that looks like it belongs to a local TV crew. There are studio lights. He has the TV voice. There is no script. He told me he started making the “take home” tapes back in the 80's. He is not Mr. Audio Visual; he just shoots film off-film. One take, no cut, no re-do, no re-shoot like they do in the movie business. He has entered the homes of hundreds and hundreds of players through his unique video system. Steve says that kids come from all over the world and less than ten percent do the homework assignment and send Steve comments about the video that Steve sends them.

Steve keeps a video file on players and he will know if one has gone home and made the changes. Neither my daughters nor I had any idea going into this experience that our transformation was going to be so complete—like the ones on the P90X photos showing a couch potato looking like Tarzan. Losing a hundred pounds of fat or losing a 100 different flaws in your tennis swing takes the same amount of work and discipline. Yet in the world of fitness, people know the basic formula: eat less and exercise more. In tennis, people do not know the basics. I don't understand how people could go through the video program he has and not make the changes, especially if they were at our level. On our video tapes from Steve, we heard the repeated phrase, "The operation was a success but the patient died."

You Can Do It

The process of trying to convert our summer experience with Steve on court to paper involved speaking with Steve several times on the phone. His first question in these conversations was always “Are the girls still practicing?” He repeatedly mentioned, “It would be great if they could hit against a wall all winter long.”

Steve knows my oldest daughter, Sami, has to overcome being a late starter. I heard from Steve that we are supposed to blossom where we are planted, be a flower, not a weed, and bloom at the end. When I thought of the video clip of the late bloomer on Steve's website that eventually played at Arthur Ashe Stadium, I knew there was hope for Sami.

In an attempt to motivate the girls to hit on the wall all winter, Steve shared two success stories from our time with him during the summer of 2012. Robin Anderson from UCLA just won a national NCAA title at Flushing Meadow and she won the NCAA indoor singles title. Peter Kobelt reached the finals of All-Americans, another national tournament this fall. Steve explained how the story of Peter opposed to Robin applies to Sami. “Peter was not a huge

success in juniors because he was a basketball player. He only played tennis part-time and he had to revamp his game at the age of 20.” Again, Steve goes into motivation 101, “If Peter can do it, Sami can do it. It’s not where you start, it’s where you finish.”

My daughter understands that two players, who will probably be ranked number one in the country this season in division one college tennis, were not too cool for school when they visited Steve. Robin Anderson of UCLA and Peter Kobelt of Ohio State were at the Tennis House and drank the Steve Smith Kool-Aid. They were part of our summer of 2012, along with Vicki Duvall.

The recipe is the same for Sami as it is for these players who are finding success at the college and national junior level. The process of being filmed, being skilled tested, being critiqued, practicing without the racquet, hitting off the cone, swinging in front of a mirror, serving with the sock, and the backboard routines are what produce the player. Sami has to buy into the system and do it every day with struggle and effort to reach her goal. In talking with Steve on the phone, he says “The system works. The information is so powerful. But the examples are more powerful.” Steve quotes Billie Jean King, “If you can see it, you can be it.” “Yes, Sami, you can do it!”

Most Importantly, The Backboard

This story would not be complete if I did not mention how each kid is told to hit on the backboard. “Fifteen minutes is equivalent to hitting an hour of balls on court.” When you visit the Tennis House, Steve will always ask kids how far a backboard is from their house by car, by bike, and by foot. Backboard routines are taught as part of the recipe for success.

The kids at the Tennis House jog up the golf course each morning and put in their 350 reps before the 8:30 morning practice. He hopes to instill a habit in the kids that will survive after they leave the Tennis House. Steve tells stories about former students and their parents who have built their own backyard backboard. “It never ends; kids are told to record their backboard reps and routines daily in their journal. Prior to going to the backboard they are supposed to complete their routine in the mirror. It only takes 42 seconds, 6 seconds for 7 strokes for kids to do their shadow swinging.”

Steve rattles off examples of pros that are products of the backboard. “James Scott Connors, 109 pro titles, still hits the backboard every day.” Steve tells a story about the mother of one of his coaches, Gregg le Sueur, from South Africa. “She did not hit on a court until she was thirteen, only hit on the backboard, and she has a win over Margaret Court, winner of 62 Grand Slam titles.”

“Before you go to the mirror and before you go the backboard, you are supposed to do ‘50-50’—fifty push-ups and fifty sit-ups. Following these exercises, there is the daily skip rope routine. You are not a tennis player if you don't skip rope.” Being around Steve, I learned the backboard has produced player after player that had no formal coaching.

Steve has endless examples to verify his system. “Charlie Hollis, who taught Laver, made players skip 1000 skips before each lesson. Welby Van Horn made you hit the backboard for

thirty minutes before your half-hour lesson with him on court and then following the lesson, you had to shadow swing for a half hour in front of his pro shop window."

In one short sentence, Steve captures the essence of his concept. When he talks about the importance of the backboard, he says, "Nadal is a wall. Get a wall. Be a wall." In relation to making the backboard part of your life, Steve quotes, "Brush your teeth. Hit on the backboard." The habits should be one and the same.

Tough, Technical, and True

Steve Smith believes in a spartan and stoic approach. He is certainly tougher on himself than he is on people. People have a tough time understanding what is truly difficult. Steve summarizes understanding "true difficulty" with this series of sentences: "What is tough is the honesty. To avoid hearing from the critics, say nothing, do nothing, be nothing. Be your own best critic. It is tough to find out your score on the skills tests, your stats from the sets played, and the flaws from the video sessions. It is tough to find out what your mile time is, what your time on the 'beep test' is. It is tough to find out you have to go backwards to go forwards. It is tough to find out you should take six months off from tournament play and rebuild your game. Actually, it is toughest to find out you have no game." The average tennis player doesn't want to hear those last sentences or think through what they really mean. Steve lives this reality on a daily basis.

The Tennismath system is multi-faceted—you can think of it as a large diamond with many sides. There is a math facet to this diamond that can't be missed. What I mean by the math is the numbers used in explaining each detail of the game and how all the pieces of the puzzle fit together. Steve could take a picture of a tennis match and fill it with all kinds of angles and distances that explain exactly what is happening in the picture--mathematically.

If you get him started on math, he will soon have your head spinning with numbers and how they relate to the game: "The grip has eight sides and if you turn the racquet eight times, one bevel at a time, the racquet rotates in a full circle, 360 degrees. So each bevel represents 45 degrees. 360 divided by 8 equals 45. Yes, it is that simple. But then the complexities that happen with an inefficient grip begin. The grip determines the angle of the racquet face, the angle of the racquet face determines the angle of the racquet path. The speed of the racquet needs to be adjusted based on the angle of the racquet face and racquet path. The variables are endless. The movement of the body also has to be calculated based on the grip." This last quote is just one slice of the pie when it comes to Steve. When I say that he has a "Tennis Mind," I'm not joking around.

If you get Steve started on stats (another facet to the diamond) it sounds like this: "With stats, you can start with the following symbols: $(++) + (-F) - (--)$ = +/- . They represent points hit as winners with points won through forcing, minus your unforced errors equals your differential. When I was a kid I could tell you week by week the stats of each player in the NHL. Learning those numbers may have been wasted energy but the energy placed in learning the details for tennis production and tennis development have not been. It works like this: the numbers from stroke production turn into the numbers that formulate the statistical breakdown and those

numbers formulate the only numbers that most people have an interest in, the score and who wins."

Steve's knowledge of so many areas of tennis is so deep. This depth of knowledge is what makes the system the best.

Steve also collects quotes to use as inspiration for the troops—it's another facet to his system. I could have written a separate 300-page work on the quotes used by Steve Smith and why. One of these quotes that I heard more than once in my week at Tennismith that occasionally summarizes Steve's approach is this quote by Teddy Roosevelt: "I am not giving you hell, I am telling you the truth and it sounds like hell." From Ghandi to John Wayne to Billy Jean King, Steve's list of quotes seems endless, but each quote is an arrow to inspire and motivate the most dispassionate of students.

We could turn this tennis system around all day and look at each facet and how that facet contributes to the overall success of the player who experiences the system. But this is a project for another day. The system has truth because it has been studied by a person who doesn't start with preconceived notions. Steve looks at things like a scientist—studying them endlessly, observing them endlessly, and listening to other experts. In the end, his conclusions are based on a massive pile of evidence. This produces the truth.

An Assignment

From Steve's website, to numerous phone calls, to our week-long experience in Tampa, to our 'take home personalized training tapes', to recorded interviews, I have written a long, short story about finding Steve Smith and understanding what he does. I believe that Steve and his work are an American treasure waiting to be discovered. If this work helps in that process, then it has accomplished its mission.

If Americans, as well as tennis people throughout the world, can read this story and believe its message, then more people will come to the truth that Steve practices. Steve's efforts represent many tennis teachers; it is not a work of self-promotion. He is the first one to give credit where credit is due.

I hope this is the first of many more assignments with Steve and his mission. There are volumes to write. Nothing has been invented and nothing has been cured, but much has been revealed, and so much has been explained with clarity. The complexities of tennis are simplified in this work and a pathway has been proven and a vision has been set.

A Life Changing Experience

If you have read this narrative of our time with Steve Smith, I hope that you have understood the journey that I took with my daughters. The truth about tennis was found, but you can see that we discovered more than just mechanics and tactics. Parents all want what is best for their kids. I want my kids to have the opportunity to be great tennis players, but I also want them to be great people—people that work hard, teach others, do not quit, seek knowledge and apply it, have a passion for what they do in life, hate mediocrity, and use a sport as an anvil to hammer

out the metal of their own character. Gratefully, this and so much more was found and we are the better for it. To make an understatement, our journey was truly a life-changing experience! A thousand 'Thank You's' to Steve and his staff.

"Tennis Intelligence Applied," was the first part of our journey. I suggest that you make it the first step of your journey. "Vic has told me for years that the two of us need a master plan. We have written our mission: To improve tennis teaching worldwide and to have more American kids playing American college tennis. In a perfect world, Vic and I work together. He goes forward with a light bulb finding answers and I go backwards with a club, hitting people over the head, asking 'Did you get it?'"

In closing, I get it. My daughters get it. I hope my narrative helps you get it. Get on the course. Go to Google and begin your journey to finding the truth in tennis. Look up his common name, Steve Smith. Add tennis to his name and you will find written posts and video clips that will help you start a journey to the truth.