

Too Old To Deal with All The Racket
The aging process is difficult to face, but when the aches become too great,
It is time to leave the court of play.

Op-ed Published in the September 28, 1999 issue of The Atlanta Constitution

By
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This was the year I quit playing recreational racquetball. Actually, I announced my “retirement” almost two years ago, but thought I still could make an occasional appearance on the court. Now, after 26 years of serious competition, I am through. The truth is, I am relieved. But the process leading to my decision was difficult, both personally and socially.

During the last two years I played in pain or was hurting for a couple of days afterwards, or both! I thought I was doing enough, stretching before and after, taking nutritional supplements, receiving chiropractic and even getting therapeutic massage. While all that helped, it couldn’t compensate for another reality; my body could not perform the way it did when I was 35. Fortunately, I finally paid attention to the many signs and occasional “warnings” from this remarkable, but aging body of mine.

I now realize that I had been unwilling to admit I was hurt, especially around the guys. And even when I acknowledged the existence of pain, I often discounted its significance, telling myself, “It’s just a cramp. It will be fine after a few minutes in the Jacuzzi.” When I had a swollen Achilles tendon and wore a removable cast for 2 months, I worried that my skill level would seriously deteriorate. One day I went to a court in the back where I wouldn’t be easily seen and just hit the ball for a few minutes with the cast in place. I wouldn’t back off. I wouldn’t rest. I wouldn’t trust the process.

I realized how much I loved to win and hated to lose. If things weren’t going all that well in daily life, I could always find a game and often enough, rally for a victory. Showed them, who ever “them” was!

When I began to calculate the accrued costs, I admitted I was in deep trouble. My level of play would never be what it was and I was so angry – mostly at myself. I was also scared, but it was easier to show my anger. Pain became a familiar companion on the court and I was not having the fun I had enjoyed for so many years. My recovery time between playing was increasing from two to three or four days, always with aches and stiffness. Attempting to play less intensely was like trying to suppress laughter from your favorite comedian’s funniest line. Good luck!

When I announced to the guys I was through, there was almost universal shock. Why? When I told them I refused to be in that kind of pain anymore, I received some ribbing. A typical response was something like, “Hey, at our age, we all have a few aches and pain, what’s the big deal?” One avid player wryly quipped, “You’re not going to wimp out on us, are you?” From the time I made my announcement it took 18 months for me to remove my racquet from my car. During that span I played perhaps six times, all with the same results. Ouch!

In the weeks following my announcement I had private conversations with some of the regulars I had played with, where they acknowledged their own pains and that it was becoming more difficult for them to play so intensely. Like me they worried about what they would do instead. How would that void be filled? Had we all become addicted? I also leveled with myself. I wanted to spend much more quality time with men and competing with them wasn’t quality time. I also wanted to be okay with myself without having to beat somebody at a game. This last part required some unexpected grieving.

The first six months following my decision were not easy. While I felt better physically, I became mildly depressed. I sure missed the adrenaline rush and the excitement. At the club I would be jogging upstairs on the boring treadmill where I could view the court with the glass front wall, mourning the game I loved for so many years. I got lots of practice responding with, “No thanks,” when invited to play. Gradually, the invitations stopped.

So how is my life different today? First of all, I listen to my body better than ever. Instead of physically and mentally competing with others, I inspire myself with Hatha yoga, accepting where I am, measuring myself to myself. For inspiration combined with aerobics, I briskly climb Stone Mountain two or three times a week.

All of this took time. It was far from easy. I let go of former beliefs, rituals and some friends. I shed tears. I am more gentle with myself (and others) than at any other time in my life. It is easier to say “ouch” about everything and I frequently do. I have an acceptance of and satisfaction with the man I have become and I am most grateful for the difference.

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