what people—these mysterious, anonymous Harvard students—produce for it. In the end, all such sites suffer the same crisis of purpose: why are people writing this stuff? And who’s reading it?

It’s easy to turn these questions into a jeremiad against the Internet, or the shallowness of youth culture and its fads, or the failure of students to make meaningful real-life connections—all of which might be fair to some extent, but ultimately miss the point. There’s nothing terribly new here: the outlet, perhaps, but not the impulse. (The virtual bathroom walls were preceded by actual ones.) It’s the allure of anonymity, but also the sense that you have something to share—the thought that if you were released from all responsibility for a statement, free to speak with complete honesty, you could get at the heart of what goes on not only in your own mind, but in others’ as well. People don’t think that they’re writing with Shakespearean wit (much less profundity), of course, but neither do they think that their posts are completely worthless—otherwise, why bother to write in the first place? This is true of both the drippingly sincere and the bitingy sarcastic. Irony and honesty blend together. It is impossible to tell whether the leukemia poster was being serious or facetious. The difference stops mattering. The point is being able to touch something at the core of the everyday, whether it’s a bitter complaint, a secret crush, or a disdain for the notion of either.

But it’s only a fantasy, and it gets old fast. Those things aren’t really the heart of the everyday; they’re the surface. The sad fact is that thinking takes work, and so what goes on in your head when you’re bored at Lamont sinks no further beneath the surface than any of the other thoughts you have from moment to moment. Feeling like everything is going wrong, or wondering if the person you passed was someone special—these are experiences everyone has, and for that reason, they might be interesting for a bit, but ultimately only tell you what you already knew. It’s thrilling to find that there’s someone out there who thinks the same thoughts as you, but, in the end, it’s not very helpful. That explains why these things tend to appear, flare up, ebb, and all but disappear: after a while, all the flirtations and the frustrations start to resemble one another. And, though we occasionally like to entertain the fantasy that we’re at Harvard because we’re at least a bit out of the ordinary, that’s as true here as it is anywhere else.

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SPORTS

Game, Match, and High Set

A contrarian approach to the “philosopher’s stone of tennis”

In 1970, while watching tennis, Bruce Wright had a life-changing moment. He’d been invited to a professional match in Washington, D.C., that featured the legendary Rod Laver. Wright, an outstanding gymnast at Springfield College, hadn’t seen much tennis, but found himself hypnotized. He observed Laver’s on-court movement with a gymnast’s eyes, ignoring the flight of the tennis ball but soaking up details of how the great Australian lefty carried himself.

“I couldn’t even tell you who his opponent was,” Wright says. “But I noticed a subtle thing: Laver had optimized the height of his center of gravity while moving to and from each shot. Later, with much more study, I realized that this was the single factor that distinguished Laver and put him head and shoulders above his peers—not stroke production, not fit-
ness, but his high center of gravity when moving to the ball.

Wright spent years watching a “huge amount of tennis on videotape” and, through study and experimentation with players, determined that this “high set” (high center of gravity) confers several major advantages. The high set results from “trying to stand as tall as possible,” Wright says, “moving while minimizing flexion of the knees and waist.” Doing so, he says, makes players quicker to the ball, improves their stamina (as it is less fatiguing than a “low set”), and puts less overall strain on the body, making injuries, especially knee injuries, less likely.

As a 66-year-old volunteer assistant coach at Harvard, he’s now working with Dave Fish, head men’s tennis coach since 1976, and assistant coach Andrew Rueb to bring this innovative concept to the Crimson varsity.

Wright’s approach is contrarian because, almost unanimously, tennis coaches advise their students to “get low to the ball,” to move toward the ball from a modified crouch. “If you have to get down to hit the ball,” Fish explains, “the assumption is that you should get down to the ball as early as possible.” But Wright distinguishes crisply between “hitting stance” (one’s stance while actually striking the ball) and “moving stance” (how one holds one’s body while moving around the court between hits). “Nobody has paid any attention to moving stance because everyone is glued to the ball,” he explains. “But the efficiency of your hitting stance is determined by the efficiency of your moving stance. If you get there later, you’ll hit it badly.” Only on the final step before hitting the ball, he advises, should one lower the body to the degree necessary.

The high set enables quicker movement from the “ready” position and keeps athletes light on their feet. The result is the kind of moving stance epitomized in Muhammad Ali’s maxim, “Float like a butterfly.” Wright notes that “Ali was a high setter,” adding that the high set is effective in any sport that involves quick initiation of movement. “It’s very significant, as it affects every single contact with the ball and every recovery after a stroke,” says Fish. “When the player, after the split step [the body’s slight lift that initiates movement], returns to the higher set, that player is instantly unstable in the most desirable sense. That instability allows him to move forward, back up, or lunge out to either side more quickly. [Top professional player Roger] Federer seems to float above the court, because he maintains a high set.”

After his gymnastics career at Springfield College, where he was nationally ranked in the rings (“A physical impossibility for someone as weak as I am,” he says, grinning), Wright went on to coach gymnastics there, and then at MIT and Annapolis, and to consult with the tennis squad at West Point. He took up tennis seriously after his epiphany watching Rod Laver, and within two years was skillful enough to have made the naval academy’s varsity, according to their coach. Using his concept of high set, Wright then worked with several pro tennis players, including Stan Smith, winner of the 1971 U.S. Open and 1972 Wimbledon.

By 1977, Wright felt that he’d introduced
“It was so contrary to common knowledge—it was like saying, ‘You’re supposed to drive on the left side of the road.’”

the concept of high set to pro tennis, and that its obvious merits would ensure its eventual adoption throughout the game at all levels. Not so. “So great is the force of tradition that the tennis world missed it,” Fish explains. “If you’ve been told that two plus two equals three long enough, no one is going to stick his head out and say it equals four. I had never seen anyone pay attention to the inefficiency of the low set.”

Even a top-10 pro like current American star Andy Roddick could benefit from the high set, Wright says—especially on the forehand side. “Andy lowers to some degree moving to most forehands,” he explains. “Arriving in position in a more crouched, lower moving set than optimal, his body tends to rise up during his forward swing, taking his racquet upward with it. But an upward swing generates topspin, which—in contrast to a flatter ball—reduces pace, producing a less penetrating shot and hence more time for Andy’s opponents to get to and make their reply.”

Wright, who first met Fish almost three decades ago, began sharing his insights with him two years ago, and this year they began coaching the men’s varsity on the importance of high set. “The guys resisted

The Mystique of Red Top

Nearly everything about the Harvard-Yale regatta is unique.

The long list of past results is studded with footnotes that illuminate some of the more peculiar races. In 1870, for example, “Yale ran into Harvard, which was leading at the turning stake; Yale disqualified.” In 1890, “Yale stroke broke oar, dove over-board;” in 1971, Yale’s #7 man lost his oar and dove into the same river. In 1911, Yale’s stroke was taken from the shell near the three-mile mark, presumably a victim of exhaustion, a fate that befell an un-footnoted Harvard oarsman in 2007, enabling Yale to come back from a deficit and nip Harvard by half a second.

Let’s not forget the notorious “eelgrass” race of 1882, when “At the mile Yale led by a length of clear water, but the coxswain losing his head steered through a patch of eelgrass near the east shore, owing to which they were 19 seconds behind Harvard at the mile and a half,” according to a Yale historian. The Blue gamely rallied to come back and ultimately lost by only three seconds, despite setting a new Yale course record.

There are many quirky stories partly because there have been so many races: this year’s will be the 145th (Harvard has 90 wins, Yale 54). The Harvard-Yale Boat Race, begun in 1852, is the oldest intercollegiate athletic contest in the United States. The varsity four-mile event is the longest crew race regularly rowed in North America. Its only peer is the even older and longer Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race (4¼ miles), which dates from 1829. Both regattas take place upon the Thames, though the one in Connecticut rhymes with “games.” Harry Parker, the men’s head crew coach, says, “It’s special—a very, very challenging race. It puts a premium on training hard, good determination, and endurance.”

The race training is unique in the world of college sports. Harvard and Yale are the only colleges that maintain special training camps to prepare for a single athletic contest. Harvard’s is called Red Top, after the color of a cupola atop the small boathouse there; Yale’s, a short way upstream, is Gales Ferry, the name of a local town. These camps lie fallow all year until the crews arrive a week or two before their showdown. Only heavyweight men compete in New London: the varsities plus the freshmen (a two-mile race), JVs (three-mile race), and an unofficial “combi crew” (a mix of oarsmen from the third varsity and second fresh-
this at the beginning,” Fish says. “It was so contrary to common knowledge—it was like saying, ‘You’re supposed to drive on the left side of the road.’ The high-set concept met with both respectful doubt and mockery and ridicule.” But as players began adopting it, the results started speaking for themselves. “I’ve noticed an increase in consistency, which is the philosopher’s stone of tennis,” says Fish. “Our guys have hit individual shots well enough to beat the pros, except the pros can sustain that kind of play through a match with greater consistency.”

Take Alexei Chijoff-Evans ’11, currently Harvard’s number-one singles player. “Alexei is a big guy who’s been taught to move low all his life,” Fish says. “He felt that his results in tennis all depended on his stroke. After he adopted the high set, he began to feel he could hit a big shot from anywhere on the court.” Chijoff-Evans adds, “I have a propensity to drop my head and bend at the waist too much on the serve. By staying higher, my serve percentage has gone up and I’m able to hit it harder. I’m also making a lot more forehands—not muscling the ball with my arm but hitting it a lot more loosely.”

Wright is now at work on a book titled “The Movement Myth” that describes his findings. He has even gone beyond high set into an analysis of the anterior/posterior axis that he feels can illuminate a long-overlooked physical source of error in athletics. Stay tuned.

Two Harvard crews (right) row past “The Rock,” long contested as a site for Harvard or Yale partisan artwork. Below, rowers convene with coach Harry Parker. The boathouse, with its eponymous red cupola, is at left.

Photographs by Craig Lambert

man boats who race two miles on Friday—before the regatta proper on Saturday—or sometimes on Sunday).

The days leading up to the floating clash are a college oarsman’s version of the Elysian Fields (or streams), a paradise of sorts where there is little to do but row, eat, sleep, and horse around. The Harvard crews row twice daily, in the early morning before breakfast, and in the afternoon. In between, there’s ample time for games of cards (and today, video games) or croquet on the riparian lawns. “They call it croquet,” cautions Ian Gardiner ’68, M.B.A. ’74, former chairman of the Friends of Harvard and Radcliffe Rowing, who stroked the 1967 varsity. “I dare anybody to beat Harry [Parker]. He made up the rules as we went along. There was ample cheating on all sides.”

There can be serious matters to attend to, as well, such as exams: many oarsmen have taken finals at Red Top and “Harry was often the person who gave people their diplomas,” Gardiner explains, because the regatta sometimes conflicted with Commencement. (This year, Harvard’s revised academic calendar means that the race falls on May 29, two days after Commencement.)

“The event has changed so dramatically in terms of its importance in the world,” says Clint Allen ’67, who stroked the undefeated 1966 varsity that finished nine lengths ahead of Yale. In the 1920s and 1930s, as many as 100,000 spectators thronged to New London for the regatta, and a special observation train rolled along the riverbank, enabling its passengers to keep track of the race. As late as 1966, Allen recalls, “There were hundreds of yachts side by side, lining the last half mile of the course. They were all blowing their horns and it was a cacophony.” Allen’s victorious race made the front page of the Boston Globe; today, he says, “You have to hunt in the sports section to find the results,” and spectators number in scores rather than thousands.

Yet spectatorship has never been the primary issue. “The striking thing to me is how participants in the regatta continue to cherish the experience,” Parker says. “They treat it as a really special event, and that’s a large part of why they are so loyal to it.”

Indeed there is a timelessness to Red Top. In the dormitory, “You look at the door of your compartment and see the names of your predecessors,” says Gardiner. “You are becoming part of history there.”

~C.L.