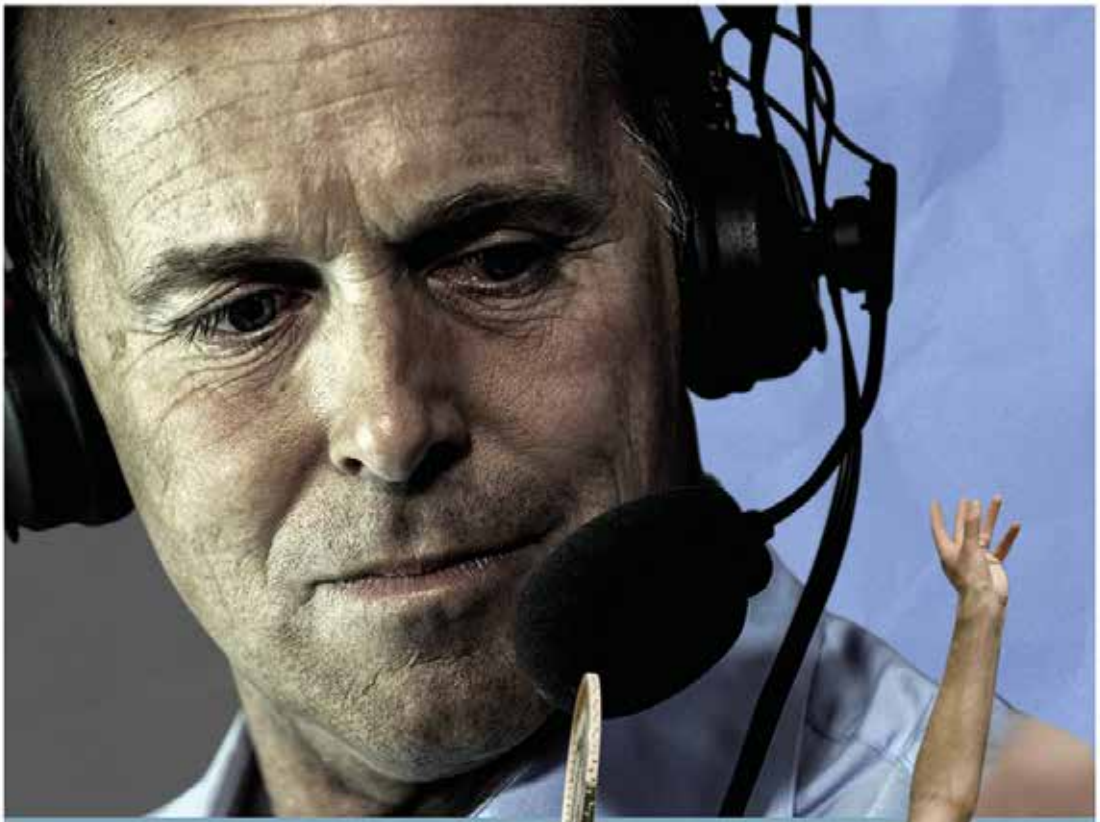
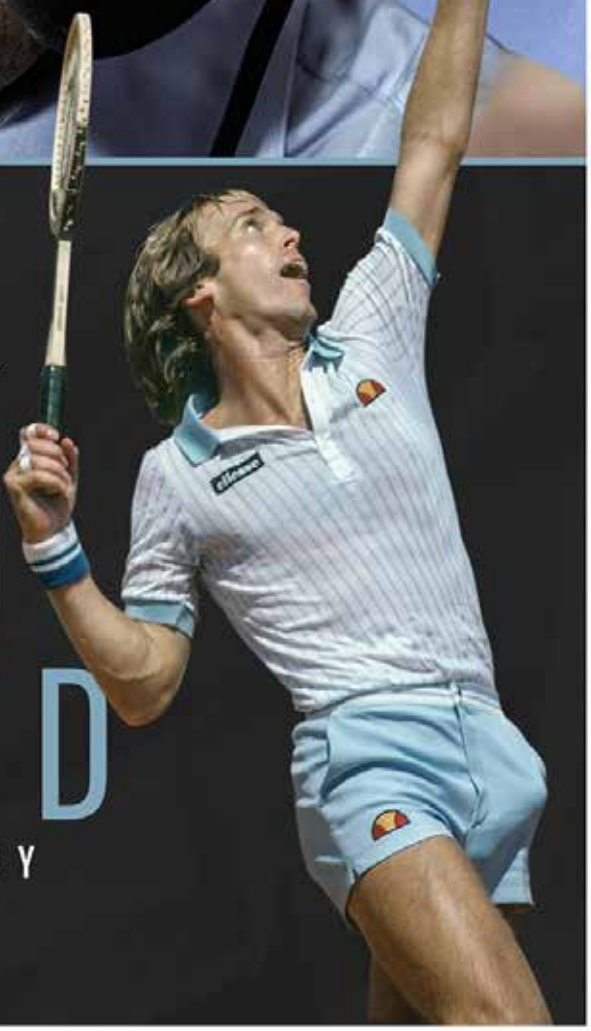


Dear John

THE JOHN LLOYD AUTOBIOGRAPHY



Dear John

THE JOHN LLOYD AUTOBIOGRAPHY

CONTENTS

MUM, DAD AND A TENNIS-MAD SCHOOLKID

A letter from the John Lloyd of today to his former self as he embarks on life in the green blazer of Southend High School for Boys.

Dear John,

Get an education. The dream is to become a professional tennis player. It's one you have had since you were five, when batting a ball against a tiny wall in the backyard was the daily ritual.

You believe you have the talent to succeed and you certainly have parents to back you all the way. But the chances of making it to the top are slim. Plus, one serious injury and it can all be taken away from you in a heartbeat.

Without an education, there will be nothing to fall back on. So, don't skip school on a whim. Your sore rear end will thank you for it. Attend and learn. Pass your exams. Then, when the worst befalls you at the start of your tennis career, you will have options and not just the worry of potentially shattered dreams. Just get an education.

John

MY MOTHER and father were amazingly selfless people. Many parents are, of course. The best mums and dads always put their children first. But the sacrifices my parents made weren't so they could proudly wave their children off to university, with the promise of careers as city professionals. No, they gave up so much in their lives to keep their boys' sporting dreams alive. Elder brother David, younger brother Tony and myself all wanted to make it as professional tennis players. We all dreamed of playing in the Wimbledon Championships. Thanks to Mum and Dad, those dreams came true for all of us.

My father Dennis was from a wealthy background in the south of England, while my mother Doris grew up in a mining family of 12 in the north-east. She lost one of her brothers in a mining accident: a terrible tragedy amid an early life of hardship.

We used to visit my grandmother in the old terrace Mum had grown up in. How so many people squeezed into that tiny brick house I could never understand. The streets resembled those used in the film *Billy Elliot*, about the child dancer from mining stock. The only bathroom – and its big old tub – was downstairs, the toilet was outside. There was a coal fire and no heating anywhere else in the house. Tony and me had to share with Gran. Even in winter, she would have the window open and just a single sheet to cover her in bed. It was bloody freezing. But they were made of sterner stuff in that mining community, fuelled no doubt by liberal mounds of suet pudding made in a handkerchief and drizzled with Lyle's Golden Syrup. I loved it. But I would be so full and bloated afterwards. 'This must be what it feels like to eat a football, whole.'

It was rough up there, but the locals were great people, so warm and welcoming. They were tough, though. By virtue of her upbringing and surroundings, so was Mum.

Doris met and fell in love with Dennis during the Second World War. My father was from money in Essex: big mansion of a house in Chingford, complete with its own tennis court, and all. The contrast to their respective lives in their formative years could not have been greater. Mum must have thought she had hit the jackpot when she married into that kind of wealth, with the promise of a life of luxury. Unfortunately for her, that's not how it panned out. Luxury, in Mum's case, was not for life.

When my grandfather on my Dad's side died of lung cancer, he left everything in two equal measures to his two children. My father was suddenly a very wealthy man. He decided to plough all his money into a retail clothes business in London. I was too young to know what was happening in Dad's work life. I just remember we had it good back then. The business was an apparent success.

Unfortunately, my father was too trusting of people. He was probably too nice for his own good. When a partner persuaded him to open up another arm of the business in Birmingham, it was the beginning of the end. He was, to put it bluntly, screwed out of his fortune. He lost everything and was left with massive debts.

What he did next was a wonderful life lesson for me. He didn't go bankrupt and carry the stigma of that through life. He took two jobs and paid all his creditors back in full, penny by penny. It took him 25 years, but he was never declared bankrupt. I always admired Dad for that. He told me: 'If you make a deal, you honour it. It's that simple.' That line about honour has always stayed with me.

Our family of six – Mum, Dad, sister Ann, brothers David and Tony and me – downsized into a three-up, two-down house on Woodfield Road in Leigh-on-Sea, which is a borough of Southend-on-Sea just to the north of the Thames Estuary. It wasn't much bigger than the house my mother grew up in and there was still an outside loo. That was an experience and a half in the middle of winter, I can tell you. Using the toilet for the first time and sitting on what felt like a large doughnut of ice, with the passing rag 'n' bone man shouting 'any old iron', is a memory never to fade.

Leigh-on-Sea's historical claim to fame was its minor involvement in the Norman Conquest of 1066 and its mention in the *Domesday Book*. My brothers and I had hopes of creating our own history for Leigh … on the tennis courts. And to that aim, our father's misfortune would – strange as it may sound – help us. That's because he took one job as manager of a friend's newly opened store, HW Stone's Sports shop, and a second job as tennis coach at the local club.

David was six years older than me and had hit many a ball against the wall at the back of the house. I wanted to be like my big brother, so copied him. Tony, in turn, copied me. It's where we hit our first volleys. A coal shed took up a quarter of the space in the tiny garden, so there wasn't much room to play tennis. But I was only four when I started practising against the wall, so I didn't need much space either. Every day after school, I would bat the ball against the small shed wall, imagining I was taking on some great tennis champion. It was my favourite part of the day: that and being first to the milkman's horse cart when he delivered one of those bottles with the cream on the top. That was just the best on my cereal,

and if I could get to it before the rest of the family it was a little victory.

When my father had his business in London, he was in the city six days a week. We didn't see much of him. Now things were different, especially at weekends. We would all join Dad at the Westcliff Hardcourt Tennis Club, where he coached part-time. It was a family club about half a mile from our house, not too far from the sea front. During the summer, we spent all day there. The kids would play football on the field there, have a game of hide-and-seek or go down to the beach, while the adults played tennis. Mum brought lunch down for us all and then, in the afternoon, we youngsters would get time on the courts. It was such a healthy way to grow up. My best friends were made at the club. Certainly, some of my best days ever were spent there. These were innocent, magical times.

Mind you, looking back, it was ever so antiquated. There were no indoor courts, so playing in winter – when it was dark from about 3 o'clock – required a floodlight that was pointed at just one of the courts. The net posts had spikes at the bottom. We'd use those to crack the ice on the courts in freezing temperatures. There was no way a bit of frost was beating us. I would think back to these days when I was about 16 and first playing in America. I was at the Orange Bowl in Miami, where all the world's best juniors gathered. The Americans I talked to – at least those based in hot states like Florida – had been able to play three or four hours a day, every day after school whatever the season. My rivals had probably spent 50 times more hours on court than me, maybe more. That's why in those days British players had a reputation for maturing late: they had talent but not enough court time on the clock.

When I first started playing tennis, as an infant really, my brother David was already ranked in the top ten in the country in the under-12s. He was doing well in local tournaments and was considered a top prospect. He always inspired me: always gave me something to target. Seeing him succeed is probably why I had the unshakeable belief I was going to be a professional tennis player. There was no doubt in my mind.

That, in turn, is one of the main reasons why I never gave a damn about school. What use was education to me? I was going to play tennis for a living. I was going to play at Wimbledon.

I passed my 11-plus exam to earn a place at Southend High, the grammar school for boys. That in itself was some kind of miracle. I had learning difficulties, which would be diagnosed quickly enough nowadays but weren't acknowledged back then. Unless there was repetition of a task or an experiment we were meant to carry out, there was something in my brain that prevented the information from sticking. It's hard to describe, but it had a damaging impact on my schooldays. In a class of 32, I was hardly about to receive special treatment. Visual stimulus I could respond to, but the lessons were unimaginative and as dreary as white chalk on black board. Again, no wonder I believed school wasn't for me.

This downer on school and learning was stupid in the extreme, of course. The chances of making it in tennis were slender and there was no money in the game. My goal wasn't kept secret. I didn't care who I told. Most people patronised me or thought I was plain daft. They thought tennis only happened properly two weeks a year, at Wimbledon. Anything else was a circus sideshow. When my father took me to Wimbledon as a 12-year-old, when I wandered the grounds in some permanent

state of bliss, I gazed at great champions like Lew Hoad and John Newcombe, I smelled the grass, I saw the new white balls brought from their boxes and thought: 'How fantastic. How glamorous.' This was for me. Somehow, I was going to make it happen. It never crossed my mind for even a solitary second that I might need qualifications to fall back on.

My headmaster was a 6ft 4in giant of a man, Mr Price. He was expressionless and looked for all the world like Lurch from *The Addams Family*. He didn't like me even before he met me. That's because he loathed my brother David, who had attended Southend High before me. David was always in trouble, picking fights with prefects and generally giving Frankie Price and his staff the runaround. David was a frequent visitor to the head's office – and not to collect badges of honour. But I didn't expect to maintain the family tradition quite so soon. My first run-in with Lurch came as early as day one.

The morning had already started badly because Mum had made the mistake of sending me to school in short trousers. Just two other mothers out of around 150 hadn't read the memo either on 'long trousers only' and made the same costly error. Costly because it drew even more attention to the new kid, leading to more teasing and possible beatings. Later, the English teacher – who, I was to learn, also hated my brother David – sent me to the head's office for something I hadn't done, as if to rekindle the family grudge. Lurch stared down at me from about ten feet in the sky and scared the living crap out of me. My only thought: 'I've got to stay away from this bad place called high school.'

That's what I did, as much as conceivably possible. I bunked off at every opportunity, usually climbing out of windows and threatening prefects to say I had been in school when I so

obviously hadn't. By lunchtime, I was normally out of there. I would save money from my paper round to play pinball machines at transport cafes. I became so good that a couple of shillings could see me through two hours of play. If it was good weather, I would go sunbathing on the cliffs. If I was particularly flush with cash, I would head to the cinema for an afternoon matinee. As long as I was out of sight and filling the afternoon, most pastimes would work to drown out school. My sister Ann wrote a few 'John can't attend school today because …' letters. They were a big help. But my attendance record was so bad – and when I was there, I was late nine times out of ten – that I couldn't escape punishment forever. A caning every now and then was inevitable.

The first time Lurch caned me was a monumental shock to my system. He lectured me for about ten minutes, then pointed to the cupboard in the corner. That's where he kept his collection of canes. I had to bend over his desk. He lifted my blazer to expose the hitting zone, then whacked me twice with full force. It was seriously painful. Lurch was such an expert with the cane that he managed to criss-cross his 'design' on my arse. Where the red raw lines met, he drew blood. He would lecture me some more before I could leave his office, doubtless knowing my backside was stinging. Then I would run to the toilets, fill a basin with cold water and sit my bare bum in it. I would leave it sizzling in there for a while, before planning my next escape. It was a battle of wills. We despised each other. I took gratification in knowing my class had the worst overall attendance record in the five years I was connected to Southend High.

Lurch had his petty revenge. When I was only 11, I was playing on the school's under-15s tennis team, thanks to an

invitation from an older boy named Trevor Stone. I was better than the older kids and being outmuscled was less of an issue at tennis than it was at rugby or football. Nonetheless, this was a big deal and pretty much unheard of. In many ways, it was a stupid thing for me to do. I had to give up my Saturdays to play on terrible potholed courts with threadbare nets and balding tennis balls against lads I could beat playing left-handed. But at the end of the first year on the team, we were awarded what were known as 'half colours'. That's to say a gold letter 'T' for tennis could be sewn on my blazer pocket as a mark of honour. Lurch had to begrudgingly present it to me at an assembly of around 500 students, so that in itself was probably worth the Saturday sacrifice. The year after, I was due to receive 'full colours'. This was gold braid stitched to the sleeve of each arm of a school blazer. No 12-year-old had ever enjoyed this distinction. I wasn't about to become the first. Lurch told me he was not giving me 'full colours' so as not to make me stand out from my peers. When I told my father, he immediately pulled me from the team and I never played for my school again.

Dad was remarkably supportive. Throughout all my truanting ways, my father was never on my case. Okay, so he hadn't seen all my report cards strewn with Ds and Fs because I had thrown them out of the train window. But all else considered, he was more than forgiving. He accepted it because he knew tennis was in my blood. He was also seeing tennis opportunities opening up for David.

With just our one floodlit court at Westcliff, playing during the week in winter was increasingly difficult. Dad asked Lurch if he could take me out of school on one afternoon a week to play at Queen's Club in London, where I had been accepted to

practise alongside other promising British juniors. Lurch said: 'I've never heard of anything so stupid.'

'If you don't grant permission,' said my father, 'I'll take him out of school anyway and move him elsewhere.' The headmaster reluctantly agreed, although how foolish of him to miss his chance to ditch me and improve the school's attendance record in one fell swoop.

So, on Wednesdays, I would leave school at midday, ride my bike the 20 minutes to my house, collect my packed lunch from Mum, head to the station and climb on the train to Fenchurch Street, eat half my sandwich on the 50-minute journey, walk to Tower Hill tube station and travel to Barons Court. I would arrive at Queen's Club about two.

The indoor courts there were made of fast, hardwood boards. Water sometimes leaked through during winter and we would have to throw down sawdust. There was no heating. It was freezing cold. But these were like five-star facilities to me, especially the big hot baths at day's end. There was no annoying knocking on the door to hurry up or battling for hot water like there was at home. Most important of all, I was able to play three to four hours at a time with players of my ability, watched over by a top coach.

My return journey started around rush hour. I would get a seat on the tube train at Barons Court, no problem. But it was packed out from Earl's Court onwards. The polite thing – and expected thing for a youth back then – was to vacate one's seat for a woman or an elderly person. I pulled down my bobble hat, pretended to be asleep and counted the number of times the train stopped to judge when to get off. I would get some dirty looks as I clambered from my nice, comfy seat; but hey, I had been playing tennis all afternoon. A boy needs his rest.

There was no pretending on the train from Fenchurch Street back home. I would eat the other half of my sandwich and then genuinely fall asleep, usually drooling on an unsuspecting stranger's shoulder. I would often get a nudge from the porter at the end of the line and have to head to the opposite platform to go a couple of stops back the other way. Even then, I would climb the hill to home and would be through the door by eight.

And all this, every week, on my own, at the age of 12. What innocent times.

My schooldays were finally over at the age of 15. I counted down the weeks until I could concentrate solely on my chosen profession. Exams were not for me. I left without an O level to my name. The mock exams had shown how futile even sitting them would have been. I sat the mock mathematics test over three days, starting with arithmetic. I took one look at the paper and decided that, on a good day, I would do well to get 30 out of 100. 'Why bother?' I thought. I signed my name where requested on the exam paper, then raised my hand.

'I'm finished, Sir.'

'You can't have finished, Lloyd. You only started two minutes ago.'

'Can I leave now, Sir?'

'No, you have to sit there for the next three hours.'

Next day, I learned from the error of my ways. This time, I signed the algebra paper and, rather than draw attention to myself by asking to leave, simply rested my head for a good, long nap.

My friends found all this very amusing, of course. But the headmaster did not.

'Nought out of 200!' he barked. 'Is this your sum knowledge of the last five years here? You are a disgrace to the school. All you have written is your name.'

It crossed my mind to say: 'Can't I at least have a mark for getting that right,' but I thought better of it. Lurch still had one eye on the cane cupboard. It was no less painful to be thrashed at the age of 15.

'Show me more effort in the geometry exam or you know what's coming to you.'

When I sat that test, I filled the pages with all kinds of triangles and theories, plucking something about Pythagoras from my memory banks. X equalled Y when multiplied by Z was one of my creative answers. Up went my hand for more paper. My friends were looking at me as if to say: 'What's happened to Lloyd? Has he gone mad?' Three hours later, I had shown more effort as requested. But the fact I had made it all up meant I scored another big fat zero. Let's just say the powers that be at Southend High were not pushing me to sit the proper examinations at the end of term. Instead, I was able to leave three weeks early. It was tennis time.

I moved to London and stayed in a YMCA. It was so cold in winter that I had to sleep with two tracksuits on. I did part-time jobs to pay my way, like washing cars, and simply lived to practise at Queen's Club or play in tournaments that would bring my childhood dream closer to reality.

Then, aged just 16, I received the shock of my life and the dream started to unravel.

Torquay was the venue for an indoor event I had entered. My habit, whatever the weather, was to hit the courts cold. It could be snowing outside and I still wouldn't warm up properly.

Straight away, I would think I could smack down big serves. Boom, I hit one serve. Crunch went something in my arm. I was in excruciating pain. For the one – and I think only – time in my career, I had to default. My arm was bent out of shape. I had done some worryingly bad damage.

My godfather was a lovely man by the name of Alan Murley. He was my father's best friend and, fortunately for me, one of the top bone specialists in Oxford. Alan examined me and told me, in his forthright manner, 'You've got a severe case of golfer's elbow. You've got the ligaments and tendons of a 40-year-old. To be quite frank, with an injury that bad, I'm not convinced that you are ever going to have a career in tennis.'

It was a devastating diagnosis. Here I was at 16, without any qualifications and with the prospect of my tennis career being over before it had even started. Perhaps the best I could now hope for from tennis was to coach in some capacity. That would not have been the end of the world, but right there and then it felt like it.

Alan explained: 'I'll try to help you with some exercises. But you can't – and absolutely must not – hit a tennis ball for six months.'

The exercises felt impossible at first. I couldn't even lift a glass of water with my injured arm. But they took effect in time. I could even work for a family friend's electrical business, helping two big bruisers lug fridges around. I was getting my strength back. But could I hit a tennis ball pain-free?

It was the scariest thing, that first day back on the tennis court. Had I rested my arm long enough? Would I be able to strike the ball without fear? It was difficult to forget the agonising pain of that serve six months earlier. 'Deep breath, John – here

we go.' I hit a forehand: no pain; then a backhand: no pain; then a serve: still no pain. The relief washed over me that I wasn't washed up at 16.

My godfather saved my career, I'm certain of it. If I had seen another doctor who had been less blunt and had sugar-coated the condition, I might have returned too soon and done irreparable damage. I respected Alan so much that what he said was gospel. I would never have gone against his advice or wishes. He put the fear of God into me, actually. With another doctor, who knows?

Alan might have saved my career, but the two men to nurture it were my father and a great friend John Barrett, for so long the voice of tennis on the BBC. My mother was a huge influence, too, of course. She was the organiser-in-chief, a proper tennis mum, not just to me, but all her sons. On the playing side, though, Dad and John were my earliest mentors.

How blessed was I to have a father who had no ego when it came to coaching me? He knew that at a certain level I would pass him by – that I would need to get advice from people who had played or coached at a higher level than Dad. He just wanted me to be the best player I could be. He didn't need to be front and centre, taking credit for producing a player with world-class potential.

It could have been so different. I could have been the son of a father who wanted the glory of manufacturing a champion: part of some kind of sporting experiment.

Stephen Warboys was a fellow Essex lad and one of my peers on the junior scene. Long before the careers of the Williams sisters and Maria Sharapova were dreamt up by ambitious fathers, Stephen was the first prototype for a wonder-kid turned champion. His father was a former British player, Jack

Warboys, a multi-millionaire with enough cash and clout to employ Wimbledon champions Rod Laver and Pancho Gonzales as his son's hitting partners. Stephen had an advanced nutritional regime, he was advised to sleep for a minimum of 11 hours a night, he wasn't allowed to watch television and he was home-schooled from the age of 11.

I was drawn to play Stephen in a competition sponsored by London's *Evening News*. The match took place on a court at his father's mansion, which also boasted a running track, a boxing ring and indoor swimming pool. When I saw the house and compared it to my family home, where we were packed together like sardines, there was a certain amount of envy. But it didn't last long. As soon as I realised there were no televisions in the house, my green-eyed monster was killed.

The 'Warboys Experiment' worked for a while. Stephen was just eight when he won the Under-15s Open Championship, only 13 when he became the youngest player in the Wimbledon Junior Championships of 1967 and was runner-up in that event four years later. For a while, he was probably the best junior tennis player in the world.

But by 1974, Stephen had fallen out with his father and would eventually relocate to Canada. He had been turned into a loner through no fault of his own. When the rest of us were partying at tournaments – just doing regular teenage stuff – he was stopped from joining in by his father. The older Stephen got, the more he must have resented that and wanted to rebel. He had been denied a normal childhood. There was nothing to envy in any of that. Thank heavens for a dad like mine.

Jack Warboys was 20 years ahead of the times. Many more parents have since tried to create tennis champions. What they

all failed to grasp is that in the vast majority of cases it doesn't work. Even if their children have success on the court, it usually comes at the cost of a lost relationship off it. I have seen examples of parents mortgaging their homes to pay for coaching in Florida. Imagine the pressure that puts on the child, even more so if they become the expected breadwinner at 14 or 15. Pathetically, it is usually a case of frustrated parents wanting to live their lives through their children.

When you look at it, when you get down to the very basics of it all, you could lose your precious relationship with your child over hitting a yellow tennis ball across a net. It's so ludicrous. Jack Warboys paid that price and I can't imagine anything more expensive.

While Stephen was being shackled, my father was letting me run free. Not only was I allowed to travel on my own to Queen's Club every Wednesday from the age of 12, but I was also given permission to stay overnight in London once a week to practise on the indoor courts at Wimbledon from a similar age. This was all courtesy of the fine gentleman that is Mr John Barrett.

John was a tennis pioneer, developing British talent with the help of his Barrett Squad – an elite group that trained together. John knew my brother David and was kind enough to take time to see me play. He saw my potential and, without asking for anything in return, agreed to help me progress. Every Friday after school, I would head to south London to stay at the flat John shared with his wife Angela Mortimer, the former Wimbledon champion. On Saturday morning before breakfast, we would run two to three miles around Wimbledon Common. We would then play a few hours on Wimbledon's indoor courts in the morning,

I would demolish several plates of food at lunch, before another few hours of tennis in the afternoon.

The first time we played, there were tennis balls strewn all over the court after practice. I left them there and went to sit down. John, pointing to the balls, said: 'What do you think you're doing?'

'My dad normally picks up the balls,' I replied in all innocence.

'No, no, not anymore. You do that. Pick up every one and don't say anything like that to me again.'

John was right, of course. I was a lazy sod. That had such an impact on me that, to this day, I pick up all the tennis balls wherever I play, even at things like corporate events, for fear of retribution. It's ingrained in me, just as the greatest kindness and consideration is ingrained in John Barrett – just as the very essence of decency was ingrained in my father.

Dad had one shot he loved more than any other. He called it the drag volley. It was a forehand or backhand volley at the net, where you had to cut the ball to create spin and an acute angle. Even if Dad lost a set, he was happy if he could come away saying he had hit a drag volley. Tim Henman was one of his favourite players and one day, after a victory for Tim, my father said: 'You hit two gorgeous drag volleys today.' Tim didn't have a clue what he was talking about, so I explained. Thereafter, Tim always asked after my dad – 'How's Dennis? Ask him how his drag volley is shaping up.'

A couple of years before Dad died, he was bedridden and no longer had good eyesight. But he could still enjoy listening to my commentaries on television. One player hit what I decided was very much like a drag volley. My co-commentator asked: 'What the heck is that?' I took great delight in pointing out: 'This is

a Dennis Lloyd speciality – my father's own brand of shot. I'm going to tell him to patent it, in fact. It should be in teaching manuals, with his name alongside it.' Dad loved hearing this and it apparently perked him up no end.

My head was always too big for caps and hats, so any I was given often ended up worn by my father while he coached. In his later years, when he was still only charging £8 an hour for a lesson and loving every minute of it, a woman in her mid-50s – not blessed with any particular talent, but a trier – was hitting some mid-court shots Dad's way. She connected with one at Mach 5 speed. It was on course for his head. His reactions weren't what they once were. He couldn't get his racket up in time. So, he used one of my caps – at least the peak of it – to flick away danger and probably injury. Dad loved telling me these stories. Even in some small way, the fact he wore my caps all the time he taught his beloved tennis kept us connected.

Dad was still coaching until he was 88; still listening to members claiming they had hit the legendary drag volley; still insisting he would not believe them without hard evidence – 'With all due respect, just a select few can hit a shot like that, you know … just a select few.' Only a couple of untimely falls and an insistent doctor put paid to his life on the courts.

We lost Dad in 2014 at the age of 94, four years after Mum's passing. Their spirit lives on in four children and tens more grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Dad remains the oldest playing member Westcliff ever had. He did always say: 'Tennis is a game for life.'

My parents sacrificed so much for us. We had the occasional holiday at Butlins, but there was nothing more glamorous for them. All their money most summers went on funding our

travels to tennis tournaments in other parts of England. Dad would stay home to work; Mum would come with us. That's just the way it was. We were having great fun at their expense. Many years later, when we boys started to make some money from tennis, it was fantastic to be able to pay for their more extravagant holidays and give them some kind of overdue reward.

But it was only the smallest of paybacks in the whole scheme of things, because how can you truly repay anyone for a childhood so extraordinary that inspired the fulfilment of a dream?

Dear Mum & Dad,

One of the biggest thrills of my life was winning the mixed doubles title at Wimbledon in the early 80s, looking down from the Royal Box presentation ceremony and seeing your smiling faces. That meant the world to me. I knew what you had sacrificed to get me there.

I love that I'm a life member of Westcliff Hardcourt Tennis Club, the place where we spent so many happy times together and where you were honoured with the unveiling of a commemorative plaque a decade ago. That was some speech that day, Dad. But then why should I be surprised that the man who led the club's annual pantomime productions could command the stage in such a manner?

Thank you for supporting me, for believing in me and for giving me the freedom to dream big. I hope I made you proud.

Your loving son,

John