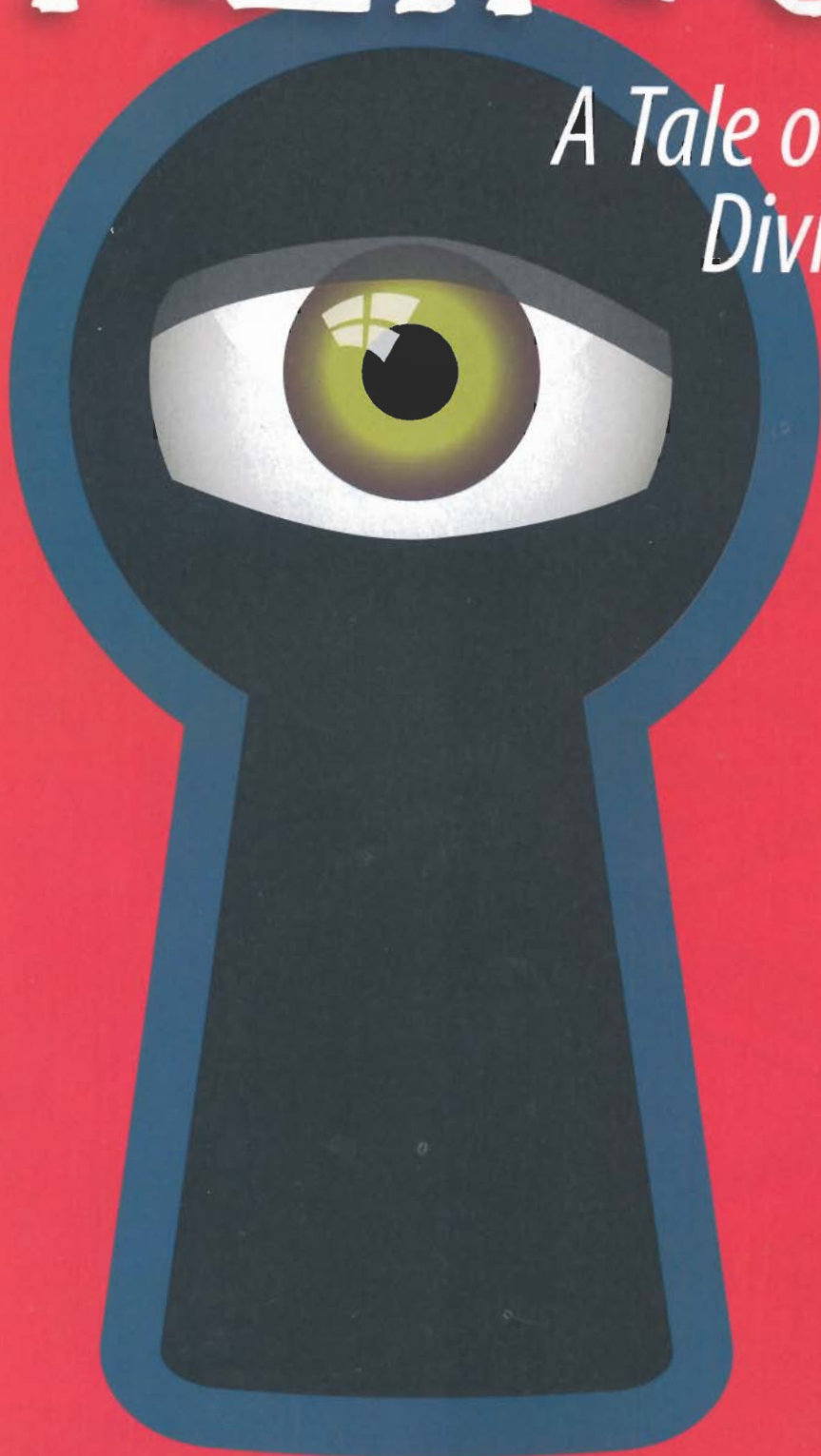


ALTA Gate:

A Tale of Intrigue and Divisional Rivalry



By Anna Willis

It was two days before my tennis team was to play its last regular season ALTA match, and our opponents were in first place. Trailing in second place, my team was the classic underdog—but not so far behind that we were totally out of contention to win the division bag tag. Still, the odds were not in our favor. The first place team (I'll call them the "Dominators" to protect names and facility reputations) had lost only one point all season. Knowing we would soon be facing a team of ringers was not a calming notion. But this was nothing, compared to what happened next. Let me retrace history:

It was a warm Tuesday evening, and I was sitting in my car at a Zaxby's drive thru, when my cell phone rang. The display flashed, "No name." (I didn't know it at the time, but this was the start of some major intrigue!) I let the call roll to voicemail, since I was authentically busy reaching for a French fry and a gulp of sweet tea.

Later, I retrieved the message. The heart of it is transcribed here:

"Hi, this is a friend. I'm not going to leave my name, but I wanted to tell you that the Dominators, you know, that team you're supposed to play on Thursday ... well, they are stacking their line up! They are dropping their threes to line five. Just wait until after



the match is played, and call the coordinator on them—they'll be disqualified!"

As I live and breathe! I about choked on a chicken finger.

I immediately called my co-captain. "The Deep Throat of tennis has contacted me!" I said with a shaky voice. We speculated about the caller's intentions. Clearly, it was a person who had a grudge against the Dominators. Was it a disgruntled player? A revengeful former opponent? A Good Samaritan? I couldn't figure out which theory to latch onto: Was this a real tip, or was someone out there trying to hoodwink me? It was all so cloak-and-dagger!

The entire situation rattled me more than I wanted to admit. Despite more than a decade of ALTA play, I considered myself rather naïve concerning the ins and outs of captaining. I didn't even have the rules committed to memory. So how on earth would I manage this? Sure, I am familiar with tennis antics, but never in all my years of recreational tennis had I been involved in something this covert and wild!

Later that evening, I replayed the message, pondering the Who and the Why behind it all. **The frustrating part** was that the voice sounded vaguely familiar. Whoever it was, she had a funky Southern accent and the nerve to speak out.

What to do? Fiddling with our lineup was out of the question. We were sticking with Plan A—that meant playing the Dominators straight up and letting the tennis fuzz fly where it may. Mole or no mole, we were ending the season with our ethics intact.

The day of the match arrived. Everyone on my team was either jittery, sleep deprived or both. Play began. It was tense. Game faces were on. In the end, though, we could not take all five points. Say goodbye to the bag tag.

After my partner and I lost our line in straight sets, I was ready to let go of all the stress. So I grabbed a beer, wiped my tears and took on

the role of spectator. As I am standing there, a woman walks up behind me. She chatted my ear off for about five minutes straight. I nodded a lot. She told me that she had played on



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the Dominators team, but was kicked off.

"Really?" I said, my interest now sufficiently piqued, as I sipped my beer and wondered who this person was that had appeared out of nowhere.

"It's true," she said.

"Why did they kick you off?" I probed further, all of a sudden wondering why this woman was spilling her guts to a perfect stranger, much less the captain of her opposing team.

"I skipped a practice. Yeah, I had to go

somewhere with my daughter, and I let my captain know that. Do you know what she did?" She was incredulous at this point.

"What?" I asked.

"She benched me!" The woman was now talking very fast and very loudly.

Dumb me finally realized who she was. It was the caller! The Friend.

"Wow, that's too bad," I said. "We don't have rules on my team."

As the woman's rant continued, I mustered the courage to ask one last question.

I leaned in close to her. I glanced around to ensure that no one was watching us. In a quiet voice I said, "Did you call me?"

She froze. Then she glanced around too, like a 007. "Yeah."

"I thought that was you," I said. "I recognized your voice."

"Oh really? 'Cuz I tried to disguise it."

It was still hard to believe what had just happened. The craziness of it all. The informant had revealed herself! Rather than continue the melodrama, I let it all go. I never called the coordinator to check our opponent's lineup. I was simply too tired and ready to focus my energies on tieoffs.

The silver lining to the day was that we beat this "first place" team head-to-head. Sure, we weren't able to win the division, but we felt like champions nonetheless. After all, we were in second place and would advance to playoffs.

As fate would have it, we ended up having to play the Dominators again—one week later and in the third round of playoffs—Showdown Part II. This time, going to City Finals was the prize. Our ones and twos lost. But our threes and fours held firm. It came down to a dogfight on line five.

I could barely watch. Point after point, I fidgeted. My thoughts toggled between a huge victory and the agony of defeat. My humble pie was baking in the oven. I had already told myself that if our opponents beat us that I would be shaking hands and giving congratulations to them. But eating humble pie was not to be that day. Our fives played with a lot of heart, and eventually won their line in two tough sets.

Going to the ALTA City Finals and winning big was a fabulous experience. Our team felt the satisfaction of holding the Championship trophy and earning an even more prestigious bag tag.

Reflecting on the season as a whole, I am still amazed by how much work (time, coordination and strategy) goes into captaining a competitive tennis team. It can actually get stressful sometimes! And having a "mole" contact me was just about the coup de grace.

But you know, even a bit of espionage could not overshadow our season. We had good memories, excellent tennis and closer friendships. We are City Champions—fair and square.



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