

Rooikat Autumn

A tennis journey
of Generations

Aangename kennis, my naam is Dennis, Dennis Doringtrekker - en ek speel tennis!

Actually, my name is Etienne van Bart, grassroots tennis coach from Redelinghuys, but you can call me Dennis if you like.

Not long after we started the Rhuys Tennis Club - painting accurate lines upon a disused tar-concrete surface and planting poles and a net - Yzerfontein Tennis Club heard about my grassroots coaching of the local San children, and invited me to be their coach!

Yzerfontein is situated about two hours drive further down the languid Cape West Coast from Redelinghuys, within distant sight of Hoerikwaggo, or Table Mountain, a gigantic sphinx of a berg welcoming Pilgrims to the grandeur of Africa.

News tidings of Usman, the tennis Wizard from the North, reached my ears in Yzer during a sunkissed December Holiday tournament we held at the end of 2025, within sight of the saffron sea, so that we might as well have been playing beach bats.

"A story is like the wind," says //Kabbo the Bushman in Bleek's book of their folklore, "It is wont to travel to a far-off place." And though the message I received in the wind was slightly inaccurate, as happens with messages, in claiming he was from the Congo, still the impression of a master from the heart of Africa, plying his trade within sight of Hoerikwaggo, was true enough. Yet I took him to be of my generation, an older fox, because Marchand had told me

that Usman was coaching his daughter - I mean Marchand's daughter, Mia, at Christmas Tennis Club in Bellville. I did not gather the fuller story then, as if the prevailing summer South-Easterly wind diverted some of the drum-beats pulsing from afar with news of the return of the King.

But in my little tidal pool in Mzer I was King of the Court then, adorned in the heraldic 1996 Bafana Bafana black and gold and white and green striped shirt, a blast from the past unseating a King of a still prior generation, Roy Marshall, who once made it to the second round at Wimbledon.

Fathomless is the extent of the Sea of Being.

Faan Oosthuizen, Chairperson of Mzerfontein Sosial Tennis Club, reminds me of an ancient Mariner, a Captain of the Seas, one of the very good sort, who won't somner shoot an albatross, and who can tell when not to continue chasing the White Whale. White-haired with a matchingly white close beard, eyes shining with Love of God, Faan it was who reached out to me, when all I had left on my body were rags. Faan pushes the envelope; even if that means gently pushing a few buttons in the process; he roused me from holiday bliss to join Roy in a New Year's Eve doubles tournament. (Where young Mia Verhage had won the junior singles tournament in convincing style, now Youth was again to headline the doubles event, when Alex Koch, top U14 in the country, teamed up with his dad to blindside myself and Roy without so much as breaking a sweat, much to the excitement of the spectators.)

And so the New Year began with that perfectly bittersweet flavour of the eternal waxing and waning of the Wizard's strength (But I observe the Solstice as the true New Year).

Coaching got underway. My congregation in Redelinghuys returned to me, inspired by stories from afar, fronted by the indefatigable Rowalden Taylor, who has been there from the start, the bright inquisitive boy gazing through the fence while Ian and myself were labouriously painting the court lines in April 2025.

Meanwhile in Yzerfontein, where I stay over from Thurs - Sat at Oom Faan's, sipping coffee and talking God and Tennis in his Voorkamer when I'm not on court, I continued carefully adding fuel to the little fire of tennis enterprise we'd begun in the Dorp, and in nearby Darling.

I proclaimed into the wind, "This is the year of ranking tournaments."

The returning winds answered with summons:

The yellow-green tennis ball got rolling in February, when the Department~~s~~ of Art, Culture and Sport, and that of Education, teamed up to host an interdistrict sport event in Cape Town, aimed at youth from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Our West Coast District Federation, comprised of clubs including Vredenburg, and Moresburg, and Yzer, kindly selected juniors from two recently affiliated grassroots clubs, namely Darling and Redelinghuys. Young Rowalden Taylor, and Bjorn van Wyk from Rhuis, were joined by Esre, Kurt and Kayden from Darling, along with their coach Hillary Jansen, a teacher from Cape Town.

In the soft grey light of Dawn, in a school hostel in Kuils River, we encountered the San proteges of coach Petrus Koekemoer, engaged in a slow-motion trance-dance of groundstrokes and net play and serves, to awaken, said Petrus, key pathways of muscle memory.

Well, I certainly have a fond memory of those boy's muscles on court next day at a school in Lavender Hill, representing the Eden District and their home town of George with prodigious displays of tennis muscle memory, greatly impressing the onlookers and coaches a former pro woman player whose mom, Gugu, I had the pleasure of chatting to while her daughter led the participants in a series of game-based drills.

Though I'm not sure if there was much more to the event than a bit of exposure, I'm happy that the Department of Art, Sport and Culture was able to spend a great deal of money in order to feel that something was being done, on a political level, for tennis in the Cape.

We who live among the rural grassroots have learned to appreciate gifts from above...

The question is,

Can you keep cool

allow consciousness calmly to
guide you?

Tennis is a breeze

when you play the maverick fool.

The beads upon his neck
remind me to re(in)spect
the shifting conditions
awakening

To the African Cool.

This Afro Cool
is Global too
the primeval
master among men
a bushman like you.

Alderd Burden of Step Ahead Academy assisted me much in the pursuit of the Play and Stay Coaching course, which equips coaches with an insight into the efficacy of a game-based approach to teaching tennis, where ~~starters~~ players play against each other in game situations and simulations, and plain sets and matches, first on the smaller court and later expanding onto the full court.

I completed my practical hours at Piketberg with the very competent Coach Benderd, who has remarked of his experience of ITF qualifiers, that "Dit voel asof al die" balle land in die tramlines, maar hulle doen nie. It was a groovy experience bringing Rowalden to the afternoon coaching, including him in match practice against Benderd's pupils which birthed an idea for match practice sessions in which (children) players from Rhuyz travel once a week to Piketberg to take on the players there.

Alderd later invited me to bring juniors to the Wilson Events he oversees, which are one-day tournaments held throughout the year. He included us freely! I selected Bjorn "Borg" van Wyk, die geel Boesmantjie, Rowalden "Rooibokkie" Taylor and Darling sisters Grace (junior) and Adrienne (senior), from Darling.

We enjoyed the excursion immensely, which involved a far simpler, less far convoluted

tangential and bizarre voyage than into the Peninsula than had been the case for the Interdistrict Expo, whereby we had travelled to the proverbial frontiers in the lucid form of Atlantis passing through us on either side of a medieval walled river of dusky time, like the perpetual shadow that hangs upon the brightest Transvaal day... A park, leafy, underwater, sunlit patches of water bobbing upon the surface far above us.

Atlantis loomed like a recurring dream I'd been having in which, at the helm of my Golfie Volks Wagon, I sniffed my way through a labyrinth San community, somehow finding my way back to a familiar land. But at the awakening of the second version, I had been unable to find my way out...

Yet our voyage to the Wilson event, tracing languidly rapidly down the coastal R27 with Hoerikwaggo looming stately, growing, Sphinx of Africa, was preceded by a dawn grey rendezvous to Darling to collect the sisters, whereupon Rooibokkie spotted a bok along the roadside, while a shooting moment later I saw a shooting star. At the Wilson, which was comprised of Venees Milnerton for the girls and Pinelands for the boys, the kids got merrily, summarily and roundly round-house kicked, like being beaten up by Chuck Norris even from the next world! But not before the boys and I had gotten roundly lost, seeking Pinelands Tennis Club, and landing up halfway into Athlone instead, before finding Mowbray, Maybr, then Pinelands.

The kids were great - just like they'd been at Woodstock - with an amusing moment being when Bjorn, still a relative novice at court ettiket and propriety, called a first serve "Buite," adding, after ponderous reflection, "tweede dien!"

How accomodating of Faan and family, to have been a halfway house for us from Redelinghuys, on our journeys into the Peninsula of reoccurring dreams.

We returned unto the shadow of Hoerikwaggo the following Friday, for the three-day tournament Cape Town 'Autumn, held at various venues in Bellville.

(When I'd entered Grace, Rowalden & Bjorn the previous week online from Faan's Wendy House outside room, I'd noticed that there was an entrant by the name Kushimo Usman, in the Open Men Section.)

Like in a dream, I navigated Bellville with the children Friday late morning after an early rise and practice session in Yzer... mapbook, Freddie's moth-eaten from years of navigating the labyrinths of plumbing clients within the Peninsula, spread upon Grace's lap in the passenger seat, -aiding us through unfamiliar territory.

(In two hundred words, turn the page...) When I dropped the boys at Christmas I met Bronco and Jacques, Clubmates who were joining me at Parow for the Men's Open.

But first buzzing off to Glenhaven, Bellville South, to Drop off Grace, best of luck, then turn and face that old Ghost,

Voortrekker Road, through Bellville downtown at midday noon after to coast.

It occurred to me then very vividly, that I felt very much like I was dreaming.

Cape Town Autumn. I made it to Parow Tennis Club at about 13:35, hurried into the venue five minutes late, was told by the convenor "We've been waiting for you," and was directed to a court where my match was to commence forthwith.

Heading to the allotted court, I noticed on centre court the presence of a tall, lean, cat-like warrior slicing aerial dropshots, and felt sure that here was the reputed 'Usman.

I was meaning to tell you that, on the cloudy morning that Bjorn, Rowalden and I left Redelinghuys for the tournament, we passed on the road, amongst the sandveld fynbos, a beautiful Rooikat, sphinx body curved and arched like a wild thing, dirty red like a dust road, crouching cautiously to let us pass, white ears tipped black pointing skyward like the spiked leaves of an agave cactus.

During the first set, I could not find my rhythm against Liam Noeth, a tall, stocky eighteen year old in his final year of high school. The polished intensity of his strokes, coupled with my nerves as a returning outsider, saw him dictating play and taking the first set 6-3.

I eyed the hedge on the far side of the court where I stood. I have seen that hedge many times before, on many different courts. This one included little pink berries amongst its foliage. It represented a natural wall, a barrier I had to overcome, if I was to exorcise the painful, nervous memories of inadequacy at tournaments as a junior, especially after

I lost my amazing coach Gavin Kampers at the start of high school, when our family relocated to Cape Town, Cape Town Autumn, a generation later. It was now or never.

But I was a champion once, when I out-rallied Shainal for the ~~Grader~~ School Title in Grade 7. And muscles can remember.

I began to play from the heart, beyond tiredness, beyond even seeking accuracy, but just hitting with everything, the far side dimming to a bright twilight in which the mind was still as life on a mountainside, where one hundred years pass as calmly as a single moment.

At about 4-4 I jumped skewedly to make a kick serve return, and my right knee popped, that is, twisted way out of its ordinary position - a first for me, a weird scary feeling - but my body responded instantly, my will too, by stretch - pulling the knee back into its ordinary position - and continuing the point!

I found that I could still walk, and that the discomfort was mild, dulled by adrenaline. I continued, beyond tiredness, beyond accuracy, finally breaking Liam's serve, and his resolve, to win the second set 6-4.

Various onlookers were taking interest in the match by now. Usman himself had passed the court side a few times. But what had given me true hope was a San child watching me then behind the fence, whose face reminded me of Rowalden. I turned towards the hedge, closed my eyes, and asked God for no-mind, the secret awareness of Zen meditation. Awakening, I became the hedge, the lushly flexible barrier against assault, and dominated the super-tie break completely. When it was over, I leaped for joy in the air, silently.

Outside the court I was graciously complimented by Liam's mom, - having hugged Liam after our marathon - and by a friendly young man called Alex Dublin, who informed me he had had a buy in the first round, and that I was playing him next.

Injured, fatigued, and distracted by concern for my three students at their venues as the sun's shadows stretched across the court, I could not do much against the onslaughts of Alex, whose power shots rock the court with the intensity of Carlos Alcaraz or his sensei Raphael Nadal, both of whom Alex is reminiscent of both physically, and in his friendly and humble demeanour.

Admittedly also, he is on a higher level than I, having seen already far more intense match and training action. Yet I will see you again, Alex, when I can fly freely.

Rowalden, Grace and Bjorn did me ^{as} proud as a dad, playing their hearts out against children who had already been playing for years; but nevertheless holding their own with that **African Cool** I have endeavoured to teach them; poor Grace fell awkwardly during her second match, with her family there to support, and the brave tears welled up within from the sheer shock of the intensity of it all. Crucially she got up, and continued resolutely.

In the parking lot afterwards, Grace and I encountered Solomon Masanga, a former ITF star of my generation or thereabouts, now coaching out in Langebaan a boatride away from Yzer, whose daughter, Majesty, is basically the top U14 girl in South Africa and who went on to win the tournament in her age category.

We exchanged fond greetings with the dreadlocked legend masked behind polarized shades, who bowed as he took Grace's hand and said, "My Princess."

Thereafter at Parow, to which the boys U14 had been shifted, Bjorn "Borg" van Wyk lived up to his German namesake on Centre Court, playing very creatively despite being overwhelmed, so that Solomon, also watching, grinned approvingly at me and said, "I can see your hands, coach!"

Rowalden "Roobokkie" Taylor did his best on a far court in his last match, which was observed by a Redelinghuys resident, Oom Michael Janse van Rensburg (Pronounced Migall), who came especially to watch my juniors - thank you, Oom Michael!

In the Parow Clubhouse I approached Kushimo Usman, who shook hands with Grace and I, and we introduced ourselves. I had already seen enough of his games - the starry arched serves, the impossible consistency, and the sheer flamboyance - to realise he was everything and more than imagination had ~~be~~ suggested him to be. Now he was in the final tomorrow, and I got to know a bit of insider's background about him.

But before I share anything, understand this: Usman is a regal Lion, best viewed from afar; the closer you come to him, the farther he retreats, vague in his casualness. His might, or much thereof consists in his remoteness from the understanding of his foes. I know, because I too am a stalker among shadows, eternal student of the disappearing Act.

Some scant facts, nevertheless, for us to gnaw on: Usman (his first name) hails from Nigeria, from a family of modest means and of six children, of whom he is the first born. He learned Tennis by simply playing, first against a wall and thereafter with other juniors at the local courts, and played and played until he played his way into tournaments, eventually winning a Junior ITF tournament out of the blue with no serious ranking or reputation, defeating to the

astonishment of onlookers Karim Bennani from Morocco, who recently beat the world no. 90... But Pro tennis requires money, and so Usman has journeyed to South Africa since two years back, plying his trade as a hitting partner at clubs in Cape Town, and winning a string of TSA tournaments in a country where he perceives greater opportunity for his deeper aspiration: in April he will travel first to Pretoria and then on to Mbombela, for two ITF tournaments that he hopes may springboard his professional tennis career.

I did not know all this when Bjorn, Grace, Rowalden and I got up extra early that Sunday to watch Usman play Zak Oosthuizen in the final of Cape Town Autumn. What I did know was that I was seeing a genius at play, a sublimely complete player who scarcely hit power shots or winners outright, so great was his claw-like grip upon the direction of each point he played - though no doubt his arsenal encompasses the power game too.

Usman asserted his dominance early on, in a spellbinding moment that seemed a dream, when Zak returned a tame bouncer next to the net; Usman flipped his racket around as the ball bounced up, so that his hands held the racket's head - and with the grip he knocked the ball nonchalantly in near the tramline.

In that moment of flamboyant African magic I was transported to an earlier chapter of my eternal youth, when ITF hopefuls from around the continent, from countries such as Zimbabwe, Mauritius, and Ghana, where opportunity had not been as painfully denied to people as in South Africa, challenged our nation's top juniors at tournaments in Pretoria - and won by miles. It was the heyday of African tennis after the colonial era, when African children were given a chance to shine as they were always meant to. And I was there, an African child in time.

On a temperately sun-kissed Saturday 4 April 2026, an unprecedented and profound tennis event took place at Yzerfontein Sosial Tennis Club: an exhibition match between two stars from the recent Cape Town Autumn tournament - Alex Dublin, from Observatory, and Kushimo Usman, from Nigeria - to raise awareness and support for their shared aspiration to become professional tennis players at the highest level.

Kushimo Usman, who has journeyed to South Africa in search of golden opportunities in competitive tennis, has won a string of TSA tournaments since stepping on the SA scene, and has his sights now firmly set on ITF (International Tennis Federation) tournaments, which are the golden gateways to becoming an international tennis star.

Alex Dublin, three years Usman's junior at 18, has a similar agenda, having broken through into TSA tournament victories in recent years, and risen like well-kneaded bread to the top of his academy.

But pro tennis requires strong financial backing - especially in the beginning - and so this special exhibition match was conceived by the Muses in Heaven and whispered to me when I sat down after our enthralling campaign at Cape Town Autumn, as dusk descended upon the Verlorenvallei beneath a golden moon.

Oom Faan Oosthuizen, proactive Chairperson of Yzer Tennis Club, welcomed the initiative with open arms; I approached Alex and Usman with invites, to which they agreed heartily - "a rematch from the heart" it was billed as, in the promotional advert we distributed, while word of mouth did wonders to secure an intimately ebullient fanfare of spectators at the court that fine Saturday, where it was understood

that after the main event, the order of play would include top locals and enthusiasts generally, in competitive social matches in the spirit of the exhibition. Noteworthy in attendance was Solomon Masanga, a former ITF/ATP star who caches in nearby Langebaan, and his daughter Majesty, one of the top-ranked girls in Under 14 in the country, and winner of Cape Town Autumn. Moreover, it was gratifying to be joined by close companions in the sport, such as Marchand and daughter Mia - through whom I'd first heard tidings of Usman, the tennis wizard from the North - as well as Heinrich, also from Bellville, Grant from Somerset Country Club (who granted an astounding donation of R3000!) family members of Alex, including his loyal father Kevin; as well as the Berry Family, including young Lily, my student.

Ostensibly, tennis is a hot gladiatorial contest in the dust of physical exertion; yet it is likewise a Wizard's deal, a game of supreme tact in which a cool, creative awareness is the key to body as a vehicle, and all of the body's uncharted possibilities, including the ability to "fly" for brief moments that seem to last forever; to embrace the evenomation of a recent spider bite, for Agile fancy's flight; or to "shapeshift" into becoming Alcaraz, as Alex seems to do when he levitates to rock forehands that could be used for game hunting. All of this requires the imagination and the body imaged, actualized, poised in Presence in the Present Moment.

We witnessed the contest between Usman and Alex in awe, as one does when in the presence of champions performing their art,

With all the decorum of the big-match moment - the hushed whispers during pauses before the next waves of thunderclaps, the fearsome silence ringing the deulling of the stalkers as, cat-like, they joust for openings in a deadly approach to net for the kill...

The feet of a jaguar brought close into a springing jump to catapult the arching ball tremendously into the fray of returned play: the seismic rocking jump-strokes of a lad who once tore a ligament he hit the ball so hard, who looks like the epitome of the "C'mon! kids" generation I grew up amongst; and the fearsome, lofty resilience of the mighty jaguar, who unrelenting gets everything back, athlete par excellence, then turns tables, as suddenly with cool attack, a complete player, flamboyant, adoration of his day.

And when my Babolat Pure Drive Wand, which Usman had borrowed when the strings of his own wand snapped, had delivered the final blow, and Usman emerged victor - Usman, who once beat a top player using a wooden racket: who as a junior at an ITF tournament defeated Karim Bennani of Morocco, ATP player, in straight sets out of the blue with no ranking - when it was all over, despite the deepest effort Alex could muster, the small contingent of spectators cheered with the chorus of a Wimbledon grandstand.

Thereafter the children amongst us joined the two heroes for a fun-filled game of doubles, what a treat for them it was. Usman and Alex, I've noticed, are very good with kids, and so surely there will always be a place for them in tennis, as there has been for me.

Then Solomon, guru from Langebaan, who hails from Zimbabwe originally, and should be proud of it, was prevailed upon by Oom Faan to sparr a bit with Usman. And though Usman appeared the surer player, yet Solomon, in his track pants and polaroid glasses, masked, has yet to reveal to Yzer the true extent of his wizardry.

Alex, still hungry for meaty success, sparred with 'little old me who, despite my injury (popped knee) from CT Autumn, would like to think I gave him a run.

Then the four of us had a casual, flair-filled set of doubles, before each then joining up with a kid partner for a last medley of heroic doubles.

What a day! In total, Yzer Tennis Club raised R4500 towards the aspirations of Usman and Alex professionally, from a basket going around among the spectators, subsequent in-payments, and the gregarious lump sum of R3000 given by Grant of Somerset West Country Club. Thanks from the heart to one and all!

When all the fun and games were wrapping up, I found myself talking with Solomon on the court, Usman listening attentively. I had a burning question for him: "Do you know Takanyi?" I asked him. "Garanganga!?" replied Solomon with incredulity. "He was in my class at school. How do you know Taka?" I told him, "Back in the day we travelled to Pretoria for interschools week, and at the end were exhibition matches between Africa's best players, such as Takanyi, Lofu from Mauritius, Mensah from Ghana... the matches took place at Affies."

Solomon Masanga's eyes widened, rooikat-like. "I was there!" he breathed.