



LEARNING CURVE

PLAYING WITH THE BOYS

→ On the squash court, former pro athlete **Louisa Hall** faced male opponents with ease. But that was only half of her double life.

My first match in a national squash tournament, when I was 8 years old, was against a 9-year-old boy. That year, at an annual competition in Chatham, New Jersey, there weren't enough entrants in the girls' under-10 draw, so the organizers canceled it; my parents responded by placing me with the boys. I was confident in my talent—how often had people wandered by my practice court and stopped, laughing, to point out the ease with which a girl, no bigger than her racket, could feather a drop shot into the corner? Out of the groups of anxious children devouring bagels and listening to pump-up songs on their Walkmans, I emerged, tore my blue-and-white Prince Junior racket out of its case and marched onto the court to play Ziggy Whitman. Though

Ziggy was a year older and much taller, I felt pretty certain that my precision would triumph over his muscle.

This didn't turn out to be the case. I lost in a fairly one-sided match, pinned to the back wall by his blistering serve. But after that, I never limited myself to competing against girls my age. I knew I could play with anyone willing to join me on the court.

At 12, having reached the upper limits of the local ladies' league and the middle school boys' varsity team, I tried out for the men's league. I spent my Tuesday evenings traveling to area clubs, playing men in their 30s and 40s who accepted defeat at the hands of a preteen girl with varying degrees of sportsmanlike grace. Faced with a 90-pound opponent, one man I played worked himself up to such a pitch of competitive fervor that he struck himself on the forehead with his racket, opening a gash that spouted blood. Enraged, he ran to the men's locker room, fashioned a makeshift towel turban and insisted on finishing the match while his turban turned crimson. Unshaken by this spectacle, I beat him handily.

Competing on equal footing with the opposite sex was the athletic path my parents had always hoped I'd follow, and I was happy to play along. They were thrilled when, years earlier, I'd lost interest in ballet and eagerly began whipping a racket and running around a court. My mother, who grew up during a time when women's athletics—and career ambitions—were tolerated at best and discouraged at worst, always wished she'd had more opportunities to compete. For her daughter, she envisioned a different kind of upbringing. On weekends when I wasn't traveling to tournaments, we campaigned for congresswomen and female judges, attending meetings of a local women's advocacy group. My mother made it clear that we were emerging from a time when submissiveness and a spirit of apology were requisite aspects of being a woman. She wanted me to be fierce.

And I was. Playing squash gave me such satisfaction. Slicing my racket through the air in an ideal arc so that the ball pinged off my strings made a sound that still gives me shivers to remember. I never apologized when I beat BOYS > 90

(SELF) WORTH

an opponent in the men's league, even if he exited the court muttering obscenities.

In school, I aired my opinions with similar force. Until, that is, I began to realize my behavior was branding me as a social anomaly. It was during a game of "library basketball" when the other kids first made fun of my swagger. Because gym class was usually segregated by gender, this game, in which the librarian had us shoot a small ball into a plastic hoop after answering questions correctly, was the only time girls and boys competed together. After making a basket, I triumphantly sauntered back to my seat. When the laughter and whispers started to ripple through the library, I was shocked that anyone should find my jubilation unnerving. Wasn't the goal of library basketball to score baskets? Returning to my chair, I discovered there was something to be embarrassed about in the way I was succeeding. The shock came with such impact that tears pricked at my eyes.

From that moment, I began observing the ways in which girls were meant to act differently from boys. That year, and in the

ones that followed, I learned that boys could strut and talk trash, but girls were meant to be humble. To be popular, a girl should feign shyness. With boys, she should be sweet and not debate their answers in class. Even the teachers seemed to regard aggressive girls with a little suspicion. It was better to be surprisingly, not obviously, intelligent.

This was a radically different set of expectations from the ones to which I'd grown accustomed in the men's league. With a sensation of terrible bereavement, I realized that if I wanted to fit in at school, I'd need to cultivate an alternate personality. On the court, I was still ferocious. Off the court, I became quiet and self-deprecating. I started flipping my hair and forced myself to speak less in class. I worked to add a slight slouch to my posture. My classmates seemed to appreciate this general contraction of my presence.

This costume of timidity initially felt like wearing an uncomfortable outfit, one that made me awkward and ashamed. Yet every day when I went to school, I dressed up the same way. Eventually, I began to truly

feel less confident, to understand myself as timorous. Ever a good competitor, I trained myself to adopt all the right traits for my in-school personality. That primarily meant seeking out disrespectful boys to date.

When a boyfriend first cheated on me in ninth grade—while I'd been away winning a national tournament—I experienced a sickly feeling of accomplishment for having been slighted and getting to play the role of victim. Between classes, everyone rallied around me; they supported me in my humiliation as much as the crowds had supported me in my athletic victory. With every squash success I achieved, in high school and later in college, I chose a more discouraging person to date—the narcissistic musician who never listened when I spoke, the heavy drinker who insulted me in front of my friends. It was as if I owed it to the deities of my gender to sacrifice a portion of personal strength for every ounce of muscle I gained.

By the time I graduated from college and turned pro, I was miserable. My romantic life was in shambles and my athletic

performance started to suffer. I funneled my unhappiness into overtraining, and my body began to break down. The more sprints I ran, the slower I got. I felt heavy and numb. I developed sleeping problems.

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As my tournament results sagged, I knew I had to resolve the divide of my life. I'd spent too long playing a double role and was left with no sense of who I was. I reasoned that the only way I could find myself was to return to the time before my personality started to split. What had I wanted from life before becoming two separate people?

At night, exhausted after training, I tried to remember what my earliest dreams had been like. When I was a little girl, I'd wanted to be a writer or a doctor. But from the time that I pursued squash, my accomplishments on the court had always defined

me; all my other goals had become abstract, amorphous. So at 24, I took a summer off from squash for the first time in 17 years. Armed with a backpack full of poetry, I left for Honduras to volunteer in a hospital.

I'd often traveled by myself to tournaments in other countries, but living alone for eight weeks in an unknown city and working in a new environment meant that I had to banish my timid self from existence. I craved the assurance I possessed when I hit a perfect drive, and I needed it as I spoke to a patient or walked down the street in Tegucigalpa, trying not to feel like a stranger.

From a different hemisphere, I considered my tumultuous relationship back home with a man who broke up with me—monthly, it seemed—before begging to get back together. Having already split with

squash, I saw that I also needed to end the pattern of bad relationships I'd started so many years earlier. When I returned to the United States, I promptly ended it with the guy and applied for a Ph.D. in literature. I scaled back my participation in tournaments and took a coaching job to help save up for graduate school. The time I once spent on court sprints I now devoted to reading. It wasn't easy—I was behind my peers in this new academic territory. But I was well versed in discipline.

That spring, after I accepted an offer to join a master's program in Texas, I played and won my last match at the Men's National Team Championships. When it was over, I sauntered out onto the street, finally ready to leave behind the sport that had bound me to my double self. I wanted to move with confidence into a new career, into better relationships and into the rest of my life. Maybe someday I'd go back to it. But at that moment, I was eager to discard my childhood costume, to run and smash and swagger with abandon. I was learning to define a new set of rules—my own. ●
