

The Launch

On January 22, 1984, Apple ran the most famous television advertisement of all-time introducing its Macintosh computer. Aired during the Super Bowl and seen by countless millions, it promised a product so revolutionary it would free us from the shackles of conformity and the big brother frighteningly envisioned by novelist George Orwell. It closed with the devastating explosion of an imagined overlord and the tagline, "You'll see why 1984 won't be like 1984," and it put big ideas in my head about my own launch into the world upon high school graduation in 1985.

I wanted to be as revolutionary as Mac, a paradigm-destroying, one-of-a-kind path-blazer. As the first in my class to put gel in my hair and wear clothes from Chess King and Merry-Go-Round, I fancied myself a budding if not yet dangerous, non-conformist, and with Mac at my side there was no limit on what I could accomplish. So I struggled to contain my excitement about the big, computer-sized box in beautiful wrapping sitting next to our table at graduation lunch. There I was with my parents, my sister and my grandmother celebrating the completion of my first step toward greatness and picturing my sleek, shiny partner about to emerge from the striped paper festooned with red ribbon.

Dressed in a blue blazer and tie, I bore no resemblance to the convention-free spirit I aspired to be but saw my attire as a temporary cage holding an animal about to spring loose.

"Let's open presents," my father said with his usual genuine enthusiasm.

"Cards first," my mother cautioned, wanting to make sure the emotional heft of the event was front and center.

Making quick work of the cards and the inconveniently-lengthy sentiments expressed in them, I set my sights on the largest box.

"Small gifts first," my mom said, and I dutifully obeyed, opening a series of quintessential college gifts: a dictionary, a thesaurus, pens, pencils and a Ziggy desk calendar among them.

“Only one left,” I said, finally able to open the object of my true desire.

“Whaddya think it is?” my grandmother asked, her Brooklyn background still shining.

“It’s the big one, Elizabeth,” my father said, grasping at his heart and doing his best Fred Sanford impression before laughing the same way he had the first 200 times he used the line.

With all the good humor in the air, the last present had to be a great one. It had to be Mac. I tore off the paper and stared, immediately doing my best not to look crestfallen.

“It’s top of the line,” my father said, unmistakably proud of his purchase.

“Wow,” I said, the word deflating like a balloon.

“That’s something, huh?” he asked.

“I didn’t know they still made these,” I said, trying desperately not to sound like the world’s biggest ingrate.

“Yes, sir. It’s a Smith–Corona, just like the one I had in college. The best typewriter on the market. Has all the bells and whistles you need. Even has something called Spell Right.”

“You don’t say.”

“Hey, I wouldn’t skimp on my boy’s gift.”

“Thanks, Dad. Thanks, Mom,” I said, my disappointment barely contained but somehow imperceptible to them.

I wanted to add. *Are you nuts? It’s 1985 not 1955. Where were you during Apple’s Super Bowl ad? In the bathroom?* Instead I said nothing, got up from my seat and walked over to kiss them each on the cheek. I didn’t realize it then but by raising me to always honor and respect them even when they botched things; they’d given me the greatest gift of all. Sure, the lack of Mac was a blow to my plans for imminent world domination but at least I had my summer travel plans.

Having toiled for years to become a nationally-ranked junior tennis player, I couldn’t wait to play the series of summer national tournaments that would take me all over the country, starting with the hard court championships in Burlingame, California. It was my chance to compete against the best and move closer to my dream of playing in

the U.S. Open and Wimbledon someday, and a perfect way to change the subject as we ate graduation cake.

"Hey, Dad, are you going to make my plane reservation for California pretty soon?" I asked excitedly. "Hard courts are coming up."

"What are you talking about?" he asked, dropping his fork.

"Hard court nationals in Burlingame. They're only a month away."

"You're not going to nationals."

"What do you mean?"

"You're getting a job this summer. You need to learn the value of a dollar."

Yes, my father used those exact words. He was born in the 1930's.

"I know the value of a dollar."

"You've never worked a day in your life."

Now I was angry and frustrated and my voice betrayed me.

"I've been working *every* day of my life at school and at tennis. Why do you think I have the opportunities I have?" I asked.

"You're getting a real job. Do you understand?"

I momentarily considered pushing things further but, true to my rearing, backed down and stopped challenging him. My father's tone told me resistance was futile and the conversation was over so I tucked my entitlement between my legs and shut my mouth. Graduation, a day I'd looked forward to with so much anticipation, was officially a bust and I left the restaurant feeling miserable.

"I can't have you leave this household without knowing how hard it is to earn money," my father added in the parking lot.

"I get it, Dad," I said tersely.

As much as I hated it, I knew what he meant. My older sister worked as a hostess at the Ground Round during high school and he wanted me to experience working very hard for very little.

"I've already spoken to Pete Gangloff and he's arranged a position for you down at Midtown Tower in maintenance," my father said, referring to his good friend who

worked as the general manager of the downtown office building where his office was located.

“Maintenance? I don’t know anything about maintenance.”

“You’ll learn.”

“What’s the pay?”

“Minimum wage. \$3.35 an hour.”

“Any chance of negotiating that upward?” I asked.

“None. First you have to prove you’re worth the \$3.35.”

The following Monday I rode to work with my father to start my penance.

“Whatever you do, don’t mention the word college,” my father advised as we made our way downtown.

“Why not?”

“Pete tells me your new boss hates college kids. Just despises them.”

“What if he asks me what I’m doing in the fall?”

“Be evasive. If you have to say something, mention the Marines or the circus.”

“Got it.”

“And one more thing. Watch yourself around the guys,” my father warned.

“The guys?”

“The other guys who you’ll be working with. They’re part of a work-release program from Monroe County jail.”

“You’re putting me in with criminals?” I asked with alarm.

“Non-violent offenders. Most of them anyway.”

Deep below Midtown Tower, my father led me through concrete hallways and exposed pipes until we reached a small, dark office occupied by four men in evergreen jumpsuits smoking cigarettes.

“Which one of you is Flem?” my father asked the group as I peered through the smoky haze.

“Right here,” a large, bearded man with long hair and tattooed knuckles said.

“Pete Gangloff told me to drop my son here for work. Is this the right place?”

“Yup,” Flem said.

“Okay, he’s yours for the summer,” my father said before wishing me good luck and leaving me in the custody of a man named for an excretion and his merry band of felons.

Flem stared at me for a minute, his lower lip bulging with a wad of chewing tobacco. If my goal had been to die by 40, he would have made the perfect mentor.

“This here’s the rest of the crew: Trigger, Bowflex and Skeeball,” Flem said, pointing to the others, before spitting a mouthful of tobacco juice into a Coke can.

“Nice to meet you,” I said cheerfully, hoping to get off to a good start with my co-workers. But my friendly greeting aroused only grunts in reply, compelling me to make more nervous small talk.

“So. How’d you get the nickname, Trigger? I asked.

“I shot a guy,” Trigger replied.

“I see. Any particular reason why?”

“He asked too many questions.”

“I can always learn about your nicknames later,” I said, directing my attention to Bowflex and Skeeball.”

Just in time, Flem began his orientation process, showing me how to punch in and out on the time clock and letting me know the dress code.

“You need a jumpsuit,” Flem said, observing my attire of shorts and Frankie Says Relax t-shirt.

“I do? I don’t think I own one.”

“You can wear Smitty’s. You’re about his size.”

“What about Smitty? He won’t mind?” I asked.

“Smitty’s not here anymore. We lost him in a smelting accident,” Bowflex said.

“What happened?”

“He wasn’t wearing his jumpsuit.”

Reluctantly, I slid into the jumpsuit with the former owner’s name stitched on a front pocket and his half-used tin of Skoal sitting in a back one. From that point forward, everybody on the maintenance crew called me Smitty.

“So does this job come with any benefits?” I asked Flem.

“You get one 15 minute break for lunch and if you shut-up and do what I tell you, you might live.”

“Okay. Good perks,” I said.

Instinct told me it wasn’t the right time to ask about dental insurance or a gym membership. Minutes later, Flem led me to an abandoned construction area with generous amounts of dust, debris and asbestos floating in the air.

“This is where you’re working today,” he said.

“Think I need a mask, Flem?” I asked, my chest tightening by the second.

“Nah, you’ll be fine,” he said, pointing toward ten large buckets filled with small pieces of metal.

“I need you to sort screws, Smitty.”

“Screws?”

“Screws, nuts, bolts and washers. Sort’em into groups. I’ll check back on you in three hours and you better make a dent.”

There was no getting around it. Flem didn’t like me. He really didn’t like me. He’d seen my kind before, a suburban kid whose father wanted him to get some dirt under his nails before college, and his past experience told him I would be just like the others, a useless annoyance he had to babysit for the summer. But I’d show him. I was going to be different and as I began to sort through my first bucket, I resolved to prove him wrong by relying on the same things I relied upon on the tennis court to be successful: determination, resiliency, tenacity and frequent water breaks. If I was going to be a screw sorter, then dammit I’d be the best screw sorter in the world.

Going into overdrive, I charged at the task like a rhino on speed, furiously sorting one piece of metal after another into piles until my hands were raw from abrasion and my

throat was coarse with contaminants. Like eating an oversized bowl of Grape Nuts, making progress toward the bottom of the buckets was painful and uncertain. I thought I was doing reasonably well, but when Flem came to get me for lunch, he said nothing, a pattern that repeated four consecutive days and left me wondering why he seemed so uninterested in my headway. On the morning of day five, I got my answer.

As Flem left me at the work area on my first Friday and payday, the smirk on his face told me the screws didn't need sorting. This was make-work and suddenly I felt humiliated, alone on a stool huddled over a bucket of bolts breathing in toxins. What was this guy's deal? On the ride home with my father, I expressed my displeasure, too embarrassed to reveal the specifics.

"I hate this job, Dad. They're just wasting my time."

"What's the problem?"

"It's a really hostile environment down there," I said.

"Welcome to the work world."

"You mean it's like this everywhere?" I asked.

"Pretty much. You're getting a great education this summer."

"Either that or mesothelioma," I scoffed.

"You'll be fine, Smitty."

"Dad, don't call me that! I think Flem wants to kill me."

"That's how work is," my father said.

"You live under constant threat of death?" I asked.

"Pretty much."

And so my father was right. Every day was the same. Hour after hour of sorting screws interspersed occasionally by menacing looks from Flem and the boys from county. My launch into the world, my great big adventure, seemed further away than ever and only one hope remained: Kalamazoo.

Every August, the best male junior tennis players in the United States head for Kalamazoo, Michigan to compete in the country's most prestigious tournament. Invitation only and limited to boys' 16 and under and 18 and under age-groups, the competition was first held in 1943 and its list of past players reads like a who's who of tennis: John McEnroe, Jimmy Connors, Stan Smith, Arthur Ashe, Rod Laver and on and

on. I had been lucky enough to play the boys' 16 and under division in 1983, winning one round before bowing out to the number nine seed, but now I'd been invited to play the boys' 18 and unders, where the winner of the tournament would receive a wild-card into the main draw of the U.S. Open. This was big.

Waiting until my father was on his second Tanqueray and tonic, I approached him in his library the Saturday evening after I received the invitation letter.

"Guess what this is?" I asked, waiving the envelope.

"I hope a paycheck. Did you get it?" he asked.

"Sure did. \$97.00 after taxes. Not sure where I'm going to spend it all."

"May not be much but you earned every penny of it," he said.

"That's for sure. Anyway, this isn't my paycheck," I said, waving the envelope one more time. "It's an invitation to play Kalamazoo - my official endorsement from the Eastern Tennis Association."

"I see," he said, taking it from my hands and proceeding to pull out the letter and read it.

It may have been easy for him to deny me the right to play in the national hardcourts, the national clay courts, the international grass courts and all the others, but this was Kalamazoo, the grand dame of junior national tournaments. Nobody could say no to her. To do so would be child abuse.

"This is quite an accomplishment. I want you to know I recognize that," he said, looking me straight in the eye.

"Thanks," I said.

"And I know this is very important to you," he said.

I nodded.

"But I still can't send you. You have to finish the job you started."

"But, Dad. They're trying to kill me at work."

"Don't be ridiculous. I know this is disappointing but I told you at graduation how I felt and I haven't changed my mind."

Andre Agassi, Pete Sampras, Michael Chang and Jim Courier would compete at Kalamazoo in 1985, but I would not. With my last hope gone, I reached a new level of

despair back at Midtown the next Monday. Sick and tired of sorting screws and with nothing to lose, I decided to confront Flem as I endured yet another torturous tale of his souped-up Honda and the time he got it up to 84 miles-per hour. The only way out of this funk was to roll up my sleeves and feel useful for once.

“Flem, I don’t want to sort screws anymore,” I announced. “I’m fully capable of doing a real job.”

Flem was stunned at my impudence.

“A real job, eh? All right. I think I have something for you,” he said, searching around the office for supplies.

Within minutes, I learned a key lesson about the workplace. Never let your need to feel useful sucker you into ask for more challenging work. Suddenly, I went from coasting by as a screw sorter to bathroom duty.

“Here is a mop, some Comet and a toilet bowl brush. Let’s go. There are dozens of toilets that need a good cleaning.”

Flem marched me to men’s room one floor up and showed me its six stalls. Digging deep, I decided to tackle them with enthusiasm.

“I’m going to have these toilets shining like diamonds,” I said, confident my winning attitude would win him over.

“Just get the sh*t out of the crevices, Smitty,” he said.

“Aye aye, Captain. Consider it done.”

For the next two weeks, all I did was clean toilets and scrub bathroom floors until the smell of Comet burned in my nostrils and the assorted odors of workplace washrooms permeated my jumpsuit. But as bad as it was, I felt like I was making a contribution. For the first time in my life, I knew what it was like to be a working man, a real life blue-collar hero who put his nose to the grindstone (or in this case the porcelain) and got the job done without fanfare or complaint. Every morning I would punch the time clock, slug down a cup of coffee with Trigger or Bowflex and then climb into the trenches, taking pride in my profession.

Then one morning, everything changed. I had just started cleaning the bathroom on the building’s third floor, when a man I didn’t recognize entered. He was wearing a jumpsuit too, albeit a different color than mine.

“What are you doing?” he asked me.

“I’m cleaning this bathroom,” I said, holding up my mop.

“What for?”

“I work here. I’m from maintenance,” I said.

“Maintenance? They’re not responsible for the bathrooms,” he informed me.

“They’re not?”

“No. We are. I’m from building services.”

Mortified yet again, I raced downstairs to confront Flem, who I found in the office surrounded by my felonious colleagues.

“Maintenance isn’t responsible for cleaning toilets?” I asked in an accusatory voice.

“Nope. Not last I checked, Smitty,” Flem said as he and the boys burst into laughter.

“So you had me scrub them for two weeks just to play a joke on me?”

“Yup, rook. That’s about right,” he said, the group’s laughter growing more uproarious as I stood there fully ashamed at my stupidity.

“Very funny,” I said, shooting daggers with my eyes.

At home that night, nearly inconsolable, I went to the mailbox out of habit, never expecting it to offer me a lifeline. But somehow, by God and the cosmic forces of the universe, there was a letter there for me. The return address said United States Olympic Committee. *What in the world could this be?*

I opened the letter and read it, rubbing my eyes in disbelief when I finished. The USOC was holding its annual Olympic Sports Festival, an intra-American Olympics designed to keep U.S. athletes competitively sharp as the 1988 Seoul games approached and they wanted me to play in the tennis event. Signed by USOC President Robert Helmick, the letter promised ten days of the highest level competition in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, all expenses paid for every athlete, and spoke of the event’s already rich heritage of participants.

I raced to show my parents the letter.

“Do you know who’s competed in this thing before? I asked them as they read together slackjawed. “Mary Lou Retton. Carl Lewis. Scott Hamilton. Greg Louganis. All the guys from the 1980 U.S. hockey team. Just tons and tons of Olympic gold medal winners.”

“Honey, it’s incredible. Just incredible,” my mother said.

My father continued to stare at the letter, leaving me in suspense as to his reaction.

“What do you think, Dad? All-expenses paid. Did you see that part?”

My circulatory system revolted as I waited to learn if my fate included Louisiana. Would he say yes or annihilate another dream? Finally, he looked up at me.

“You’ve got to do this,” he said, converting the tremor of excitement within me into a full earthquake.

“Yes!” I shouted, relieved and released. “Do me a favor, Dad. Next time you see Flem, tell him to go nut, bolt, washer and screw himself!”

From there, everything happened quickly. I flew to Louisiana and began training with the 32 players selected for the 10-day event. The assigned North, South, East and West teams had eight players each, four men and four women, who would compete in singles, doubles and mixed doubles. Outfitted in free Adidas clothing from head to toe, red, blue, yellow or green depending on your region, we marched in opening ceremonies our second night there.

Walking into Louisiana State University’s football stadium, packed with 67,000 cheering fans, I awakened from hell and found myself in heaven, a starving prisoner now standing at a banquet. I was jubilant and as the adulation showered down on me, I convinced myself this was how life should be and always would be, even though recent experiences taught me otherwise. It was remarkable how rapidly your fortunes could change and as I signed autographs for the children who streamed onto the track as the opening ceremonies concluded, I marveled at the miraculous the turn of events I’d been part of and witnessed. Days before I’d been face down in a toilet and now I stood on a summit. The only thing missing was my parents. How I wished they were there to see me in my moment of glory, my launch, the start of my big adventure.

The campus of Louisiana State served as the Olympic village for the athletes and everywhere I turned, especially in the cafeteria when sharing meals, I saw people I recognized from television. Each day, I called home with newsy accounts of the stars I’d seen and an update on my results. I lost early in the men’s singles and mixed doubles, but in men’s doubles, my partner, a West Virginian named Joby Foley, and I survived our first match, winning a long three setter. Eventually, we won our way to the final, guaranteeing ourselves a medal.

The day of the gold medal match, I saw a camera crew setting up on the tennis stadium court where we would be playing. Rumor had it ESPN would be televising the men’s doubles final and my body quivered at this amazing prospect, wondering how

lucky a guy could get and praying someone from home would catch it on cable and hail me a champion when I returned.

Warming up for the match, I looked up to the stands where the cameraman was located and saw two figures I immediately recognized sliding into the row next to him. It was my mom and dad and had I been older and more susceptible to the emotions that rule you once you've aged, I would have cried. But at 17, the sight of them was nothing but joyous recognition and true fulfillment. My partner and I lost that day. But at the medal ceremony immediately following the event, as the Star-Spangled Banner played and I stood on the platform with silver around my neck, I watched the tears flow down my parents' faces in the stands and felt deep gratitude. I had launched and they had seen it.