

Mixed-Up Doubles

When TV and tennis meet marriage and memory, reality gets rearranged.

**By: Kerrie Houston
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Tennis is never about *tennis*, Kerrie," my tennis coach said. "It's about people dealing with their issues...lots of issues." We both laughed—but that was before I wrote myself onto a reality-television show about tennis.

A casting call had gone out on TV and radio, and to all the tennis clubs in Western Washington—including mine, the Bainbridge Athletic Club. "Tennis Underdogs" was to be one of 13 episodes in a series (*Me vs. Me*) that Lance Armstrong's coach

would host on the Fine Living Channel. The premise: Take underdogs in various sports (e.g., a dad who regularly loses on the links to his golf-pro wife *and* three-year-old son), and turn them into über-dogs by flying them out to Washington, DC, to train with Wimbledon finalist and U.S. Women's Olympic Team coach Zina Garrison.

I wrote like a streak, explaining why I should be the lucky underdog—even though I'm not one. I play tennis on Bainbridge teams that compete with 22 other clubs; last year we won the league championship. So I wrote an autobiography for my husband, Patrick. I explained how I'm a corporate pilot, and failure at *anything* has never been an option—except tennis. And how the only reason my wife (me) gave me her phone number when we met

on a plane was because when she asked if I played tennis, I said yes. Truth is, I can barely keep score, and my wife can't stand the way I hold the racquet like a Ping-Pong paddle....

Maybe I wanted revenge: Consciously or subconsciously, I've never forgiven Pat for claiming he was a tennis player. Certainly I wanted to see if I could write a reply that would get us on the show. But only when I set all this down did I realize: It had everything to do with my dad.

My father, Darrell Bob Houston, was a locally famous gonzo writer, an editor for the *Post-Intelligencer* whose column "Sunday at the Movies" told stories of everyday life (and realities) written as though they were movies. A self-taught tennis player, he coached my oldest brother to the Washington State High School Doubles

Championships—twice. My mind floods with memories of playing tennis, first on the Lower Woodland courts by the headlights of Dad's old station wagon, then on clay courts at exclusive clubs in Japan. In 1970 when I was 10, he won a prestigious Alicia Patterson fellowship and we moved to Japan. When we returned, the *P-I* wouldn't take him back, he moved to California to take a job with the *Los Angeles Times*, and family life as I knew it ended.

Soon after I sent my husband's underdog autobiography, the casting director wrote back. The producer loved my (his) story and could they interview me (him)? Posing now as myself, his wife, I replied that Pat was out of town but would contact them when he returned. When I told him what I'd done, he gasped: "What the hell have you gotten me into, Kerrie?!"

He was still fuming when he took the ferry to Seattle for the interview.

"I hear you're a Type-A pilot?" the producer prodded.

"Do you want a Type B flying your airplane?"

"Tell me about a bad day for you," she continued. When *you* make a misjudgment, that's a bad day. When I have a bad day, I'm a lawn dart."

The meeting ended with Pat telling them he didn't care if he were chosen or not... which, of course, he was.

The night before the first tennis shoot, I asked what he'd wear. He slammed the door. The next morning he came downstairs in short shorts, with his blond hair blown dry and glistening with hairspray. He smelled of Jovan, and his untanned legs were slathered in white suntan

lotion that wasn't quite rubbed in. Either he was playing the "before" part to the hilt, or he was playing himself too well.

At Wing Point Golf & Country Club we were paired against a club pro and my TV-attractive teammate Louise, whom the casting director intimated it would be nice to have more of on camera. Their job was to make me look as good as possible and Pat look as bad as possible. Pat swung, missed, called the wrong score, and tripped on his tied shoelaces. The producer winced: "Is he really *that* bad?" I didn't know. I'd only played with him once, on our third date.

The next week Pat headed east to train with Zina Garrison. There, in the nation's capitol, in 95-degree heat and 95 percent humidity, he learned to play tennis by getting pulverized and humiliated by

Zina's eight-year-old students. She kitted him out in extravagant gear by Yonex and Adidas. When he returned he met me at the tennis club in an untucked, loose-fitting aqua Yonex shirt that matched his eyes perfectly. His steel-grey long-board shorts looked amazing against his tanned legs. He smelled of Abercrombie's Fierce. He smiled and exuded an I'm-going-to-kick-some-tennis-ass sexiness.

"Let's do the up-and-back drill!" he exclaimed. "How about the overhead drill where you have to touch the net first, then run back for the overhead?" His mastery made me feel like I was having an affair with the new club pro.

On the last day, shooting the "after" sequence, Pat and I played doubles and beat Louise and her pro

"husband." For a victory lap, we had to jump off a dock, into the frigid island waters. The shooting schedule listed a formal interview afterward, at which Pat and I would discuss our reality-TV experience. I imagined the ending of *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*, with Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt all glammed up, swapping sexy banter. Instead I was interviewed emerging dripping from the Sound, a Northwest Creature from the Black Lagoon.

The filming culminated at Boeing Field with Pat looking very cool, leather flight jacket over his shoulder, preparing his supersleek Challenger 300 jet for takeoff. The viewers will discover he's not the big dummy they took him for. And I'll think of my dad and what he would say if he knew how reality turned out after I wrote my way into it.