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# Rendezvous with Touch Rugby

- Anagha Ramanujam

**G**rowing up, I never picked up any sport. The focus on academic work was so intense that it was always easy to find an excuse for not getting to the field. So when I did manage to get to the field on a rare occasion, I was quite predictably hopeless... Throw in laziness, spice it up with the inability to face defeat and a dash of embarrassment for being worse than the worst, you have a perfect recipe for a 'non-sporting' me!

Ironically, I loved sports! So, I yearned to play... In 8th grade in school, I signed up for an inter-house badminton tournament. I believed this was the easiest of sports requiring minimal effort, had the right gene pool to pull it off (with a tennis player father and a badminton champion uncle) and hoped I would play well enough to not embarrass myself. By now, I think you already know what happened. I failed, miserably! I think the score was 12-0 in 2 matches. I couldn't serve. I couldn't pick up a serve and kept getting smashed, repeatedly, consistently, convincingly. Before I could gather my wits and realize what was happening, the game was over. Before I could strategize for the next game, that one was over too. I was ceremoniously escorted off the courts and vowed never to take a second look at any sports ground or court!

If only, I could be one of those who hit the ground running, I'd probably have become a pro at many a sport. Unfortunately, this wasn't me. Like everything else I have learnt, this too called for tremendous patience, practice and perseverance. I didn't have any of these. Or, I had an excuse to not give it a try.

School went by. I moved to university. I told myself I would learn to play. I may not be the best at it, but I would persevere. I guess it wasn't meant to be. I landed up in the tryouts for the same sport that I had miserably failed at and guess what! I got jelly feet and dropped off the court even before the matches began. We had to compulsorily play a sport or engage in social work. The latter seemed less intimidating!

I was always envious of people who were sporty. In the back of my mind, I always wanted to be there. I told myself I would try. I did. I tried a few shots at tennis, dabbled with swimming, tried rock climbing, hiking, athletics... These seemed okay.

Probably because I was pitted against myself and not against opponents who intimidated me. I guess that's what built some confidence and I signed up with the corporate touch rugby team when I went to Hong Kong last year. Sounded exciting but I never made it to ANY of the practice sessions. I blamed it on long hours at work because of which I could never make it to the field at 7:30 pm on a Friday evening and 2:00 p.m. on a Saturday summer afternoon was way too hot to run around chasing a ball and other people off. With the sun beating down on the turf, my head would spin and I'd faint. So, I can't go. Or so I told myself. It was another opportunity lost.

This year, I very reluctantly agreed, yet again, to go for practice. I promised myself that I wouldn't back out and would be true to my word. Within a week of saying 'Yes', I was having second thoughts. I spent a week praying this was a joke and there was no tournament at all. When that seemed impossible, I spent the next few days hoping there were too many people who wanted to play, so I could volunteer to drop out. That didn't work either as they needed at least 2 girls in the team and I was one of the 3 who had signed up! I made all the initial disclaimers about being amateur, not wanting to let the team down with my poor play - the works. I don't think destiny wanted to let go of me this time. Every time I tried to hide, it sought me out and put me on the spot. The way I got pulled into the game by the team captain is more than a mere lesson in leadership. He said he didn't care for my experience and skill as long as I was willing to learn. Well, I couldn't say I didn't want to learn...

Another colleague from the team signed up too and with both of us playing on behalf of the firm, we could wiggle out on the 2 Fridays that we practiced. The first game was a lot of fun. Never having played in a team, I loved the whole idea of 6 different people being responsible for a collective objective. Yet, no one could sleep on the job. It was exhilarating to say the very least. It was, perhaps, the first time in my life that my hair was a colossal mess, my shirt was drenched in sweat and my heart was palpating. I didn't seem to have a care in the world. Something, something at last had made my over analytical brain stop processing random thoughts! I loved it. I even looked forward to D-day. Sunday, 20th June will go down in history as the first day I played a team sport. Wow, this was exciting!

Come 19th June. I have jelly feet again. It is a sunny day with clear blue skies and no clouds. Not a soul wants to be out in this weather. I have my Big match tomorrow. I can almost sense the burnt skin and the splitting headache doing me in. I wish I didn't exist. I wish I wasn't in Hong Kong. I think of all possible excuses that would let me out. Each one seems lamer than the other. Also, something inside me pushes me to go for it. It will be an experience; I want to give it a try. If I am a loser, I will give it up forever. After a day trip to Macau, and a call from my colleague, the other girl in the team saying she had injured her knee and wouldn't be able to play, I try to fall asleep with an aching belly and a spinning head. I wish "tomorrow" never arrives.

Time and tide wait for no man. Or so they say. The morning did come, a little later than I had expected it to; I had to bring it on. After a quick shower, I changed into the team jersey. Black and red with the number 14 printed behind -I looked a clear picture of the devil! The Chinese character for 4 is the same as that for death. None of the buildings in Hong Kong have floors numbered 4, 14, 24, 34 ... Here I was, literally wearing death on my back, on the very first tournament in my life. Life has got to be kidding me!

I reach the stadium and peek out of the cab to see the team captain. I am so glad to see him! His laughter is a great reassurance! I pay the cab guy, he wishes me luck and I get to the pavilion. Half-an-hour later, the warm ups begin and then we were up

for our first game against Swire properties. Luckily for me, the captain didn't depend on my amateur skills to see the team through. He had recruited a couple of professional touch rugby players from the Hong Kong and Singapore country teams and they saw us through to the semis.

In the end, we didn't win the trophy. The captain said he wasn't hopeful of the cup. But he hoped we could take back the plate. We truly disappointed him. What could you expect from a team that had amateurs like me pitted against some of the most seasoned players of touch rugby?

They say, you could lose the war and yet win some battles. Guess that's kind-of what happened today. We lost the trophy and the plate. But I think, in my mind, I won the never ceasing battle against my fear of playing a sport. I returned with a blasting head and an exhausted body. I showered and fell asleep only to be woken up with an ache that was worse than one I had ever experienced, all thanks to the day spent running around in the sun. Yet, after a few hours of sleep, awake and refreshed and reminiscing the series of events that led to the day's debacle, I am so glad I was a part of this team.

Sometimes, you need to push yourself, hard, harder, be harsh to yourself even. You'll see that there's many a thing to smile about after the pain subsides. That's how you grow as a person.

Three cheers to an excellent team and a brilliant captain! □

