



No Pain, No Gain

When Ivan Lendl called for a hitting partner, wild horses—or dogs—couldn't keep this player away.

BY MARC HOWARD

Under normal circumstances, being bitten by a ferocious dog is the stuff of lifelong trauma. In my case, it's associated with the most remarkable tennis experience of my life.

Cajun, you see, was not any old dog. He was one of four German shepherd guard dogs that belonged to a one-time

tennis partner of mine named Ivan Lendl. In September 1991, I was a junior at Yale University. I was a good college player but had no illusions about turning pro. As I arrived for a Monday practice, my coach, smirking, asked me, "Who do you want to play with tomorrow?" As I thought about it, he added, "How about Ivan Lendl?"

It turned out that he had met Lendl at a tournament over the summer. Now, two days after Lendl had lost in straight sets in the U.S. Open semifinals, he had called looking for a practice partner.

The next day, I drove an hour to Lendl's house in Greenwich, Conn. I was early, and I noticed several of Lendl's dogs running around. The groundskeeper made a point of introducing me to them. As I lay stretching, eyes closed and barely able to contain my excitement, I felt a soft, warm tongue licking my face. It was one of Lendl's shepherds, Todd. We rolled around playfully for a few minutes.

Lendl arrived with one of his coaches, and after crisp introductions we started hitting. I expected to do drills, but after a brief warm-up Lendl announced that we were playing sets. So there I was, about to launch into a match with someone I had watched on TV for hundreds of hours. Someone whose every trait, from the pocketful of sawdust to the unusually high ball toss, was familiar.

Lendl seemed to enjoy my anxiety. He won the toss and elected to receive, grinning slyly as he said, "I like to start with an early break."

I started timidly and he quickly took two games. I realized that my only chance to give him a workout was to be aggressive and go for my shots. In the third game, I hit three aces and a backhand winner to hold serve. I played some of the best tennis of my life despite losing 6-3, 6-1.

Afterward, Lendl invited me to hang out. Over the next few hours, I saw a side of him that was at odds with the dour perfectionist projected by the media. He was lighthearted and jocular, despite his unparalleled determination and competitiveness.

It struck me that while Lendl had a wife, Samantha, and four lovely daughters, the unwavering pursuit of greatness must have left him lonely. His obsessive focus also seemed to be linked with deep feelings of insecurity—about his ability to compete, to perform, to win. And what could be a better antidote to loneliness than having a dog?

Well, maybe having four dogs.

Ostensibly, Lendl's dogs were meant to secure the perimeter of his large

property (as if the cameras and groundskeepers weren't sufficient). I suspected that their real purpose, given their obedience and loyalty, was to secure the perimeter of their master.

It was apparent that Lendl took great pride in his dogs. He bragged about how well-trained and disciplined they were. They seemed to symbolize the same absolute perfection that their master strived to achieve on the tennis court.

A few weeks later, Lendl called and invited me back to play again. When I arrived and got out of the car, he sauntered toward me to shake hands. One of his dogs ran between us. I reached out to pet him and was surprised to hear a growl. I quickly withdrew my hand, but before I knew it the dog—Cajun, whom I had not met during my first visit—pounced.

Cajun bit into my left leg, hard, slashing through my jeans and sinking his fangs into my upper thigh. By then, Lendl was screaming at the dog, who immediately released his grip and plopped to the ground, confused, shaking, and (to add insult to injury) visibly aroused.

I was stunned. Blood streamed down my leg. Samantha ran out and we all wondered what to do. I blurted out what I felt: "I want to play." So we bandaged up my leg and hit the courts. The adrenaline rush of playing with Lendl helped numb the pain, and I played terrific tennis again. While I lost by the same score, I did break Lendl's serve, prompting him to hit a ball into the back fence in frustration.

On the way home, still on a high from playing with Lendl, I thought more about our workout than my injury. The difference between the college and pro versions of tennis seemed subtle compared to other sports. I realized that serves are hit just about as hard, and the level of athleticism is comparable. The real difference, I now knew, was depth.

Lendl rarely hit a ball that landed more than a few feet inside the baseline. I frequently hit short balls and each of them meant that the point was over. So, I fantasized, if I could hit with more depth, maybe I could make it on the tour.

The next morning, I woke up to find my sheets stained with blood. When I went to have the wound checked, the nurse took one look and berated me for not coming in earlier for stitches. The doctor told me that since one of Cajun's canines had gone all the way into my

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thigh, it may have torn some muscle. I had to take two weeks off from tennis.

It turned out I had been lucky. Todd, the shepherd I had met the first time I was at Lendl's, was supposed to follow a trespasser around, growling. Cajun was trained to bite people in the leg. Another of Lendl's dogs was schooled to go for the throat.

A number of people advised me to sue, and I certainly had been traumatized. For a few years I had flashbacks whenever I came near a German shepherd. But I never considered a lawsuit.

Over the next few weeks, Lendl called a few times. Once, without saying anything else, he asked, "What size pants do you wear?"

I told him and asked why he wanted to know.

"Cajun wants to know," he replied, promising that Samantha would buy me some new jeans. He must have been in a good mood, because he also joked that I should take a photo of my wound and send it to Cajun. "He would probably lick it," he snickered.

I had one more opportunity to play with Lendl. It was in the winter, and we played at an indoor club, so I didn't get to see Cajun. Lendl forgot to bring the jeans that Samantha had bought for me.

"Next time," he said.

He called me over spring break, when the Yale team was in California. He left three or four messages, including this last one: "Marc, this is Ivan. I haven't heard back from you. Maybe you're away. I hope you get this in time, because I have nobody to play with tomorrow."

It was truly bizarre. Here was one of the greatest players in the history of tennis practically begging me to play. By the time I called back, the opportunity was gone—he was either traveling or injured. Lendl retired shortly thereafter, and like much of the world I haven't had any contact with him since. I never did get those jeans.

But the voice on that machine stays with me, evoking memories of his greatness and his insecurity. And when I look down at the scar that Cajun left, it makes me appreciate Lendl's all-consuming drive for success, along with his all-too-human—and canine—imperfections. ●

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