

Love all in aspen

By Clive White (Filed: 20/06/2004)

Twenty years ago the career of Andrea Jaeger, to all intents, came to a painful, premature end when, a month short of her 19th birthday, she suffered a serious shoulder injury in the first round of the French Open. The world might easily have forgotten about the precocious youngster in pigtails and braces - in fact, the tennis world probably has - had she not then embarked on an even more daunting career in which she became much more of a champion than she would ever have been on a tennis court.

Three years and seven operations on her injured shoulder later, Jaeger was forced to accept the inevitable. Retirement at such a young age might have destroyed a lesser individual, but the girl born of German immigrants in Skokie, Illinois, knew there was another, more rewarding career waiting for her just around the corner.

As a child living in an adult's world, Jaeger had endured a lonely existence on tour, which began for her at the unprecedented age of 14. She found she had more in common with the ball-girls and boys than the grown-ups whom she beat with, what was for them, irritating regularity. And when at school, her fame inspired only envy among classmates, who would sometimes pelt her with cafeteria food.

A shy girl by nature, Jaeger withdrew more and more into her own world where she only really found solace on the practice courts or in prayer. As much as she loved to play, she took no pleasure from beating others, seeing it as a selfish act; but she enjoyed winning for the sake of her parents, who had invested so much time and money in her career. The year before her injury she rose to No 2 in the world, briefly splitting Martina Navratilova and Chris Evert, and reached the Wimbledon final, where she lost to the former. In the semis she had brought to an abrupt end the celebrated career of Billie Jean King, who was going for a sixth and final singles title, beating her 6-1, 6-1.

There was no doubt that the best of Jaeger was still to come when her shoulder popped out as she went for a backhand on Court Philippe Chatrier in Paris. "I knew the second it happened it was a career-ending moment," she said. "At first I thought it was a gun-shot. It was as if Jaws had taken hold of my shoulder and had kept on swimming! It was later diagnosed as posterior and anterior subluxation, which is when your shoulder dislocates in a variety of directions. It was very painful."

Shunned by both her peers and elders, Jaeger had already developed an attachment to children, particularly sick children, whom she would visit in local hospitals whenever she was on tour. This became the new, all-consuming focus in her life. One day, on the spur of the moment, she pawned the \$18,000 gold watch she received from a watch commercial endorsement and spent the money on presents for children, which she anonymously donated to hospitals around her home in Florida. It was the start of her philanthropy but she would soon need the philanthropy of others.

Next to go was her beloved Mercedes - it took her parents a full year to realise she really had sold it and dispersed the proceeds. Many people thought she had taken leave of her senses. "They thought I was less of a person, I could see it in their eyes," she said. "Some of them even said it."

But Jaeger was working towards a more productive use for the wealth she had amassed from tennis, which took the form of a children's cancer foundation and Aspen, Colorado, was to be its home. In 1990 the Silver Lining Foundation was established, but the specialised programmes it provided for children didn't take long to consume the \$1.4 million that Jaeger had made in prize money, not to mention her pension.

The ultimate aim was a purpose-built ranch that would provide an escape from a sterile hospital environment for children from around the world. With a good fortune which has blessed Jaeger throughout much of her life - career-ending injury and one near-fatal car accident apart - an Aspen couple, Fritz and Fabi Benedict, donated 10 acres of land, worth \$1m per acre, while Ted Forstmann, a philanthropist whom Jaeger had been tracking for three years, gave \$1.7m towards the building campaign.

Donations had been hard to come by but once John McEnroe made the first, it gave the Foundation the seal of approval and others soon followed; from the rich and famous like Madonna to the unemployed. Many fund-raising events later the Benedict-Forstmann Silver Lining Ranch was completed at a cost of \$4.7m. The new target is a \$40m endowment which would relieve the pressure on Jaeger to constantly find ways of funding her programmes, but that has been hit hard by 9-11.

Hundreds of children every year are given a week-long holiday at the ranch where they get the opportunity to do white-water rafting, horse riding, skiing and just about anything else the Rocky Mountains can offer - as well as meeting celebrities, ranging from Cindy Crawford to Nelson Mandela. Fishing and canoeing takes place on the nearby ranch of Kevin Costner, who is building a new lake on his property for the private use of the Foundation.

"These kids are dealing with things that we can't even imagine dealing with as an adult," said Jaeger. "You hear some harrowing, haunting things that just tear you apart. One girl called Lauren, who was 14, told me how she was picking out the clothes, make-up and music for her funeral. When I was 14 and just starting out on the tour: the hardest thing I had to figure out was how to dial room service and here was a 14-year-old preparing what she would wear, not for a graduation ceremony or a sponsors' party of the type I was once accustomed to going to, but for her funeral service.

"And yet she said to me, 'Andrea, I don't have millions of dollars to give you and I don't have a lot of time left, but I'm going to find a way to help because you have to keep doing this'. In lieu of flowers at her funeral the family asked that donations be made to the Foundation. You know, I reflect on that a lot. She was thinking about giving something back when she had just days to live.

"She didn't wear a wig like a lot of the girls. She had a brain tumour, you could see, her head was, like, stapled together. But she always had a smile. You watch these kids and you don't know whether the next day is going to be their last and yet they bring joy, love and laughter. They're teaching us."

Jaeger makes it a Foundation policy never to attend funerals, not so much because of the emotional strain it places on the staff but because they simply don't have the time. She recently heard the funeral arrangements for a girl named Holly as she listened to news from the French Open. Holly had been diagnosed with cancer at 14 and had died at 18. How different from the life Jaeger had led between those tender years.

"Your heart gets ripped in a million pieces," she said, "and it's not as if I'm immune; but the other side of that is that they also fill it. It's like, 'You're called to do this, well do it!' That's why I get on a plane or wake up at five in the morning or stay up late to fund-raise, because it's important to get them these programmes. And they never complain about what's happened.

"There's this 10-year-old boy who's been diagnosed with cancer and we were at the movies and he was eating candy, and he just looked at me and said, 'Candy doesn't taste the same since chemotherapy'. He wasn't complaining, it was just a fact of his life. I mean kids are always eating candy and then all of a sudden to have that taken away as well...

"Growing up as a tennis player I found people have different perceptions of you if you win or if you lose. With these kids, every day is an accomplishment, every day they appreciate it in a way that's so profound. I remember one June we had a group of children from Tampa and we're on top of Aspen Mountain when snow start to fall. 'Wow,' said these kids, 'you guys are really amazing'. They thought we'd made it snow. I'm looking at the staff and I'm thinking, 'We're good, but we're not that good'."

- First Service, published by Health Communications and written by Andrea Jaeger, price \$21.95, is on sale at Wimbledon bookshop throughout the fortnight, all proceeds to The Silver Lining Foundation. Anyone wishing to make a donation to the Foundation can do so at www.silverliningfoundation.org or by contacting the site office on 00-1-970-925-9540

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