

My Tennis at 50

Masaki Shiomi

Looking back on life, I realize there have been a few turning points. Among them, my decision to come to America tops the list. Turning 50 was also another memorable turning point. In Japan, 50 is called 知命 (*chimei*) taken from the Analects of Confucius. Here in America, it's called the Big Five O.

I don't know how it came to me that I wanted to do 'something' when I turned 50. But when I actually turned 50, I didn't know what. I juggled with many ideas. Painting? Singing? Or something more physical? I had never been good at any of them but gradually I decided to do something physical that I would not be able to do later in life. It took another 6 months before tennis was the winner.

Questions arose. How? Where? With whom? I had never been good at sports and I was old. My worries ended on 22 July 2000. My diary note for that day reads, 'Went to the park. Someone let me use his racket. Oh, that was fun!' Since then, tennis has always been a part of my life and has become one of the best things I have ever taken on.

My tennis 'career' started with 1 day a weekend and quickly became a whole weekend activity. Within a year, I started playing local amateur tournaments and even went on to a tournament in Canada. No matter what the result, playing in tournaments gave me a great feeling I had never had before.

One day, I got email from the United States Tennis Association (USTA) asking whether I was interested in becoming a captain in its Senior League. The USTA League is the country's largest recreational tennis league and is organized as competitive match play with a national championship. Teams are made up of a minimum of five to eight players. A captain organizes and manages a team in competing against other teams. I hesitated at first but eventually decided to take on this new adventure. The job



When playing in Canada

(Author)

description includes assembling players for the required matches, coordinating dates and venues with the captain of the opponent team and deciding play orders and pairing doubles. I did it for 3 years. Although my team wasn't successful, I can say that I gave it my best.

Flushing Meadow, the site of the US Open Tennis Tournament, is less than a 1-hour subway ride from where I live. In the mid-90s, something dramatic started happening in Japanese tennis, especially the women's side. As Kimiko Date's photos appeared in the New York Times, many in New York's Japanese community were drawn to Flushing Meadow. I was no exception although I was not yet playing tennis. Years later, after I had started, another Japanese sensation attracted the attention of the tennis world. In 2008, Kei Nishikori won his first ATP Tour tournament and reached the fourth round at the US Open. Early this year, he was named ATP's 'Newcomer of the Year.'

Speaking of Nishikori, believe it or not, I watched a match at the Open sitting next to him. If I remember right, it was September 2005 when he came to play the Junior US Open. I had no idea who he was. The second time I saw him was



At Wimbledon

(Author)

August 2007 at the first round of the Open preliminary. He looked very different. The shy boy in white was gone and he was quite hip with fashionable hair and attire.

Unlike swimming, which I also enjoy, tennis is definitely a social sport. I play 'pickup play,' which is a way of finding a partner. When I don't have a partner, I just go and find whoever is available at the court. As a result, I have had the pleasure of playing people from 5 to 70 years old.

I met Zouheir as a 'pick up.' When I arrived at the courts, I saw a young man sitting straight on a bench. We agreed to play and went to a court where he confessed that he had never played tennis. Many people don't like to play beginners because it is no fun. It could have been just a one-time deal but I kept playing him after that. Unlike many others, he was very reliable and respectful. It is said that the joy of tennis comes from playing someone who is slightly better than you are. By playing him, I came to realize this is not necessarily true. Joy can come not only from the skills and techniques but also from the person himself despite his skill. I learned

the joy of tennis as a social sport through this young Muslim from Morocco.

Zouheir is very religious. He goes to a mosque regularly and follows its teachings. I came to learn a little about his religion through him. Among them is Ramadan. It is an Islamic religious observance that takes place during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. The most prominent part of this month is the fasting, in which participating Muslims do not eat or drink anything from dawn until sunset. The meal they have after sunset is called breakfast (= break fast). Zouheir and Sanae, his wife, invited me for this breakfast. It started at 19:00 sharp with a Koran reading as the 'go' sign. Among the dishes, a soup called *harira* is very important according to Zouheir. I guessed it was gentle on the empty stomach. Other dishes included *jujube*, *msaman*, and small sandwiches. My favourite was *msaman*, which was like Japanese *yakimochi* (grilled rice cakes).

They had also invited me to dinner before Ramadan. I once mentioned that I liked couscous and Zouheir wanted to



Rackets in order for play on my vacation

(Author)



Relaxing time after tennis on my vacation

(Author)

show me home-made couscous. On that occasion, I made an unforgettable mistake of bringing beer as a gift. Zouheir took that 'small something' and put it in the fridge. He didn't say anything but I suddenly realized that Muslims don't drink alcohol. Needless to say, I was completely embarrassed.

During my vacations to a small seaside town in New Jersey, I carry my racket with me so I can join a tennis gathering there. Players are as 'young' as in their 40s and as 'old' as in their 70s. You hook your racket on the fence and players rotate in the order of the rackets. People are very nice and welcoming, the beach is wonderful, and so is the tennis.

I had never realized that starting tennis was this easy. As far as I was concerned, tennis was always a sport for the privileged. Then, why was it so easy? I think it's because I started it in America.

There are many differences between playing tennis in Tokyo and New York. In terms of facilities, there are 211 courts at 62 locations in Tokyo. *Suna-iri jinko-shiba* (artificial grass with sand) is the typical surface in Japan and totals 159 courts. In New York, there are 601 courts at 81 locations. Almost all surfaces are hard except for 37 clay courts.

In reserving a court, Tokyoites need a lot of patience because the process is unbelievably long and complex. This alone shows why there is no 'pickup play' in Tokyo. The fee is \$13 to \$18 an hour. In New York, court use is very simple. First, you get an ID card called a Permit and simply visit a facility and sign in. A Permit costs \$100 for an adult, \$20 for over 62 and \$10 under 17. It allows the bearer to play throughout the season (8 months) at any city-owned court. There is also a 1-hour ticket that costs \$7.

How about the price of rackets? From the Internet, a racket that costs \$360 in Japan is \$190 in the US.

How about the amateur tournaments? In New York, the main draw is played as the best of three sets. On the other hand, in Tokyo, I was told that 8-game pro-sets were the

norm due to the difficulty in reserving courts and 4-game pro-sets are played at times in the worst scenario.

I am sure both systems have advantages and disadvantages, but I would say that my joy of tennis has definitely been enhanced by the low cost and easy convenience in New York.

Tennis is an injury-prone sport. I have had various injuries such as knee tendinitis, a bad wrist sprain, golfer's elbow, and now tennis elbow. It has also become a barometer of my physical well-being. In my early 50s when I started, I could run for hours and recovery was not bad either. Recently, I have been feeling a slow slight decline and someday I will have to stop playing. However, there wouldn't be an end without a beginning and I have had tremendous joy and gained a lot of confidence from the sport. For this, I would like to thank tennis while praising myself for the decision I made at 50. ■

**Masaki Shiomi**

After moving to America in 1981, Mr Masaki Shiomi established himself as a freelance journalist registering with the U.S. Information Agency. In the late 90s, he switched career and worked as a publishing manager for Citibank, FleetBoston and Goldman Sachs. There, he witnessed firsthand the dot-com boom and bust, M&A on Wall Street, 9/11, international outsourcing and finally the latest collapse of the financial markets from within the industry. Mr Shiomi has recently resumed his writing career and is currently working on a book about Japanese immigrants.