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# Rainey

A connection that started 40 years ago  
with tennis lessons just got a whole lot deeper.

By **Patrick Sauer**  
Illustrations by **Dalbert Vilarino**

# Days

**T**o the best of my recollection, I've played in exactly one tennis tournament. If I participated in more, there's only one that sticks. The one when I was 11. The one I got kicked out of for chucking my

racquet.

The Pioneer Park Invitational—a name I just made up, but please let's give it some gravitas—was held on a weekday morning on the local Billings, Montana, courts my brother Matthew and I biked over to for summer lessons, two or three times a week, from 1981 to 1983. In '82, when I was 11 years old, instructor Rainey Lamey, a local phenom who pulled off a high school threepeat—beating close friend and Billings Senior High Lady Bronc teammate Nancy Dimich each time—in the '79–81 Class AA championships, took over operations and added a tournament. Rainey's the one who bounced me out, sending me on a meandering trek back to Clark Avenue where, yet again, I would disappoint my parents with behavioral deficiencies.

I had legitimate racquet-tossing reasons. Forty years ago, they fell on deaf ears. And fine, fair enough, it was an automatic ejection, but hear me out now: It wasn't simply tween McEnroeian brattiness. Rainey, having just finished her freshman year at the University of Michigan (but not playing Big Ten tennis yet), hired high school kids to serve as umps. In a close match, my female opponent hit a ball that landed half a foot behind the baseline. No call went up because our dedicated teen ump was trying to make time with another rosy-cheeked volunteer and not paying a lick of attention to the match—*his match*—at hand. To save face, he asked my opponent where the ball landed. "In," she

emphatically replied.

*Aaaaaaaa*and the Wilson goes flying.

I relayed the story to Rainey, 59, over the phone recently and she cackled: "I don't remember specifically giving you the boot, but that sounds about right. It's entirely possible, because the only cost to join that tournament was a can of balls, and they didn't even have to be new, so it was a madhouse with 120 kids running around.... I do remember kicking you out of practice for taking big swings and hitting balls over the back fence. The kids were getting restless because we didn't have that many balls to begin with, so we kept having to retrieve them and I'd had enough."

Knocking balls out of the park à la Billings Mustang—turned-1982 MLB co-home-run leader Gorman Thomas mainly to disrupt practice? A moment lost to my mind, but definitely in my wheelhouse. Stories of my workaday delinquency never surprise me—I was a real screw-off type of a kid—but I harbor no hard feelings about Rainey's tennis utopia. Those days conjure genial memories, but not in a "life lessons from the ole ball coach" sense. My small Catholic high school didn't offer boys' tennis (and I certainly wasn't good enough to play the junior circuit Rainey herself dominated, if I even knew it existed), so by 13, I was done. But maybe I should have cared more and tried harder. The program did wonders for Tony Pett, a Pioneer Park alum who went on to win two Class AA boys' titles and play collegiately at St. Mary's in Moraga, California.

"Rainey was instrumental in getting me excited about, and committed to, the game of tennis. She was a magnet. Kids gravitated to her, and she became a huge mentor to me," he says. "We trained together over the years. She was a terrific teacher, but once we

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switched from drills to a set.... There were no friendships at 0-0. Didn't matter if you were 12 years old. To beat Rainey, you had to earn it."

I'm sure my parents stuck me and my brother in lessons to get two of their four boys out of the house, not in an attempt at grooming prodigies, but I've never forgotten the lessons because of how much fun we had. All thanks to Coach Rainey. One drill in particular stands out: Jedi Tennis. Rainey would place kids in the center service court with their backs to the net. She would simultaneously hit the ball and say, "Go." Kids would have to spin around and react, using Jedi mind tricks to track the ball and return it over the net. The drill was to teach us not to take a full swing on a volley, but we were still young enough to sweat it out waiting for the blazing forehand to come *whizzing right toward our face*.

"Jedi Tennis, of course. Rainey loved all that sci-fi stuff. We used to go play videogames at Aladdin's Castle in Rimrock Mall," says Pett. "There was this one sit-down game where small alien spacecraft would come at you from all sides and you had to shoot them down. Rainey just destroyed the game, and I asked, 'How did you get so good?' She said, 'I can see beyond what's on the screen.' She may have believed she had the Force."

The Force may or may not have been with Rainey, but the mindset to conquer the regional tennis landscape certainly was. I was unaware of her dominance, built upon a simple tennis ethos: Come to the net, she will.

"Rainey Lamey was the best serve-and-volley player in the history of Montana women's tennis," says Jerry Peach, the Treasure State guru who spent decades coaching at all levels, including the juniors at the Yellowstone Racquet Club, the state's first indoor venue, which he opened in 1973. "When she was 14 or 15, we played in the mixed-doubles finals of the Montana Open, against adults.



Twice she returned serve with a chip shot at her male counterpart's feet; twice he came to the net, went up in the air with it; and both times she drilled it into his gut. Match point, he stays behind the baseline, Rainey hits a beautiful drop shot, and we win the tournament. Same year, I believe, she won the Montana Open women's singles final. At the height of the tennis boom. That's how good she was."

Throughout high school, Rainey spent the summers playing all over the state and throughout the Rockies, holding her own against better competition and winning enough to make a name for herself. She crossed paths with a future legend—an up-and-coming pre-mullet elementary schooler named Andre Agassi. ("Even at that age, his game was amazing.") And her advanced skills had her taking on a dying relic of the past in an exhibition against Title IX's spiritual nemesis, Bobby Riggs. In 1977, he was in Billings as part of a no-doubt on-the-level fundraiser against a few young women, talking nonstop and hamming it up at every turn. Rainey thinks she lost 6-3 but knows he was gaming her 14-year-old self. Riggs was tanking points and taking bets with audience suckers, but Rainey remembers that even at 60, he was the far superior player and upfront about his hucksterism. It was supposed to be all in good charitable fun, but this is Bobby Riggs we're talking about here. He told the *Billings Gazette* Rainey will "be another Billie Jean King, only better looking." And as for the large sports-section photo of the two of them:

"I remember Riggs grabbing me at the end. In the newspaper photo, my head is craned back as far as possible," she says. "I saw Riggs plant a 'too much' smooch on Nancy Dimich. I was very unenthusiastic that it happen to me, too.... Gosh, that phrase sounds familiar."

Riggs' chauvinistic sideshow aside, Rain-

ey really did run the state. For decades, Peach saw 'em all, and measure for measure, he gives her top historical Montana marks in first serve, second serve, and overhead. Her combination of power, placement, and an utter fearlessness going to the net, which gave her a huge advantage as every other Montana girl of the era stayed behind the baseline hitting ground strokes, was untouchable. Her high school opponents weren't up to Rainey's snuff. In three years, she lost *one* singles match.

It was exciting to fill in all the gaps about someone from my past who left an indelible mark. I couldn't wait to learn more about Rainey's life in tennis, so it came as quite a shock to find out she gave up the game decades ago, by choice.

In July 2020, I spent an afternoon in Pioneer Park with my wife and daughter. We had no equipment, but I showed them the courts where the tourney ejection went down. Memories trickled back and I wondered what became of Rainey. I tried looking her up online, but not actually knowing her last name, or the exact spelling of her first, thwarted my efforts from the jump. Craziest thing, though, while watching Nick Kyrgios lay waste to his Yonex at last year's US Open, my middle schooler asked yet again to hear the story of her father's humiliation, so racket abuse was in the air. Two weeks later, out of the blue, I got an email from Rainey.

She offered condolences on the death of my father, the reason we left Brooklyn and spent six weeks in Montana during the first stupefying COVID summer. Rainey had come across the obituary I had written for Dr. John Patrick Sauer while looking for a tribute to her father from his longtime Billings law firm. Arthur Lamey died this past February. Entering one's 50s means offering



memories-as-blessings to friends who've lost parents on a regular basis, so as the catalyst to our cosmic reconnection, it makes unfortunate sense. Learning Rainey and I also share another life-altering tie that binds with nothing—and yet everything—to do with tennis was a deeper deal altogether.

I don't need to look up 1970s and '80s Montana divorce statistics to know it was endemic. I lived it. It's not an exaggeration to say that at the low end, half of my friends, classmates, neighbors, and girlfriends came from, or ended up in, broken homes. Including, eventually, my own. The Sauer family's long, awful dissolution began in the summer of 1993, right after I graduated from college. It was the last significant length of time I spent in Montana until two years ago. My three brothers and I knew there was something wrong with Mom spending all day in her bedroom, but she also kept letting us get fast food for dinner, so we decided on a don't ask, don't tell policy. At 22, maybe I should have recognized the seriousness of it all, but I'd barely been home for three years and was mainly killing time closing down bars before leaving for New York City come August.

My youngest brother, Dan, still in high school at the time, was the only one left at home as things completely unraveled. He lived with Mom in a small apartment, as I would, a few years later, on the East Coast during a wayward period before leaving for grad school. Mom had a hellacious childhood, which she buried to build the life she dreamed of. Later, when her parents passed on, the demons resurfaced, becoming both a cause and effect of the end of her marriage. She never recovered. Mom's breakdowns came at random times and speeds—mournful wailing at night, bursts of rage at breakfast, quiet tears in the grocery store—leaving me helpless to do anything to take her pain away, while also wishing I could be anywhere else on the goddamn planet.

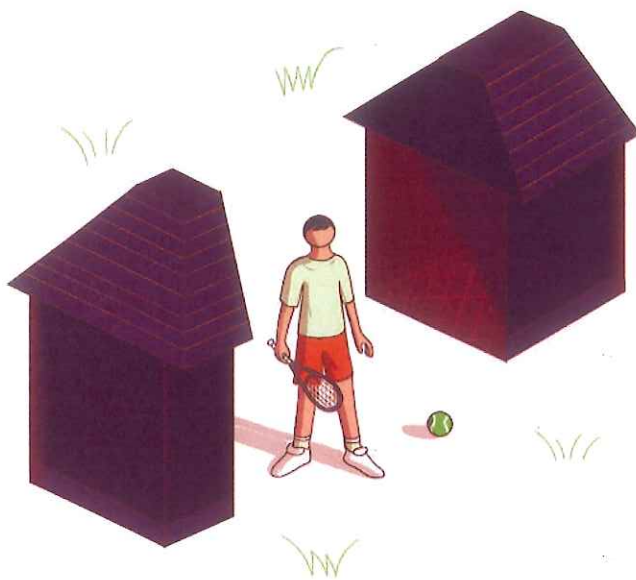
Like, say, sweating out cross-court drills at 11 p.m. on a school night at one of the three indoor courts Billings had to offer.

"Rainey Lamey was the most sensitive kid I ever had the honor of working with, and I'm proud I played an important role in her life to this day," Peach says from his women's coaching gig at St. Michael's College in Colchester, Vermont. "I wish she could have let her guard down, there was just too much trouble at home."

Rainey and I talked for over two hours, and while she didn't go deep into the dark recesses of the aftermath of her parents' divorce, it was clear she was forced to grow up in ways no child should ever have to. Her dad was her rock, but he moved out and remarried, and her older brothers were both gone. I was an adult when I lived briefly in Mom's chaos, but one story Rainey told took me back to one of the hardest things to deal with on a regular basis, the sheer *unpredictability* of it all.

"I was named after my dad's sister Lorraine, a nun in the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph. In what wasn't one of my mom's better moments, she decided to change the spelling of my name for a tournament to Rayn. I said, 'That's not happening,' so I came up with a divorce compromise, Rayne, which is how my name was spelled in a lot of newspaper accounts," she says. "It's one example of how hurtful the divorce was. Communication broke down. Times were different back then. I was the last kid at home and I took on too much. In the latchkey-kid era, my well-being wasn't as important as it would be today. I think both my parents understood tennis was one of the main ways I processed things, but it was often merely an escape."

At the end of her high school career, Rainey believes she was ranked in the top 10 for the Intermountain region, but she needed a time-out. Always a curious, diligent



A student, she turned her attention to the cosmos and astrophysics. Rainey told her dad she didn't want to play competitively anymore, effectively ending any chance of a professional career.

"He swallowed hard, knowing how much money he probably still owed for all the tennis expenses over the years, but said it was fine because it was part of my growth," she says. "It was a big moment for me because I needed to understand family love isn't about meeting expectations."

It doesn't take a Ph.D. to recognize the mental toll the game took on Rainey. The sport is isolating enough as it is, doubly so when it's a stand-in for therapy. The matches ceased, but Rainey loved teaching kids and running the tennis clinics, so she kept at her summer gig. Eventually, Rainey made her way back to the courts, but not with the same fire. She made the University of Michigan team as a walk-on her junior year, played the lowest singles and occasional doubles—she remembers winning one upset match against Wisconsin—and then took another breather from the sport. The final tennis string broke when Rainey visited her brother in New Zealand and they hit the court for a friendly match. Or that was her intention, anyway.

"I couldn't play socially, I was in constant comparison with my old self. It was perfectionism, immaturity, and all the things tied up in my life growing up in tennis," she says. "There was no healthy engagement with the game. I'm thankful for all the sport has given me, the relationships and opportunities, but I knew I needed to let it go. Haven't really played since. Don't even own a racquet."

Over the years, Rainey has fully stripped away other parts of her life that no longer bring her joy. In her 30s, after getting tired of not knowing whether she would have "zero, one, or too many," she quit drinking. At some point after that, she stopped holding on to the idea that a full life requires a marriage

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with children. "I said to God, 'If you want this to happen, make it happen,' but I have a life to live and worrying about it is not worth another minute of my time."

Spirituality and mindfulness have become centerpieces of Rainey's life. After tennis, she found tranquility in yoga and peace in nature. She's become an expert in differentiating what the shades of gray in the clouds over Lake Michigan mean for the trees, and is content whiling away afternoons watching the hummingbirds out her window. During her long career at the University of Michigan—undergrad, environmental law degree, years of reading law school applications—she returned and immersed herself in the church she abandoned in her tennis days.

Five years ago, she got a master's in pastoral studies from Loyola Chicago, and has since retired from the University of Michigan and dedicated her life to service at the St. Mary Student Parish, an on-campus Catholic Campus Ministry with a social-justice bent. Rainey is there day in, day out helping colle-

gate kids on their spiritual journeys, delivering food to the pantries, assisting in liturgies, and even programming the Summer Film Series.

Time doesn't necessarily heal all wounds, but it has a tendency to dull them to a manageable ache. Rainey says her parents never got to amicability, but there was enough inner reconciling and outer forgiveness in the later years to at least give them all a sense of peace. Additionally, she's grateful that as time went on she got to know "Bernie and Art" in ways she wasn't able to as "Mom and Dad." It doesn't change the past, but it has allowed her to be more aware and alive in the present.

When Rainey contacted me, I had grand visions of getting together for a match, the old Tennis Mother and Petulant Child reunion, so it was a tad disappointing to learn it's not going to happen. (Even if I promise to be on my best behavior?) Either way, what was wonderful about catching up after four decades was finding out those lessons were

more than a lark; they were a special time for Billings kids. I was touched Rainey recalled our short time together fondly as well.

"I always had a soft spot for Patrick and Matthew on the tennis court, because my older brothers were Matt and Pat, but it was more than that with you. The second year we had the tournament, you helped umpire the younger-kid matches. In one, a girl was getting walloped by another girl and they both started throwing tantrums, and instead of dictating things, you came over and asked for help so both girls could get something positive out of the match. It changed the way I taught; you have to figure out where the student is at and meet them there, not where you think they should be, so they can thrive. I really came to count on you and the kids to have a great tournament.... Then we all went out for pizza at Little Big Men."

It rings a bell—or maybe it's latent longing for taco pizza like no other—but whatever the case, it's nice to hear. Hopefully my daughter will take away something from this side of Dad's youthful tennis exploits. There was more to his short-lived career than the oft-told tale of the Pioneer Park Invitational heave-ho. The remembrances of Billings tennis summers past forever remain as warm as Montana sunshine.

If Rainey had to give up the gift to reach this later-in-life level of contentment, so be it. Although, you know what? I stand corrected. I did learn one valuable life lesson I took to heart like a wannabe Jedi warrior: Tennis is fun.

Thanks for everything, Coach Rainey.

Once and for all, though, that ball was fucking out. ♡

**Patrick Sauer** is a freelance writer for a lot of respected publications, and even more that no longer exist. He lives in Brooklyn and prefers Holly Hunter as Billie Jean King in the 2001 TV movie *When Billie Beat Bobby*.





# RACQUET

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