

ROSIE!

Rebecca Ripley

Though just a few moments earlier Chris Evert had ended their round-robin match at the 1976 Virginia Slims Championships by lacing one of her trademarked, two-fisted backhands down the line, Rosie Casals was in a talkative mood.

She had electrified the crowd in the Los Angeles Sports Arena, and stunned Chris, with her dazzling array of shots, some of which were almost beyond description. The first time she maneuvered her racquet around *behind* her right knee and chipped a perfect drop shot over the net for a clear winner, most of the assembled crowd naturally assumed it was merely an amazing, instinctive reaction by a player caught badly out of position. Everyone else thought it was just plain good luck, and lots of it. Like holes-in-one, circus shots of the type Rosie had so casually executed aren't planned, they just happen. Or do they?

Both theories were blown right out of the water when she turned around and did it again, not once, but twice. And each time, her between-the-legs chip shots fell in for winners. Nobody, not even someone who has been described as a 'human backboard,' can defend themselves against such sleight of hand.

Rosie, however, dismissed her racquet wizardry during the post-match press conference.

"I was just trying to mess up Chris's fabled concentration," she said with a smile.

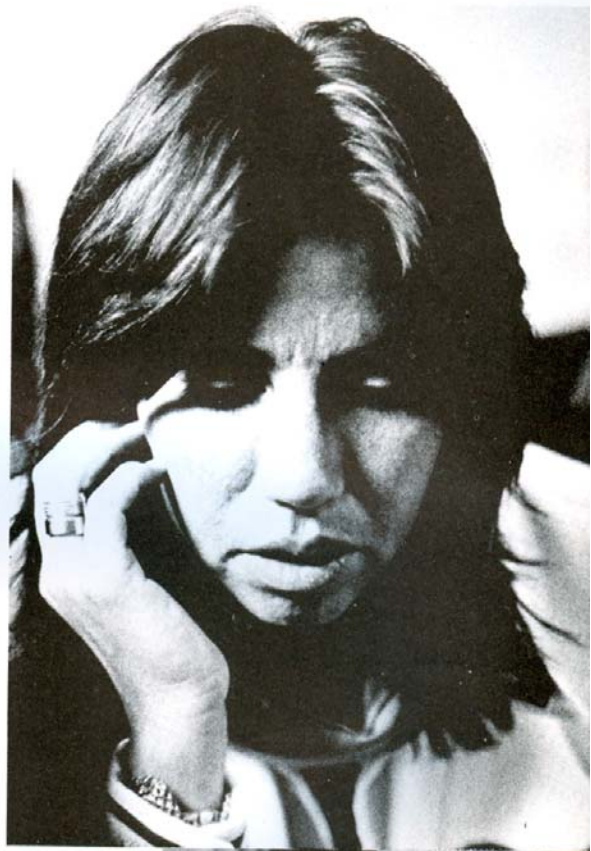
"It worked," muttered Chris. She looked very tired, and for good reason. Like many of her recent outings, this one had seen her fighting for her life. Her obvious relief more than matched Rosie's buoyant mood.

The players, seated in identical stuffed chairs, provided a startling study in contrasts. For one thing, Rosie looked like she was on the verge of being swallowed by the colorful fabric. She is one of the smallest players on the Circuit, 5'2¼", and it was not difficult to imagine her disappearing into the foam rubber depths of her chair.

And while Chris, impeccably clad in pink and white, sipped daintily from her soft drink and occasionally adjusted the thin gold bracelets that encircled her left wrist, Rosie projected the image of a tough street kid. She was decked out in a black tennis dress and she wasn't sipping her liquid refreshment, she was positively guzzling it.

The questions from the press then began to focus on the technical aspects of the match and most of them were directed at Chris. Before long, the discussion concerning unforced errors, service breaks, ground stroke depth, and turning points trickled to an end and the clicking cameras began to sound less and less like a phalanx of machine guns. A self-conscious, foot-shuffling silence enveloped the tiny room and the press conference was on the verge of breaking up.

But, as we have said, Rosie Casals was in a talkative mood. "C'mon, you people," she cried through a chrome forest





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of microphones, "let's have some more questions."

Her demand was met by a bit of nervous laughter, but further questions were not forthcoming.

"OK," said Rosie, "if you won't talk, I will."

It was a vintage performance. Casals was back and she was clearly enjoying every minute of it.

It wasn't always so.

Prior to the 1975 Virginia Slims season, Rosie had announced that she was going to play the first tournament, San Francisco, and then sit out the rest. She said she was tired and her game wasn't meeting her expectations, so she was going to take a break for a few months.

She had, after all, been playing almost non-stop for 16 of her 27 years. She had been introduced to tennis by her father when she was nine, but her initial involvement was as a spectator, a very, very reluctant spectator.

Manuel Casals used to drag Rosie and her older sister over to San Francisco's Golden Gate Park when he went out to play doubles with his friends. From the very beginning, however, Rosie wasn't content to hang around and watch the action, she wanted to participate. She finally got her chance a short time later when Mr. Casals gave each of his daughters a racquet. Her sister quickly tired of the game, but Rosie was hooked.

She spent every spare minute at the park's numerous tennis courts trying to rustle up a game with anyone willing to take on a tiny bundle of energy. And when she couldn't find a game, she'd spend endless hours hitting against the backboard.

Rosie's dedication and talent got her to Wimbledon and the other big tournaments while she was still in her teens. Along the way, she hooked up with Billie Jean King and they became as formidable a doubles team as women's tennis is ever likely to see.

But whether she was playing singles or doubles, Rosie's particular brand of tennis has always been charged with more electricity than Con Ed ever dreamed existed.

She was, and is, an intense, instinctive, and creative player.

"Sometimes I think I'm too creative," she has said. "I'm always trying different shots, and sometimes I'll try a harder shot just because I know I can do it."

She has done it often enough to have won 25 Circuit tournaments, including the first one in 1970. And last year, Rosie made her Slims comeback a highly successful one by capturing third place at the Virginia Slims Championships. During the regular season, she reached the quarter-finals seven times, the semi-finals five times, and the finals once. (Chris Evert beat her in the Detroit finals, the 100th Virginia Slims event.)

Yep, Rosie's back, and she's better than ever. Her game is still a joy to watch. Just ask anyone who's ever seen her play.

