

THE BRYAN BROTHERS

THE CRATE AND BARREL BOYS

Poised between Golden Slam and Grand Slam, the Bryan brothers have a legacy like no other

Shush!

Don't tell anyone.

The dandy story that few folks are talking about is that the Bryan brothers are on a roll.

Yes, they lost a couple of Davis Cup matches—the sky is falling—and endured a mini-slump in April. But aside from that, they have been collecting trophies like a kid squirrels away Derek Jeter cards: the Olympic Gold, the US Open, the Australian Open, the French Open, and now Wimbledon, as well as titles in Sydney, Memphis, (at last) Indian Wells, Madrid, Rome, and London's Queen's Club.

The boys are now the only doubles team to have won each major twice. With their Wimbledon victory this summer, they can now claim “The Bryan Golden Slam,” having won the Olympic gold and four majors in a row. The US Open and a potential calendar Grand Slam are on the horizon.

“I think we are hitting our peak right now,” says Mike. “We've never been this dominant. We're doing everything well.”

Bob then offers a verbal poach.

“We're closing down the holes. There are not a lot of things teams can pick on. Our confidence is high. Our bodies feel great.”

Mike notes that doubles is a complex game, with lots of “fine skills, movements and mutations” that take a lot of time to master. Of course, perhaps their greatest asset is that they have hung in together despite some nasty battles and blow-outs. “We're learning what works for us,” he says, “in the gym, on the practice court, and at the restaurants as far as diet.”

Serious stuff, but as Bob says, “Periods like this are a blast. People are congratulating you, the trophies are piling up. It feels great.”

Mike quickly offers a cautionary note. “You've got to enjoy these times, because Mother Tennis always comes back to bite



With their victory at Wimbledon, Bob and Mike Bryan achieved a Golden Slam having won the Olympic gold and the last four slams. Now they're just one step away from the calendar slam.

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you,” he observes. “We felt her sting in April. She got us bad, three times in a row. That month was very dark. We had our heads down and were disappointed. We thought we would never win again, but you are only as good as your last match. In tennis, people forget. So we stepped away. We were getting a run of crappy cards. We compared it to blackjack. You are putting your chips out and you are getting beat by

a run of cold cards and you have to go over to the next table and get a new dealer. We were playing fine, but sometimes it's not meant to be. So we'll see how long this run lasts. We know it's not going to last forever, and once you lose, everyone forgets.”

Simply put, the Bryans have done something that no other twins, no other brothers—no other players, in fact—can claim. They have singlehandedly—well,

make that “double-handedly”—forged the modern doubles game. No other team has been so dedicated and has so mastered the art form. The brothers are a force as they travel the tennis world, gathering a title in Melbourne today, checking into a suite at the Carlton in Paris tomorrow, with a hefty entourage including a coach, wives, and a kid.

It wasn't always that way. With wry smiles, Bob and Mike recall their days slumming at Paris's Pierre Vacances, which they jokingly say, with its dark almost ominous hallways, was like the Bates Motel with a French accent. There, the

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towels were paper-thin. The rock-like mattresses were so uninviting that the boys shoved them aside and slept on the floor. As for breakfast, the menu began and ended with corn pops. Très exciting!

Well, flash forward 14 years and now the Bryans stay in pricey suites and claim a collection of records that could make even the most somber statistician beam: most Slams (15); most tournaments won (91); and most years finishing as No. 1 (eight). But it's their Olympic gold that means the most. “That's the best trophy,” Bob notes. “That high lasted a few months. When people come to the house, they don't want to see the Wimbledon trophy or the Davis Cup, they want to see the gold [medal]. That transcends tennis ... That Olympic draw was just nasty. Every team was just dirty ... You don't get any easy outs in the Olympics. We started playing happier. It felt so good. You play great when you feel happy. We had smiles on our faces on the court and in the locker room, and this year has been such a great confidence [boost].”

Of course, the Bryans not-so-secret weapon is their “twin-ness.” They have the same vision. They think in tandem. They move together. They bounce together. They twitch together. For years, they shared the same house and even the same bank account. Yes, as grown men, they now live on different coasts with different families: Bob and his wife Michelle have a daughter, and are expecting a son in December; Mike lives with his British wife in Southern California and London. Still, the

boys' togetherness is so intense that fans were shocked when, during their Wimbledon first round match, Bob actually took a bathroom break by himself while Mike remained on court. Goodness, has their bond been broken?

When IT asked the boys for an example of their synchronicity, they replied—almost in one voice—with an astounding tale. “It was just the weirdest thing,” Mike explains. “I called Bob and I'm like, ‘I got a sweet couch.’ He said, ‘Shut up—I'm in a furniture store right now looking for couches.’ And I'm like, ‘Did you get one?’ He said, ‘Yeah, I'm just checking out now.’”



On court, courtside, and in daily life, synchronicity is key to the Bryan brothers' extraordinary success.

“We were in the same store [Crate & Barrel],” says Bob. “I was in Miami, and Mike was in California.”

The brothers start to recreate their conversation:

“You're in Crate & Barrel too? Are you going to buy one of these?”

“I just bought one.”

“I just bought one, too.”

“I got this little brown-beige sectional one.”

“You're s——g me.”

Bob and Mike had bought the exact same couch, in the same color, at the same price—down to the dollar. “It was like *The Twilight Zone*,” Mike marvels. “It didn't happen. It's once in a lifetime.”

In tennis, the Bryans are once in a lifetime. Bouncing and brimming with energy, they deliver a feel-good story that doesn't impose and is easy to digest. Mike notes, “We were born to play doubles together. Even through the juniors, winning Kalamazoo twice, then winning the US Open juniors together ... We took the right steps and then won the NCAAs, then started winning Slams and playing Davis Cup ... The way it evolved has been that our destiny was to play together and we're still doing it. It's what we always loved doing, especially as twins—a package deal.”

Still, clearly the circuit can be a grind. “You can get tired,” says Mike, “basically

putting your balls on the line each week. Having guys gun for you, you're always kind of protecting [yourself] because you are No. 1 ... [But] what makes us great is that we welcome teams taking shots at us. We want the big point, and to go for it. Most of the time we rise to the occasion. That's just [because of] experience. But we have lost a lot of big ones, too. We have lost more Grand Slam finals [10] than a lot of people have been in.”

“We've had a lot of great adrenaline rushes,” says Bob, naming their Olympic win as the top one. “But it's all relative,” he adds. “Winning a Gold Ball at 14 at the Ft. Lauderdale Tennis Club, that felt as good as winning a gold medal. Going home with this little wooden box with a ball in it, I couldn't believe it.”

Mike recalls “going down an escalator, seeing friends holding up a sign [saying] ‘National Champions.’ We were on top of the world, walking around school with our chests puffed out and our Gold Ball. Then [winning] the NCAAs as freshmen at Stanford. I slept with that big wooden trophy. I asked coach [Dick Gould], ‘Can I have it for just one night?’ That was my lover. It couldn't get any sweeter than that. And [also] winning Kalamazoo, [in our] first year [playing] 18s. We were 5'8”, 105 pounds, and [because of that win] we showed up at the US Open with our wildcard and credentials, and people were asking, ‘Who are these ball kids?’ They were sloughing us off, laughing at us: ‘Who are these kids? Get off our court!’ That was a thrill, so it's really all relative. Every step is a thrill, and luckily, we've kind of succeeded at each one of these levels. It's a ladder to get to this point.”

The point is that the Bryans are at the absolute pinnacle of doubles success. If they win at the US Open, they will become the first ever to claim a calendar year slam. But as for the legacy they want to leave, the boys offer a breathtakingly modest vision.

“We did our best,” Mike says, “to promote the game of doubles when it was struggling, and for people to think we were humble when we were winning, and that we gave most tennis players respect, and that we were good guys in the locker room.”

Bob adds, “Once we leave the game, we don't want people to say, ‘It's great that they're gone’ ... [We] just try to be nice to everyone.”

Yes, the twins are nice to everyone, and they have been nice to doubles. The game would not be the same without the Crate and Barrel Boys, without the incomparable Bob and Mike Bryan.