

The Vintage Voice

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Salvation Through Squash (or, at least, survival to age 73) 15-9 15-13 15-13

The Venerable Bill Brison

Peggy was 63, overweight, suffering with arthritis; not a good candidate for the hard game of squash, particularly as she had no athletic abilities or interests (quite the contrary). But I have always enjoyed sports and feel that the occasional game of squash is essential to my well being. We had just returned from a sabbatical in Grozny and I was between partners (squash, that is). Peggy asked me to teach her to play squash because her arthritis was causing her severe pain and she felt she needed some exercise.

I agreed, with some misgivings. Could she even hit a squash ball? I had just about given up introducing people to squash. Some people, even young men with athletic abilities, find it very difficult. It emerged that Peggy had played shortstop on her elementary school softball team. I'm a no-nonsense type of teacher. I told her what had been said to me when Joe Junkins, a Marine Corps friend and professional boxer, taught me to play handball. "I wouldn't *give* my own grandmother a point but if you *win* a point, you will *really* win it."

Peggy could hit the ball! In the initial stages, I did feed the ball back to her, about a racket length away, and I play left-handed against her. Otherwise, I made no concessions. She had always thought that I, in company with most men, was childish about games. When I win, I'm euphoric; when I lose, I'm depressed. This has moderated a bit in old age and when I compete against members of the family. So we played. Peggy got better and better, but months went by before she won a point. She had convinced me, and herself, that winning wasn't important. But when she won her first point, up went the racket with a triumphant shout (not really good form on the squash court, but understandable under the circumstances).

She continues to improve, developing an uncanny knack for placing the ball accurately. She has learned to read and wrong-foot me. And her arthritis has just about disappeared. The twisting and turning of a squash game stretches all kinds of places not normally reached by more gentle exercises and seems to benefit everything from stiff necks, back problems, and osteoporosis.

We recently made it through to our 50th wedding anniversary. If you think teaching your spouse to drive is risky, don't try teaching him/her to play squash. We've been playing now for ten years. We had one major hiccup. We were teaching in Nigeria, temperatures in the high 90's, the court had a rough concrete floor and no roof, and the wall looked like it had been used for artillery practice. But what really got to Peggy was that we had to search through snake-infested bush to find the ball when it went out of the court. We played on!

There are other ways of keeping fit, of course, but not for me. I find jogging boring. I see people jogging along together and having friendly conversations. I can't talk and run at the same time. I tried taking the dog, but he got bored and began to pass the time by attacking other dogs, embarrassing since

I was generally jogging in my parish. On the other hand, you can think thoughts and plan sermons while jogging.

Squash can provide pastoral insights. One time I was making a funeral visit after I had played a game of squash. On the court, I had been playing and planning the next point, where to place my next serve, etc. and all of a sudden, I missed the ball and the game was over. I got to the funeral visit and asked the lady how her husband had died. It turned out he had seemed well one day and was dead the next. A funny feeling came over me that I knew about sudden death. Then I realized that the memory was the sudden death of the squash game. I decided not to share that little insight!

Normally, it isn't possible to think very much while playing squash. That is one of its charms; while you are playing, you have to focus totally on hitting that fast-moving little ball. Any lack of concentration is punished immediately. Your problems, concerns, responsibilities, and stresses are banished for that hour in a way that happens in no other sport. Squash is great fun and doesn't take much time. In less than an hour, you can work up a good sweat (recommended by St. Clement) and feel good for 24-hours.

“Physical exercise is good for the health. But not only that: while it stimulates the desire to care for bodily vigor, it stimulates the same desire for vigor of soul. Exercise should not simply be a matter of competition, but a way to make you work up a sweat. We must always keep a balance: neither doing nothing nor killing ourselves with exhaustion.”

Clement of Alexandria c. 150-215

Those funny numbers at the top of the page are the scores of the first time Peggy beat me 3-0. I wasn't the slightest bit depressed! The physical activity of playing a fast game and getting exhausted makes me feel better all over, physically, mentally, emotionally, and I find I am in a better condition to listen to God when I am physically tired. I have high blood pressure and had been advised squash is dangerous, but the godly and squash-playing bishop who told me so died ten years ago. I wish he'd taken my advice to continue to exorcise the stress of his ministry with the exercise of squash.

Three years ago, at age 69, I had a serious stroke. In my arrogance and sin, I had thought that it couldn't happen to me, that I wasn't like other men, that squash and diet and prayer would fend off ill health, at least until I was past 69. Three weeks in the hospital convinced me differently. For the first week or so, I wouldn't admit that I had problems. I couldn't walk or talk. The doctors said I had extensive brain damage (those closest to me didn't notice any difference!). Squash didn't prevent the stroke, but being fit certainly helped me to make a complete recovery. And squash provided me with an objective measure of my recovery. Before the stroke, I was playing two young men; against one, I played left-handed, against the other, right-handed. A couple of months after the stroke, my scores were similar to what they had been before the stroke. There is really no explaining that, but I still give thanks to God almost daily for life and health and being able to walk on a squash court.



The Venerable Bill Brison, retired since 1998, enjoys being a grandfather, gardening, conducting Sunday services, and writing. Bill is involved in local community safety and conservation programs. He has contributed articles in *The Church Times*, *Episcopal Life*, and *Letters to the Editor* on national issues.