

THE PEAK

BY IAN WILLIAMS | ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHELSEA CHARLES

Thirty years of empathy, belief, joy, delusion and decline, in and out of tennis

Basketball? I can't live up to those expectations. *Volleyball?* Stings my forearms. *Baseball?* Too much responsibility in the outfield. *Hockey?* Too much equipment to store. *Skating?* On TV I saw a figure skater slice open his partner's face during a camel spin. *Boxing?* Cauliflower ears. *Football?* Which kind? *American?* Concussions. *Soccer?* Too much running. *Golf?* Too much walking. *Track?* Too all-round. *Gymnastics?* Tight hamstrings. *Cricket?* Objections to the scoring system. *Rugby?* I am not a monster truck. *Cycling?* Spandex. *Poker?* Come on. *Skiing?* Cold. *Swimming?* Chlorine in my contacts. *Badminton?* You hit so hard but the shuttlecock goes nowhere.

Tennis?



PLAY

Public Courts

It's the final set of play. The older Williams is serving. The younger Williams is returning from inside the baseline, trying to look menacing. It's not the Williams sisters, but my older brother and me. Not the grass centre courts of Wimbledon but the asphalt courts of Centre Street, Brampton, Ontario. I'm around 13; he's 14. It's fall, meaning we have to squeeze in as much tennis as we can before the City takes down the nets and leaves the courts unplayable for the winter.

My brother plucks the strings of his racket. We've seen the pros do this before serving. We don't know why they do it, but it looks very cool. He tosses the ball and serves out wide to my backhand, my weaker side. I block the return back. It lands mid-court. He takes the ball at shoulder height, as we've seen Monica Seles do on high balls, and pounds it hard and flat, almost a smash, to the opposite corner. He thinks the point's over so he doesn't advance to the net or recover good court position at the baseline, but no, no, no, I'm a scrappy bugger. I sprint across the court, full stretch, and hit a forehand behind him. But he's quick, too. He coils around and moonballs a weak, defensive backhand crosscourt. I run around my backhand, as I've seen Steffi Graf do, and hit a forehand down the line. He hits a running forehand. It's one of his favourite shots, that running forehand. He makes contact with the ball just before it bounces for the second time, swipes up quickly on the outside and turns his forearm over. My brother and I are trading forehands now, jumping when we make contact, as we've seen the pro men do. The ball is dead, the way I like it, so it stays low and allows me to hit with pace and control without the need for fancy strings. In fact, my strings are frayed. Restringing is not an option for my family, even when one of mine breaks. I'll keep playing with a racket until too many strings break, then I'll beg my parents for a new one.

My brother angles a forehand so that I must hit a backhand. I slice back, like Graf does, and he slices a better backhand in response that drops just over the net. Before we started playing, we had to crank the net up. It's sagging again by this point. I pop his dropshot back over. I know what he's going to do next: the lob. Maybe

it'll go long. I'm not good at smashes. So I run from the net all the way back to the baseline, wait for the ball to bounce — maybe it's in, maybe it's out, the baseline is faded — and put it back into play. Not good enough. My brother crushes the ball at a wicked Seles-like angle and there's no hope. My legs are done. Point, Williams the older.



My mother brought tennis to our family when I was about 10. She likes to point out, somewhat mournfully, that it was something she enjoyed before we existed. Our family took trips out to the court, played with rackets

someone gave to us. My brother and I learned quickly. Soon we could handily beat everyone in the house except each other. We didn't know anybody who had had actual tennis lessons. Tennis lessons were for people like Carlton Banks. Now, when I watch players on public courts, I can tell who's had lessons. Their strokes are fluid from preparation to follow through. They wear the right tennis shoes with support along the sides. Some of the women wear skirts and visors. After points, their faces relax into a blasé expression. Maybe it's called composure.

A few games later my brother wins the match. It was a five-setter. We rally afterward, trying to outwit each other. When we're satisfied, we collect usable tennis balls from the perimeter of the courts, go to Becker's and gulp two cans of store-brand soda. Then I sit on his handlebars and he pedals us home.

My brother and I peaked at about 15 or 16. We played a lot in the summers, then after one long winter, we just never made it back to the courts. My brother spent more time working out and playing ball. I practised piano. Then he was off to college and I didn't play tennis again for 20 years.



I sometimes look at people and try to guess what sport they played in their youth. I'm convinced the super in my building played soccer. Directing trucks as they back up, pointing down the courtyard in his athleisure clothing, it's clear he must have been a midfielder. The woman stocking apples in Metro with her hair in a half ponytail — former field hockey captain. My Vancouver mailman jogged between houses as if he had to get all the mail delivered faster and faster each day. Cross-country. I asked him one day when my curiosity overwhelmed me. He runs marathons. He clocks about 30,000 steps every day. All around me are former dragon boaters shovelling their driveways with rhythmic calm. I see short men with fast-moving eyes — former wrestling champs. On Zoom, I see a wholesome face under an '80s hairstyle and think *curling*. Some people are pure gym bodies, sculpted into museum physique, no sport attached, except maybe Crossfit. For many of us, because any chance of an athletic career dies early in life, we memorialize the period when our bodies could run 50 metres in under eight seconds or play five setters or pin an opponent to the mat in three moves. We

remember quick cuts of ourselves, as if in a Nike commercial, harshly lit, drenched with sweat, squeezing blue antifreeze-looking liquid into our mouths in profile. Now what do we become after that athletic prowess leaves us? The guy on the train with great balance. Whoop-de-doo.



Partners

Twenty years later, in Vancouver, when I start playing tennis again, I search for a partner who is roughly at my skill level but serious about improving. Finding a partner is tough. Some are too competitive; they always want to play points so you never get to swing away. On the flip side, others want to rally all day long so you never get to hit a serve or experience victory. Some want to play once per month. Others want to play every day.

Against all odds, I find three tennis partners. When I play with one partner, I feel like I'm cheating on the others, even though they know about each other. We are all in a fairly open relationship.

Tennis Partner No. 1, Alfred, is a professor. Top of his field, prime of his life. He's introverted and disciplined, with a smouldering, mysterious heat that people find alluring. Is it intelligence? Is it a painful childhood? Is he a secret agent? The moms glance at his bare torso from the nearby playscape. He stretches before we play.

Sometimes he breaks out his ball machine and we hit hundreds of forehands and backhands. He almost always beats me when we play. I can't figure it out. He's 10 years older and I have the harder serve, yet he finds ways to break me.

Tennis Partner No. 2, Brody, gives off Labrador Retriever vibes — upbeat, endlessly running, tongue lolling, wind in his mane. You name a sport and he's played it. You name a country and he's been there, although he's half my age. He plays with abandon, as if today's match might be the last match of his life so, hell yeah, he'll keep attempting the big serve even though his percentage of success is low. I suspect he comes from a large family with money, one that passes roasted vegetables around a table nightly and asks about his day. I drove him to the airport early in the pandemic so he could visit a brother. That was the last I saw of him.

Tennis Partner No. 3, Cameron, is easy to underestimate physically because he's inches shorter than me, has a slight hunch, buzzes his hair into stylelessness. Inside, though, he's lava, a self-declared hothead. He whacks or kicks errant balls back to their apologetic owners. He trash talks playfully. "It's my time!" he shouts after a winner. "You got aced! How you like that slice of bread?" I haven't met anyone who loves tennis as much as this guy. We play in drizzle, in the dark, in parkas, on crappy courts, injured.

My tennis partners and I enjoy typical, efficient bro friendships. All of them, even TP Brody, keep their lives in labelled boxes. Occasionally, I glimpse a fact from another box (TP Cameron, for instance, hasn't seen his parents in about a decade), but we don't really pursue personal conversations. We want to swat away our lives for 90 minutes.



Private Clubs

Tennis Partner Alfred and I get invited to play at a fancy tennis club in Vancouver. This one costs \$20,000 or \$30,000 to join. We have to get buzzed in. The club feels like a ski lodge, lots of wood and white. Or maybe that's just club architecture, I don't know, I've never been part of one. The members uphold the all-white dress code. I had to delay my visit until the pair of white shorts I had to order arrived. The friend who invites us offers us water and a towel. She tells us that the club has special incentives for certain people interested in becoming members. I hear, *Diversity*. It wants to diversify, but only if you're wealthy or respectably jobbed, and not too much diversity, just enough to tan the complexion of the court. I doubt Richard, Serena, and Venus would have been welcome when they were just starting out, partly because clubs are not for people who are training and partly for the unspoken but understood reasons. I look at my smiling friend and feel ashamed for thinking this.

My friend shows us around. In addition to courts, the club boasts a gym, a dining area, a hot tub and a pool, although the club is close to the ocean. The members are mostly white and Asian people around retirement age, vibrant, healthy-looking people that you'd see advertising life insurance or a new drug for arthritis pain. Knee

and elbow braces, high-quality rackets, coached technique, pleated skirts. But no Black folks. What would Black folks do to a place like this? Probably fit in. It's what we've learned to do. White TP Cameron, though, would be up in here, screaming, "You got aced, sucker! How you want your next ace, T-bone or baby-backhand?"

My friend, the host, leads us to our court. We meet our fourth, a well-to-do man with an air of large investment portfolio. I wonder if my forehand will let me down today. I don't want to let my partner down. I shouldn't worry, she's complimentary, and Alfred and his partner are sportsmanlike, applauding good passing shots and winners. Still, I feel like a higher level of athleticism is expected of me. I pound serves and chase balls until our time is up.

On the way to the dining area, I see a Black guy working on staff. We head nod each other. I have a chicken burger, and although I'm present in conversation, I wonder what this Black guy must think of me.



I've never played on a clay court because most public courts are hardcourts.

I mention this to TP Cameron late one evening while hydrating.

He suggests that we break into a nearby private club with clay courts on the way home, just climb the fence. That club costs \$50,000 to join.

I laugh. I think he's joking. I say, "That's a big risk just to play on clay."

"If we get caught," he says, "we'll just tell them that we're looking for tennis balls."

"I can't get away with that stuff, man." I rub my skin. "Maybe you can."

He says, “You worry too much.”

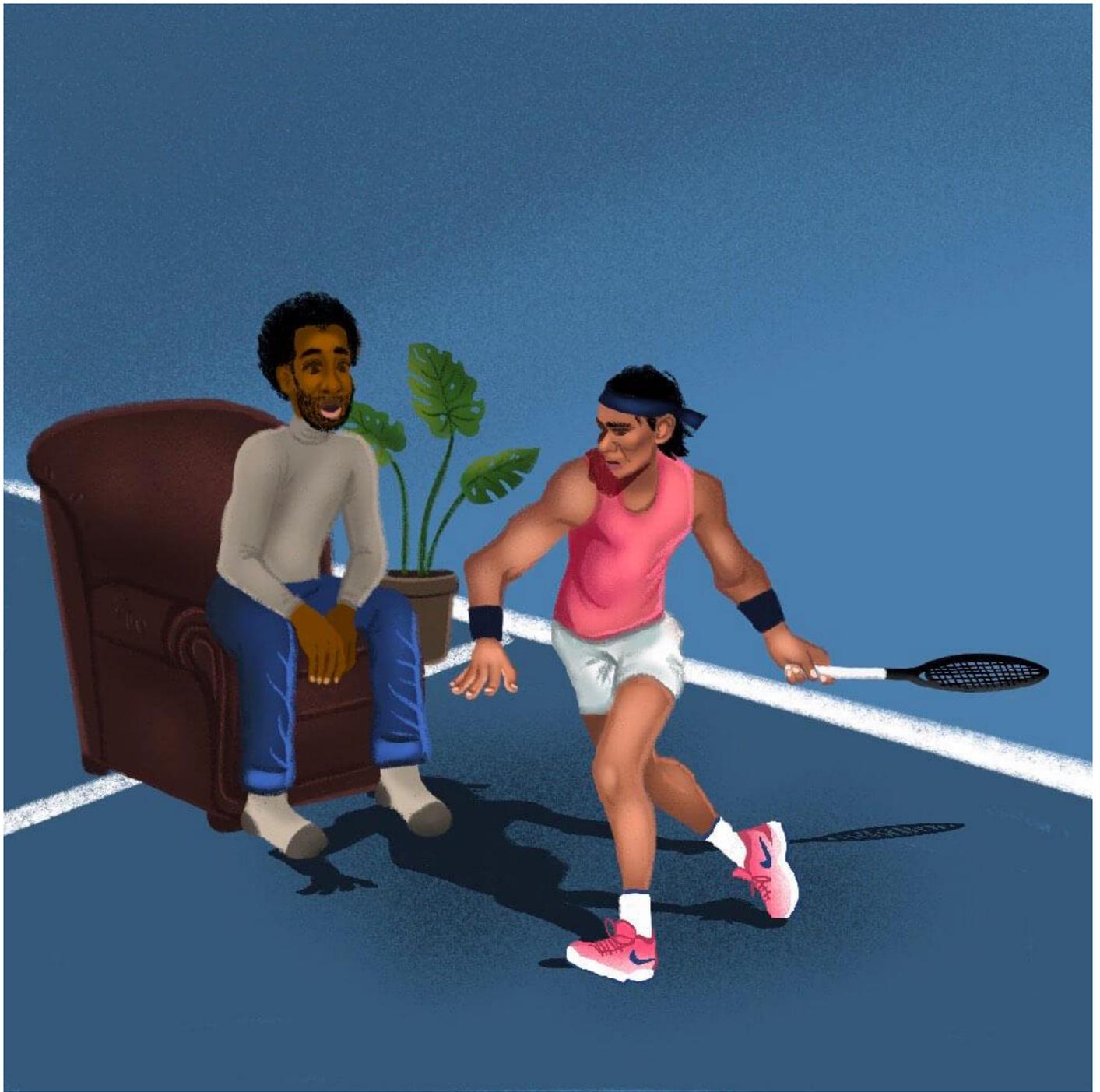


WATCH

Live

My friend, Laura, and I are wandering through the grounds of the Rogers Cup tournament. We go every year, show up right when gates open and stay until the last match on centre court. This year, Laura is checking her phone a lot but not reporting any stats or scores. We stop at the practice courts because she hopes that Roger Federer will spot her in the crowd, fall to a knee and propose. I tell her that Federer’s probably back at his hotel with his wife and kids. I lean into the fence. I point and look over my shoulder at her. Is she seeing what I’m seeing? It’s Rafael Nadal. She waves dismissively. People are holding up cameras, recording his practice, trying to position themselves in the foreground for a selfie. Laura sits behind me and puts on sunscreen.

I came back to *watching* tennis because I was channel surfing and stumbled across Nadal playing. He played a tennis that I didn’t recognize. His forehand finished with a loop over his head. Poetic. He seemed to be signing the air in cursive every time he struck a forehand. I kept watching the screen to confirm what he was doing. Arms didn’t really bend that way. Was it style? Was it affectation? He snarled. Sweat dripped down his nose. He looked like a pirate. He pumped his fists and said, “*Vamos!*”



In front of me now, Nadal hits forehand after forehand with the same intensity he exhibits when he plays. His forehand begs to be imitated. In the years that I stopped playing tennis, my forehand disintegrated from being my strongest shot as a teenager to being junk. It flies long because it's too flat, and when I try to create spin I mistime contact and the ball ricochets off my racket frame. In light of my own forehand crisis, the consistency, spin and power of Nadal's forehand is all the more impressive to me. The forehand is the stamp of power in

tennis. A forehand winner is like knocking someone out. It's violent. It feels like you've slapped the ball, and by extension, your opponent.

Nadal is practising his serve now. Laura's on her phone.

"Don't you want video of this?" I ask.

"Pass," she says. She has the distracted air of a person deep in a text exchange.

From my side view, when Nadal serves, the ball seems less like a physical object than a travelling point of light. I'd like to be on the other side of the net, returning, to see how those serves look as they approach. Would I be able to return them or would I just protect my crotch the whole time?

Amateur athletes and armchair athletes have no shortage of confidence. Part of me thinks I can do all the things that pro athletes do. If I wanted to. If I was a little younger. I could summon my body to cooperate, no? Pound one down the T? Even if my precision were off, I'm sure I could serve as hard as Nadal if I really tried. If I really, really trained, I could have his forehand in a few weeks. After all, our bodies are based off the same template. I've got two arms and two legs, just like him.

But that's where the similarity stops.

Even if I had Nadal's muscle, I still wouldn't have his skill. I just don't have the athletic brain of Nadal.

I stay at the practice courts long enough for this realization to sink in. Laura and I spend the rest of the day gorging ourselves on matches and stadium-priced junk food. I eat ice cream sandwich after ice cream sandwich, spitefully, while the players sweat on court below me. Within a few games of every match, Laura and I are certain who will win. We make predictions. We each want to be right. Tennis is only incidental in allowing us to play out this human desire.

At one point, she looks up from her phone, worried. She excuses herself during the changeover. The blue, plastic chair is hot under my thighs. When I watch tennis, I enter into a fantasy that alliances, even imaginary ones, make me more powerful than I am. The athlete competes. I roar support. Therefore I am part of his victory although I've made no physical effort toward his success. I feel momentarily stupid, cheering for some guy who doesn't know me. But I don't fight the delusion that my faith, my belief, coupled with someone else's ability can lead to victory.

Laura comes back during the next changeover, even more worried. She has to go.

Reality returns. There are more important things happening while we watch tennis. A few weeks later, Laura's mother dies.



Screen

By the time you finish reading this section, I predict that Nadal will have won the 2020 French Open about 10 more times on YouTube. He has now lifted that trophy four million times. I can't even estimate how many of those I've enabled by clicking this highlight video.

These days, I prefer to watch sports on a screen than to watch them from the rafters. When I watch tennis on TV, I can hardly believe the blurriness that I was subjected to in the past, the fuzzy sidelines, the grainy courts, the technicolour hardcourts. From the TV, I move to my device, firing it up to watch highlights, to watch highlights in slow motion, to watch highlights in super slow-mo with commentator reaction. At this level, time and physics are so distorted that I can see Nadal literally blast the fuzz off a ball.

What a thing to freeze yourself at your best. Thanks to YouTube, a tennis player's dive-volley or tweener can be viewed, liked, commented on forever. For many of us, what we're good at isn't so remarkable to record. We may be whizzes at shortcuts in Excel, but chances are there's already somebody online who can explain our

tricks in a slick, shareable way. The best we can hope for is the D-list fame of being the go-to guy at work. Video favours people who are good with their bodies. Athletes and pornstars. As long as people have bodies — bodies that age — we'll appreciate the statue of a twisting Greek athlete about to release a discus, the iconic split of Jordan's legs as he dunks from the foul line, Nadal's forehand flourish.

Look at that. Nadal won the French Open again. He drops to his knees. He'll keep winning this moment well beyond his retirement and death.



BECOME

Pretend

When we played tennis, my brother and I pretended to be other people. He'd be Pete Sampras and I'd be Jim Courier. Or if he picked Courier first, then I'd be Michael Chang, the only person of colour in our generation before Serena and Venus broke through. We could be anybody, though: Boris Becker, Stefan Edberg, Ivan Lendl, Goran Ivanisevic, Michael Stich. We were two Black boys on tennis courts pretending to be Seles and Graf, Gabriela Sabatini and Arantxa Sanchez Vicario. Gender didn't matter. I liked being Martina Navratilova — bespectacled, clinical, nimble at the net. Through all of this make-believe, we came to find our games.

If we were tennis partners today, my brother would be Federer to my Nadal, Venus to my Serena. If we found ourselves on court in five years on a Canadian-themed day, he'd be Denis Shapovalov to my Felix Auger-Aliassime. What makes us identify with some people and not others? Why does Novak Djokovic, such a dominant and brilliant player, have a relatively hard time winning fans? There are demographic reasons why we support certain athletes. We like the ones that represent our city, our country. They become extensions of us. There was a period when I checked Auger-Aliassime's ranking daily. I followed him around the world, from tournament to tournament, calculating how many points he needed to break into the top 100, the top 50, the top

20. That's what I was doing when I was on my phone in elevators. I wasn't calculating returns on equities, despite the seriousness of my face. His ascent became a subplot to my own life.



But demographics are only a starting point of our devotion. Nadal's not Canadian. Yet I align with him because he helps me clarify my values — doggedness over talent, visible effort over Federer's princely effortlessness or Djokovic's mechanical perfection.

Sometimes there's a conflict of interest in my affections. Serena vs. Bianca Andreescu in the 2020 US Open Final challenged my demographic solidarity. Do I vote nationality or race? When Nadal plays Auger-Aliassime, I hope the umpire discovers an obscure rule and announces a tie. Otherwise, do I root for the old underdog or the young underdog? Do I support an intense life or a composed one? Am I part of royalty or revolution?

One has to choose.



Father Williams

Serena and Venus were profiled in *Tennis* magazine when they were still very young. I had a subscription to the magazine; I'm trusting my memory on this. The girls hadn't made any money yet, hadn't won any tournaments, hadn't even been on the Tour. Like Black girls in our neighbourhood, they wore their hair in braids with beads. In the article, I was struck by the confidence that their father and coach, Richard Williams, had in his daughters. Venus was already creating buzz, but the thing I remember was the father's prediction that Serena would be the better player. Serena? Me? The younger kid? Venus was already supposed to revolutionize the women's game with her power and athleticism. Who could be better? The prediction also struck me because Richard Williams was their father and fathers were supposed to be neutral. But here he was, in a way, picking favourites by prophesying success. To my teenage logic, he was pulling a reverse King Lear and saying that he loved Serena more.



Empathy

Writers like to talk about the importance of literature in developing empathy. We speak about reading as if literature were the *only* thing that teaches a person empathy, as if one must be introspective and bookish to

reach beyond the self. But as a tennis fan, my devotion to certain players has stretched me more than many books.

On those courts in Brampton, when as Steffi Graf I repeatedly lost to Monica Seles, I learned to run around my weak backhand and attack to the last point, no matter how unbeatable my opponent seemed.

When I track Auger-Aliassime, I recognize the pressure of expectation on a slightly frail constitution. I recognize the trajectory of progress from playing on the outer courts to playing on centre court, from watching your heroes to shaking hands with them.

I've been Mallorcan Nadal, from a small island, repeatedly injured, of dubious staying power, never quite as beloved as the Swiss Maestro, No. 2 in the world for years.

I see them all trying to maintain their unknown selves, the people they were when they first starting playing, undoubtedly at some point on public courts with the rest of us, even as public fascination elevates them above us, even as public inspection reduces them to a few skills with a tennis racket.

I fist pump when they win. But when they lose, I feel the need to love them more. My faithfulness is all I can offer. I see Nadal cramp up at a press conference and I feel the shadow pain of tight hamstrings as I tie my laces. Serena struggles to reach a ball, and I recall the days when I used to climb stairs two at a time. In their decline, I see my own. I can see the end coming. The word most paired with *decline*? *Inevitable*.

Ian Williams is the author of *Reproduction and Word Problems*.

Photo Credits

Illustrations by Chelsea Charles

SPORTSNET | **UNITED BY SPORT**

ROGERS | ROGERS DIGITAL MEDIA
TELEVISION - SPORTSNET NETWORK

