

The Ties That Bind (Teamwork - Chapter 10)

n/a

Ready:

"Do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." -Matthew 7:12 (NIV)

"The only society that works today is also one founded on mutual respect, on a recognition that we have a responsibility collectively and individually, to help each other on the basis of each other's equal worth. A selfish society is a contradiction in terms." -Tony Blair

Set

Most historians believe that modern tennis emerged sometime around the mid-1850s and was based on a similar French game that was invented as far back as the twelfth century. Since that time, the sport has evolved at a rapid pace. From a greater emphasis on power to the size and consistency of the racquets—outside of the rules and prevailing etiquette—there isn't much left today that resembles the original discipline. Maybe that's why doubles tennis is so intriguing. There's something about it that makes you wonder if that's how the game used to look and feel—with a high value placed on serving and volleying, finesse and creativity.

Those are the reasons Mark Knowles loves doubles so much, because in essence he's a throwback to the past—and in more ways than one. And even though his original plan was to be a successful singles player, his old school leanings eventually prevailed.

"I had a decent singles career there for a while, but I really flourished on the doubles court," Knowles says. "Part of that is probably because my game is more suited for doubles, but I also like having a partner. Baseball has always been my favorite sport, and I also thought it would be great to be part of a team. I just like the team camaraderie. Having played doubles the last few years, I like winning together and losing together and going through life's experiences with somebody else. It's pretty cool.

"I think that comes from playing singles for so long and the fact that the tennis circuit is a pretty lonely world," he adds. "Everybody realizes that it's glamorous when you make it, but as it is in any sport, there's usually a lot of hard work and a lot of remote places and hard, lean times that you have to go through in order to get to the finish line. Maybe doubles has allowed me to enjoy it more. It's not as lonely."

Knowles was practically born with his appreciation of teamwork on the court. Born and raised in the Bahamas, he grew up in the shadows of two parents, Vicky and Samuel, who were skilled tennis athletes in their own right and worked together teaching the sport. In fact, Knowles's mother (the former Vicky Rees of Great Britain) was a professional tennis player

who played in Wimbledon and was close friends with the likes of legends Fred Stolle and Rod Laver.

“I grew up around tennis and just fell in love with it right away,” Knowles says. “I probably had a racket in my hand at three years old and always had great dreams to be the best player I could be. The nice part growing up was that [my mother] was friends with all of these people that I looked up to growing up. That was a unique perspective at a young age to be able to be around people like that and talk to people like that. I think it helped with my tennis development.”

When Knowles was 10 years old, he was invited to attend the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy in Bradenton, Florida, where he trained alongside such future stars as Andre Agassi, Jim Courier and David Wheaton. As he stepped into this brave new world, Knowles brought with him a foundation of faith that was rooted in his home country’s strong Christian convictions. Growing up in the Bahamas, he went to church and attended Sunday School every week.

While most people would probably assume that his separation from that world would have weakened him spiritually, it was at the tennis school where Knowles began forging his own desire to learn about God apart from the habits that had been ingrained in him back home. “There was a gentleman by the name of Chip Brooks,” Knowles recalled. “He and his family went to church every Sunday, and he spurred on my spiritual emphasis. We had FCA meetings every Wednesday night, and there were a lot of us who were trying to learn a lot more about our faith and what our purpose was on this earth. In a selfish world and in a tennis world where everyone’s so focused on the means to an end, it was nice to take a step back. It allows you to stay grounded and not be quite so insulated when you’re in the tennis world.”

But when Knowles accepted an offer to play tennis at UCLA, his relationship with Jesus took a backseat. There wasn’t the same level of accountability there. Balancing an NCAA Division I athletic career with the academic rigors of one of the nation’s top universities jumbled his priorities somewhat. Knowles achieved All-American honors in both singles and doubles but lagged in his quest for spiritual growth.

When Knowles entered the professional tennis world in 1992, he chased success as a singles player but quickly realized that doubles was going to be his ticket to a lengthy career. Along with long-time partner Daniel Nestor of Canada, Knowles reached the finals at the Australian Open in 1995 and the finals at the French Open and the U.S. Open in 1998. The duo finally broke through for a taste of Grand Slam glory in 2002 with a victory at the Australian Open. After reaching the Wimbledon final that same year, they went on to capture the U.S. Open title in 2004 and the French Open title in 2007. Before Knowles and Nestor parted ways in 2007, the team was consistently ranked among the top five in the world and had spent some of that time in the number one spot.

Amid his rise to doubles prominence, the five-time Olympian was still searching for the deeper meaning of life. True purpose eluded him. But that all changed when Knowles met his wife, Dawn, a native of Little Rock, Arkansas. The two were married in 2003 and have since added two children to their family. They split time between Dallas, Texas, and Nassau, Bahamas, while making sure that Christ is at the epicenter of everything they do.

“I was fortunate to meet my wife, who had a very strong faith,” Knowles says. “She reenergized my faith, and that allowed me to take a step back from the tennis world and remember to give thanks and to continue doing the little things that make a huge impact. So

since I met her, we've really tried to devote ourselves to God."

Knowles now enjoys added depth and greater perspective to his already strong grasp of the teamwork concept. "My faith has allowed me to take every individual for who they are," he says. "We're all different. We all have our shortcomings. We all sin. None of us is perfect, and I think the biggest principle is to treat others like you want to be treated."

Knowles's philosophy is an indirect but intentional take on Matthew 7:12—also known as The Golden Rule—in which Jesus instructs us to "*do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets*" (NIV). It's also the key ingredient to one of team work's most fundamental elements: respect. Knowles wholeheartedly believes that this irreplaceable product of genuine love and concern can be the difference between success and failure.

"For me, respect means you're allowed to mention little imperfections or give constructive criticisms without the other person feeling like it's a personal onslaught and vice versa," he says. "That only comes with mutual respect. Whether it's your playing partner or your wife, when they're pointing out something that you can improve, it's because they're on your side. They want the best for you. It's not like they're trying to put you down and make themselves better. They're just trying to make the unit better, and I think that applies to doubles tennis just as it does personal relationships."

But unlike modern society's definition of respect, which is so often only performance based, Knowles says respect is more about the commonalities that all humans share—we are all God's creation and deserve to be treated with dignity, compassion and empathy. "I think that when you have a strong relationship with God and you have a strong faith, it allows for the imperfections of others a little bit more," he says. "Maybe you have a greater flexibility in understanding other individuals. We're not all the same. Most great marriages are two completely different people, but when you put them together, they make a great unit. Just because somebody doesn't experience the same emotions or act the same way or respond the same way as you do, that doesn't mean you can't succeed together."

But respect doesn't happen overnight. There are several steps that one must take in order to foster respect for others and to gain that same level of respect in return. "The biggest thing is communication," Knowles states. "Sometimes that's not easy. Some of my mixed doubles partners don't speak English as their first language. Then it's about emotions and trying to read the other person's body language and do things that will allow them to relax and feel comfortable and flourish."

"When there isn't a language barrier, it's about being up front with each other and really communicating," he continues. "Sometimes it's about tapping into each other's personalities. Some people are very guarded and quiet, and some people are outgoing and maybe borderline obnoxious. But whatever the case may be, those two individuals have to be tied together to make it really successful."

If respect laces together the initial strings of teamwork, then perhaps genuine care and concern for each other is the double knot that makes that bond nearly inseparable. "When someone else sees that you care about their feelings or their emotions or their results, then they think, Wow, this person genuinely cares about my well-being," Knowles suggests. "We're fortunate enough to play a sport for a living, which is pretty cool, but it gets intense sometimes. We all get down after losses. We all get disappointed when things don't go well."

We're all super competitive. The things that make us successful can also unravel us. That's why it's always nice to have an encouraging and caring group of people around you—whether that's your peers, friends or playing partners.”

And with a mutual respect that is fortified by love and compassion, the by-product is often a group of people who will lay it on the line for one another because they know the same effort will be returned. “There's a sense of accountability there,” Knowles says. “You don't want to let down your partner. You want to be there for him or her. That's the great thing about being a team. You try to reach that extra level that you want to attain. You know the prize is out there, and you want to share it together. I think I've gotten better at that as my career has gone on. Early in my career, I wasn't as aware that there were other people out there. You're really caught up in yourself. You're not really concerned about anyone else. But I think my emotions have been enhanced by playing doubles.”

One of Knowles's secrets is the ability to read his playing partner's body language and then turning what he learns into an appropriate action. It might mean giving words of encouragement to lift his partner's spirits, or it might mean guarding his tongue in order to not bring him down. “Some people can play great on a team and not get along that great,” Knowles says. “But I'm the kind of guy who prefers to be friends and get along with my partner. To do that, you've got to do things with them. You've got to make an effort. You can't shut them out and lead your own personal life and only look at things from your perspective. I think it's important to look beyond that and try to see things from their angle.”

Knowles was challenged to obey his own rules of relationship when Nestor secretly worked out with a new partner before abruptly leaving Knowles after the 2007 U.S. Open. It wasn't just about tennis. It was about a long-standing friendship that had endured some downs but was mostly full of ups. “Our families were very close,” he says. “Both of us were in each other's weddings. It was a pretty deep friendship. In our game, you have changes. If you want to change, you usually do it at the end of the season and give the other guy a chance to get another partner. But he just left me high and dry. He had a partner, and I didn't have anybody.”

Despite the shocking breakup, Knowles did his best to bless Nestor and release him to his new venture. For the remainder of the 2007 season, he forged short-term partnerships with the likes of Jamie Murray, Fabrice Santoro and James Blake, with whom he reached the finals of the Davidoff Swiss Indoors tournament. Knowles has now joined forces with another formidable doubles player, India's beloved Mahesh Bhupati. But before closing the book on the Knowles-Nestor era, the veteran Bahamas Davis Cup team member welcomed his old partner back for one last tournament.

The team's championship effort at the season-ending 2007 Tennis Masters Cup not only brought closure to the situation, but it also allowed Knowles to extend grace to Nestor and stay true to Jesus' teaching found in Luke 6:27-31: “But I say to you who listen: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If anyone hits you on the cheek, offer the other also. And if anyone takes away your coat, don't hold back your shirt either. Give to everyone who asks from you, and from one who takes away your things, don't ask for them back. Just as you want others to do for you, do the same for them.”

Certainly Knowles wouldn't classify Nestor as his enemy, but he still found that the situation compelled him to follow Christ's example and forgive him and leave the offenses in the past. Knowles is ever aware, however, of the daily struggle to respect one another. “It's especially

true in today's age with terrorism and the advancement of technology," Knowles says. "Our world has gotten pretty crazy, but you look back in the Bible, there are stories that make me think maybe our stories aren't that different. There's a general lack of respect from human being to human being. You see that today with all the violence. There's definitely a lack of compassion today. But it needs to be the first thing we think about. "That's why it's so important for the Church to work together. That's why Christians need to have that trust in each other and respect for each other, so the world will be drawn to God's love."

Go

1. What societal changes over the last 60 years have contributed to the world's view of teamwork? What elements of teamwork still hold true today? What are some positive examples of teamwork that you have witnessed or been a part of recently?
2. Who are some people you have a great deal of respect for? Why? What attitudes or personality traits tend to hinder your ability to respect those around you? Read Matthew 7:12. In what ways do you think this verse promotes the concept of mutual respect?
3. What are the differences between how you respond to someone you respect and someone you don't respect? What do you think are the root causes for your reactions to those two types of people?
4. Can you describe a recent time when a teammate or peer showed you genuine care and concern? How did that affect your ability and desire to work together?
5. Have you ever been hurt by someone you respected? How did that situation impact your ability to respect others? Read Luke 6:27-31. How does this Scripture line up with the way you dealt with the person who hurt you? In what ways do Jesus' words contradict the world's philosophy on forgiveness and on the loss of respect in the world?

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Bible Reference:

Luke 6



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