

# TENNIS TEEN

## 網球少年

*An awkward middle-school boy gets onto the school tennis team through the popularity of his older brother, but once on the court, he finds confidence, happiness, and a challenge to make himself better.*

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Chia Shih-Shu has always lived under the shadow of his elder brother, Chia Yeh-Nan – the brilliant, popular student who was good at everything his younger brother is terrible at. Yet the two boys are close, and one day, on his brother's recommendation, the younger brother tries out for their school tennis team. There's only one problem: Shih-Shu has never played tennis before.

Lucky for him, his elder brother once wrote the team an analytics program that sent them to the championship last year, and the team happily accepts Shih-Shu out of deference to Yeh-Nan. The coach and other team members guide Shih-Shu through rigorous practice towards greater skill and confidence; but just as victory seems within Shih-Shu's grasp, his life's strongest support is revealed as an illusion.

*Tennis Teen* boasts an easy, fast-paced narrative that handles themes of personal growth, familial love, and death with quirky humor.

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# TENNIS TEEN

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## 3 The Tennis Team

The next afternoon after school, I was in the rest area next to the school tennis courts. I was blocking the entrance to the tennis courts when Coach Ku, about to walk in, stopped.

“Coach, I want to be on the tennis team,” I implored.

Our school, Liuzhangli Middle School, only had three gym teachers. Coach Ku did not teach our class, so this was the first time I had interacted with him.

“Oh? I don’t know you. Are you a new seventh-grader? How long have you played tennis?” Coach Ku had dark skin and looked a little like Louis Koo.

“Huh? The team only accepts students who can already play tennis?” I asked the coach.

“Of course! The team represents the school in competitions. If you can’t play tennis, why would we let you on? To be a caddy? School’s out, go home!” Coach Ku looked angry, his tone turning impatient.

I looked at the ground, ashamed and disappointed. I couldn’t help but peek at the team on the court in their sparkling white uniforms. I really envied them.

“I’ll be a caddy, Coach. Can I train with the team? I can help clean the courts every day. I can do odd jobs. During the games I can buy water, carry bags, do all of the data entry stuff that a team manager does. I can do all of the paperwork that you don’t want to deal with, such as putting the team list into the computer, dealing with the money. I can take on that kind of computer work,” I continued to plead with Coach Ku.

“No, you can’t! Space on the team is limited. If you can’t play tennis, you can’t take up a space on the team! Don’t you know that the three seniors who graduated last year from the tennis team were guaranteed spots in the top three high schools? Every spot on the team is precious. If you can’t help the team win, then you can’t take up a space!” Coach Ku persisted.

“Coach, you know that Taiwan isn’t a good place for tennis. If I try to find a coach at a tennis club, it would cost way too much. My parents only make about ten dollars for every bowl of noodles they sell, and twenty for every plate of food, and they couldn’t afford it. Also, only the coach and team members are allowed to use the school’s tennis court. I pay tuition too, yet I can’t play on them. Doesn’t that seem like a problem?” I replied.

“Are you threatening me?” The coach replied. “Our tennis team funds are completely above-board. We do not take one cent from the non-athlete student body! The accounts are very clear, it all checks out!” Coach Ku’s voice grew louder as he spoke.

“Coach, I’m not threatening you, I’m begging you. Let me train with the team for a year, and I’ll do everything for you – I’ll be your free labor. I’ll train on my own, and if I can’t beat any of the official members of the team a year from now, I’ll give up. If I take a year to train, and can catch up with or surpass the other team members, it would help weak members of the team get

stronger, and make the whole team better. It would bring constructive competition, a battle among men on the court." I was talking like a con man, trying to convince Coach Ku.

"Well, the team trains hard, and full cooperation from each team members' parents is needed. If you don't have parental consent, then I can't take you. Getting parental consent is extremely important." Coach Ku was stalling because he still didn't want to take me.

"Consent? If you let me train with the team, I'll bring you the consent form signed and stamped by my parents tomorrow. Also, Coach, look: it's unavoidable that before each game someone will get a fever, be in a car accident, get in a fight, twist an ankle on the court, or get a stomach virus; people eat all kinds of things, and inevitably get sick. The deeper your bench is, the stronger the skills of the alternate players will be. You'll have more choices in the event something happens," I said.

"You can't play tennis at all? Do you have your own racket?" Coach Ku asked.

"No, I've never played tennis, so I don't have a tennis racket. But my coordination is good, and I run fast. Plus, I don't study, so I go to sleep really early, and never stay up all night. So I am really healthy, and all my organs are functioning well," I said, a little embarrassed.

"No need to say more. I give priority to alternates who have played tennis before, whether they played with their parents, trained with a coach, or played in primary school. You don't even have a racket. Would you borrow it from another team member? Or are you implying you'd borrow it from me? School has been out for a while now. Go home, and don't hang around here! Get along with you!" Coach Ku waved me away.

I had no choice: I had to use the secret weapon my brother told me about.

"Coach," I whispered. "I'm Chia Yeh-Nan's little brother."

"Chia Yeh-Nan? Really? You're Chia Yeh-Nan's little brother?" Coach Ku's eyes suddenly got brighter, his cheeks flushed, and excitement crept into his voice.

"Yeah. From the same mother and father. My name is Chia Shih-Shu."

"Oh! Why didn't you say so earlier? You should have told me this before! You want to be on the tennis team? Come on in! You can start training today!" Coach Ku spoke happily and excitedly.

"Now? But I don't have a tennis racket...."

"No problem, I'll lend you one of mine. I have plenty of rackets that were gifts from sponsors. I'll give you a brand new one." Coach Ku was all smiles, and he seemed like a different person.

"I haven't gotten the parental consent form signed...."

"That's okay. It's not important. Just tell your brother to call me and say everything's okay, and it'll be fine."

Didn't you just say that the parental consent form was really important? Coach Ku was contradicting himself.

"So, Coach, will I be a caddy first?"

"A caddy? No, you'll be an official team member, of course! I am in charge of the team, and it's up to me! I'll give you the application form later. You can fill it out and sign it at home, and that's it."

"But I don't know how to play tennis at all!"

“Don’t worry about it! You’re Nan’s little brother. I’ll train you myself, and I guarantee that you will be up to the level of the team within three months. There are no weak soldiers under strong generals, as they say! Under my guidance you will be unbeatable. Has Nan told you that I was a national contender when I was younger?”

“Yeah, he told me that you were one of the top ten players in the country.”

“Ha ha, ‘A reputation is as fleeting as a cloud.’ Heroes do not mention past glories; those are just times from my youth. So, do you want to be captain of the team? The team captain graduates next year, and so then I can make you captain.” Hearing me related what my brother had said about his heroic past made Coach Ku noticeably elated. He stood up tall, stuck out his chest, and even quoted from the movie *Shaolin Soccer*.

“That’s okay! I’ll just be a team member, or maybe Vice Captain.” My feelings were sharply conflicted as I spoke.

My older brother really must command a lot of respect, to have made such a close friendship with Coach Ku!

It seems I’m still living in the shadow of his genius.

#### **4 Grabbing the Racket**

I followed Coach into the tennis courts of Liuzhangli Middle School. There were two clay courts on one side of the wall and a hard court on the other. Coach Ku introduced me to everyone. “This is our new team member; let’s give him a hand in welcome! Let’s have everyone start with some self-guided practice according to the written schedule. I’ll go to the back wall to help the new student.”

After Coach was done talking, he led me to the cement wall behind the clay court, saying, “Take the balls from the ground, and hit a few against the wall for me.”

I picked up some tennis balls from the court and started to hit them against the wall. I hadn’t hit two balls before they started flying out of the court.

“Ugh. I’m not doing well today.” I made an excuse to hide the embarrassment of my first time hitting a tennis ball.

I picked up another ball and hit it against the wall, but again, I only got a stroke or two in before it went flying over the top.

I kept missing over and over.

By this point, Coach Ku couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Okay, I get it. You really are a total beginner.”

Coach Ku came over and adjusted the racket in my hand, turning it seventy degrees so that the racket handle was between the base of my thumb and forefinger.

“This is the Western way to hold the racket. Try hitting against the wall again.”

Holding back the power of my swing, I hit and returned the ball over ten times.

“The angle of your grip is the most crucial aspect of the stroke. The Western grip is easy to master, so it’s a good grip for new students who need to control the ball.” Coach Ku seemed happy to see me catching on so quickly; his expression said, “He is indeed Nan’s little brother!”

I looked at the racket in my hand, surprised.

What a huge difference changing the angle of the racket made in the feel of the stroke!  
I continued hitting the balls against the wall. Everything went so smoothly, and I didn't hit any more balls out of the court.

"Ha ha! I really have some talent!" I felt really proud and couldn't wait to tell my brother. Coach Ku had me continue for another half an hour or so, then led me to the clay court. "Come to the main court and hit with the serving machine," he instructed.

I helped Coach move the serving machine into the middle of the court. I set the ball speed and direction, and the machine began to spit out balls.

Coach Ku told me to go over and return a few.

The other team members stared at me curiously, stretching their necks and widening their eyes as they wondered what kind of VIP deserved a half an hour of one-on-one guidance from Coach Ku.

I stood in the middle of the court, feeling both nervous and excited.

When the first ball popped out, I skittered toward it and swung. It sailed well over the fifteen-foot-high chain fence surrounding the court.

As the second ball popped out, I ran to it, connected, and sent it flying.

"Softer! Hit softer!" Coach Ku yelled from the side of the court. The other team members watched in open-mouthed suspicion.

Be calm.

I took a deep breath.

I took another deep breath.

As I was concentrating on breathing, the third ball flew out from my side.

One player who couldn't bear it any longer shouted: "You newbie! You have to chase! Don't just stand there! This is tennis, not tai chi!" The rest of the team laughed.

I sent the fourth and fifth balls flying, but slowed my swing for the sixth, and actually hit the ball back on a diagonal.

"Yes! Good volley, keep it going!" Coach Ku saw it.

I used the same level of strength on the seventh and eighth balls, and returned both to the same spot.

Tennis is a sport with a rhythm to it.

After catching the rhythm, you can repeat it and hit the ball successfully each time.

"Nice! Keep it going, keep it going!"

I returned the ninth and tenth balls perfectly to the same spot on the line by the ball machine.

Once I got a feeling for the motion, Coach purposely made me hit more; I returned fifty shots in a row, until the ball machine was empty.

I didn't miss any of the last forty. Once I got the rhythm, returning them back was as easy as sipping a glass of water.

"How does it feel? Do you have the idea now?" Coach Ku asked me. I was crouched down, out of breath and unable to speak.

"Coach, are you kidding? Someone like this can get on the team? My Granny plays better than him!" The tall, thin upperclassman who had yelled at once again expressed his objections.

“So, get your Granny to come over!” After Coach Ku said this, everyone laughed. “Today is his first time playing tennis. Now let’s have an open discussion and point out where he needs to improve. Scholar, you go first.”

“As the Vice Captain, I cannot say everything in one go – I will leave some for the Captain to say. This fatso’s in terrible physical shape. He’s practically throwing up after hitting fifty balls. He needs to run more, and it looks like he needs to lose at least twenty pounds. Now let’s hear the Captain speak.” The Vice Captain wore a pair of thick-rimmed glasses and had an erudite air.

“The fatso’s footwork is messy, so he’s wasting energy going after the balls. His movements are imprecise, and he’s not familiar enough with the bounce of the ball. He needs to practice more with the ball machine. Does the Advisor have any suggestions?” The Captain was very tall and thin, towering like a bamboo pole as he talked.

The Advisor had a little beard, with some of the charm of Tsang Chi Wau playing Zhuge Liang. With a pretentious air, he said, “The chubby guy has electric eyes, and is handsome and upright, heroic and cool. Truly a hero among men, a stallion among mules. He is like Lu Bu on his Red Hare Stallion; he is like the Great Wall of the nation, the descendant of the dragon! Could it be that he is Nan’s little brother?”

The whole team let out a gasp.

“What? Did you just overhear us? How did you know?” Coach Ku asked.

“Is this true? Actually, although this fatso’s – err, rookie’s footwork looks messy, but there is order there, a plan of attack. They are hiding something deep, and there is a deceptive effect.” The tall and thin Captain said, having changed his tone.

“His physical condition is not so bad. If you compare him to the average person, it’s actually pretty good. After a little training he can meet the intensity of the game,” the Vice Captain added.

Uh...what? What kind of connection did my brother have with the tennis team that would make the coach and all the players react to me this way?

I guess my genius brother had taught me another lesson about people. At home, we rely on our parents; in the outside world, we rely on relationships with others. Once you have these connections, you build more; if you have none, you have to find them.

But this absurd, senseless, and somewhat baffling atmosphere at the tennis team was making me a bit anxious. Weren’t the team members all outstanding achievers known for their militaristic training? The coach seemed spooked, and when he shouted orders, the players would sing responses and crawl all over the floor. This joyous team seemed less like a team than like some kind of special fraternity. Could this kind of thing help me to get into high school, and even college?

“In our team, we call everyone by a nickname. It makes things more intimate. Let’s think of a nickname for our new team member; the last one to think of a name has to run ten laps.” Coach Ku said.

“I propose Takeshi Kaneshiro!” Bamboo cried.

“I suggest Andy Lau!” Scholar said.

“The Young God! Adonis! The tennis team’s Brad Pitt!” Advisor yelled.

“You guys, with your blind praise!” Coach Ku could not restrain his laughter.

“He looks a little like a Bichon Frise dog. Let’s call him ‘The Tennis Team’s Bradby Bear.’ What do you guys think? It does sound a little long-winded, though,” said a team member who appeared to be new. “He’s kind of chubby and pale like a dumpling. Let’s call him Dumpling – it’s straight and to the point.”

“Woah, brother! How dare you say that Nan’s brother is short!?”

“Enough out of you! How dare you call Nan’s brother pale and chubby!”

“How dare you call Nan’s brother a dumpling!” In a flash, the Team Captain, Vice Captain, and the Advisor all grabbed the boy and held him up in the air until he was screaming.

“It’s okay! My brother calls me Chubby. You guys can also call me that, I don’t mind,” I quickly said.

“Okay. Since Nan calls you that....” Bamboo Captain said.

“We will take Nan’s lead,” the Scholar Vice Captain said.

“So, we will all call you Chubby, like Nan does!” Advisor added.

## 5 Ask Chia Yeh-Nan

“Bro, why are you so familiar with the tennis team? You really have a way with relating to people...” I began to pour forth everything that happened that day to my brother.

My brother is a college student, but because our house is close to his university in Taipei, he lives at home to save on rent.

“Oh, it’s nothing. In my sophomore year, I wrote a computer program to exhibit at the science fair, and I went back to the Liuzhangli school to see Coach Ku. I wanted to enter some information about the tennis team’s games, then process it scientifically to synthesize a strategy for defeating the competition,” my brother recalled. “I called the program, ‘Ask Chia Yeh-Nan.’ The office next to the tennis courts at school has an old computer in it that may still have the program saved on it. I have a copy here, too.”

My brother opened his laptop and showed me. “Look. Every member of the Liuzhangli Middle School tennis team had his capabilities quantified into data, like in a computer game. For example, you can click on Bamboo, who was in seventh grade back then, and is now your ninth-grade captain. He had a stroke power score of 70, a top-spin serve, with a rotating speed of 2,800 RPM, with an explosive score of 87. His fitness score was a little weak, just 55; I don’t know if he has improved. His short volley score was 75, and his emotional intelligence score was super high: 92. His serve scored at 90, and his return was an 80.”

My brother moved the mouse and clicked on another person’s image. “This is the team that Liuzhangli Middle School played in the national competition, Jialeshuei Middle School. Bamboo’s opponent had an stroke power score of 80, also with top spin, and rotating speed of 3,000 RPM. His physical fitness score was unknown, as was his short volley score. His serve was a little weak, only scoring 55.” My brother became more excited as he spoke. “This next thing is the key point. If you click on the button that says ‘Battle! Fight!’, Bamboo’s highest win percentage appears in the category: Serve and Volley! Serve and Volley!”

I’m not the smartest person around, but even I could see the logical problems with this.

“What a weird program. If you made any errors quantifying the players’ data, or gathering intelligence on the opposing team, then Ask Chia Yeh-Nan’s predictions would be way off!” I said.

“Yes”, my brother admitted, “The program sounds more powerful than it is. But quantifying the players’ capabilities yielded unexpected results. I was constantly talking to Coach Ku and had frequent contact with the players. This process allowed Coach Ku to get to know all his players on a deep level, and also helped the players to understand their own strengths and their opponents’ weaknesses. The act of entering the information into the computer strengthened the bonds between players, as did the collection and inputting of data on their opponents. My science fair project went from being a simple analysis of data on the Liuzhangli School tennis team and a way to improve my understanding of the game to a full-on intelligence-gathering campaign, directed at both our own team and our opponents.”

When my brother came to this point, he couldn’t hide a smile. “And most important thing is, that year the Liuzhangli School tennis team cut their way through a difficult field all the way to the finals, eventually winning a gold medal in the national competition among middle schools. This wasn’t necessarily all due to data analysis, but Coach Ku did attribute it to my research project. The team’s achievements won me the science exhibition and helped secure me a spot at university in the Information Engineering department. I even got to go to Finland to participate in a global competition.”

So that was the story.

No wonder the mere mention of my brother’s name got Coach Ku and his older players as excited as if they had seen a celebrity.

“Alright, I have stuff to do. Get out of here!” My brother dove back into his work.

As I left my brother’s room, I suddenly felt empty.

It was a strange feeling.

“Could I be hungry?” I wondered. When my stomach is empty, my heart feels empty, too.