

**GAME, SET,
CRASH**
First round
or final, Mike
(left) and Bob
celebrate wins
with a flying
chest bump.



TENNIS

Even as they turn 32 and bear down on the Open Era record for men's doubles championships, there's practically nothing that identical twins **Bob and Mike Bryan** do apart

BY L. JON WERTHEIM

Photograph by STEPHEN DUNN/GETTY IMAGES

Togethermess

If there's a prerequisite for success in tennis doubles, it's an ability to block and redirect rapid-fire volleys. They call this asset "quick hands," and it can serve other purposes too. On a lazy weekday afternoon in late February, Bob and Mike Bryan, identical twins and the world's finest practitioners of men's doubles, were eating lunch at an oceanside restaurant in South Florida. Mike had barely finished expressing a thought when—*thwapp!*—the back of his brother's left hand hit his face. "Never saw it coming," Mike says.

The blow sent Mike's sunglasses flying off his head. They landed against the soup bowl of an elderly woman seated at a nearby table. Suppressing the impulse to retaliate—figuring he'd get payback at another time and place—Mike retrieved his glasses and went back to eating his meal. As the twins recounted the incident a few days later, they were asked what unspeakable epithet, what provocative comment Mike had uttered to set Bob off in public like that. "I can't even remember," said Mike.

"Could have been anything," said Bob, shrugging. By dessert all had been forgotten. They finished their meals, got back into the car they were sharing, returned to the hotel room they were sharing, changed into matching outfits and headed to the practice court they would share at the Delray Beach Tennis Center. By the end of that week they had teamed to win their 600th professional match together, part of their inexorable assault on tennis history.

"There are two things in life for which we are never truly prepared: twins," humorist Josh Billings remarked. The tennis caravan knows this firsthand. Fresh out of Stanford, the Bryans started out on the ATP Tour in 1998, and their emergence made for a cute story: those handsome and genial look-alikes. They heard the predictable quips—"I'm seeing double" and "attack of the clones"—and they played along, dressing identically and sharing everything from an e-mail address to an ATM card. The Bryans were uncommonly, almost jarringly outgoing. Plus, their irrepressible dad, Wayne, was usually nearby, happy to volunteer the boys for clinics or line them up for interviews.

They're almost 32 now, but their relationship remains, well, singular in its intensity and complexity. Over the past decade the Bryans evolved from a novelty act to the most accomplished men's tennis team of their time, the doubles equivalent of Roger Federer or Serena Williams. As of Sunday they had won not only 609 matches but also 59 tournaments, two more than John McEnroe and Peter Fleming and only two fewer than the Open Era record held by retired Australians Todd Woodbridge and Mark Woodforde. The Bryans' eight Grand Slam titles—the most recent of which was the 2010 Australian Open—put them three from the Woodies' men's record for majors. Five times since 2003 the Bryans have finished the year as the ATP's top-ranked team. "Those guys are setting the standard, and they have been for years," says McEnroe. "They pretty much *are* men's doubles right now."

Bound as tightly as the DNA they share, the Bryans play together, travel together and live together, sharing houses in Camarillo, Calif., and Wesley Chapel, Fla. They pool their prize money, employ the same coach and play in the same rock band. In short, they are as insuperable as they are inseparable. "People think of twins as five-year-olds who dress alike and then, as adults, stop being twins," says Debbie Ganz, 42, who cowrote *The Book of Twins* with her identical-twin sister, Lisa, once owned the Twins Restaurant in Manhattan and now casts twins for commercials.

"No, they're twins for life. And, I'm telling you, it's not a normal relationship."

During a rare moment apart last month, Bob and Mike were on opposite coasts for a few days. They were in constant phone contact.

What's up?

Not much. You?

Not much. Just driving around.

O.K., cool.

"You look down at your phone, and it's like, eight seconds," says Mike. "But [exchange] those few words, and you're saying, Bob's O.K.; I'm satisfied."

The conventional wisdom is that when the Bryans play, they benefit from what their coach, David Macpherson, calls "the twin ESP thing," what the twins community calls "twinergy synergy" and what comic-book fans in the late 1970s called "Wonder Twin powers." The Bryans' matches tend to be uncommonly fast, mostly because, while other



teams hold lengthy strategy conferences between points, each Bryan simply knows where the other will place his serve and when he'll poach at the net. "They don't have the communication issues other teams can have," says Canada's Daniel Nestor, ranked No. 1 in the world in men's doubles. "That counts for a lot."

But the Bryans are also helped by what happens when they



CONFLICT RESOLUTION Mike (left, above and below) and Bob believe their willingness to bash each other is one reason their differences haven't caused a breakup.

don't get along. Doubles teams inevitably feel friction from time to time. Even the most successful teams have broken up over everything from personal conflicts to disagreements over tactics. Feuds often trigger messy breakups, betrayals of partners and new shotgun marriages. (Macpherson played doubles from 1990 to 2002 with more than 20 partners.) But when the Bryans fight they actually beat the crap out of each other, and then they make up. "Neither of us will ever [choose to] play with another partner," says Mike, "so we never worry about offending the [other] guy. Or worse. We'll always get over it."

Their brawl during Wimbledon 2006 is a minor legend in tennis circles. After narrowly winning a match early in the tournament, the twins swapped insults and then punches in the backseat of a courtesy car. When they arrived at the house they were renting, Mike kicked Bob in the stomach and then locked himself in the bathroom. Bob took the opportunity to do a Pete Townshend job on Mike's guitar. Then they patched things up and won the championship.

A more typical throwdown came last year in San Jose. During an early-round match Mike snapped at Bob, who (again the quick hands) jabbed the butt of his racket into Mike's groin. Mike

Over time the twins have evolved from a novelty act to the doubles equivalent of Roger Federer or Serena Williams.

doubled over, fell on all fours in the middle of the court—and smiled up at his brother. *Got me, a-----*. Eventually Mike stood up, and the twins closed out the match without further incident. "Imagine another team, one guy whacks his partner in the balls," says Bob. "They'd never play another point together again. It's *nothing* for us!"

Their partnership also benefits from their complementary traits and talents. At 6' 4" and 202 pounds, Bob has an inch and 10 or so pounds on his older (by two minutes) brother. Bob uses his lefty serve to devastating effect and is the more accomplished shotmaker. Mike, a righty, is the stronger returner and the more strategic player. "He's a volleying wizard, he's magical, he's magnificent," says Wayne with fatherly understatement.

In a typical point from the Delray tournament in February, Bob kicked his serve out wide, and Mike, at the net, poached and volleyed the return. One of their opponents desperately threw up a lob that Bob, now also at the net, lasered into the corner. "They're really pretty different players," says doubles specialist Rajeev Ram of the U.S. "You don't ever confuse them on the court."

Yet between matches the Bryans remain a con-flated monolith, a two-headed beast. Colleagues who have known them for years still can't tell one from the other in the players' lounge; most play it safe and address each of them with the generic bro

or dude. The Bryans are forever being mis-identified in tournament programs and even on billboards. It recalls one of the great stories in tennis lore: In the 1970s, a German journeyman, Karl Meiler, played both Tim and Tom Gullikson—righty-lefty identical twins from Wisconsin—in singles in the span of a month. As he retreated to the locker room following the second meeting, Meiler shook his head in awe. "Man, that guy Gullikson is good," he allegedly marveled. "He beat me a few weeks ago with one hand, and he beat me today with his opposite hand!"

The twins, meanwhile, dress alike on the court at the behest of their sponsor K Swiss and do little to differentiate themselves off the court. Reflexively, both turn around when one of their names is called. They're seldom seen apart. While there once was a handy distinction, a small mole on Mike's face, Mike had it removed. They

have the same social circle. "It's definitely a package deal," says Mardy Fish, a U.S. player and one of the Bryans' best friends on the circuit. "You don't like one more than the other, because they're pretty much the same."

Except that they're not. Just as their tennis games are markedly different, so too are their personalities. Macpherson, their coach, was on the job barely a week when he realized that he would need to

FROM LEFT: NICK LAHAM/GETTY IMAGES; PETER READ MILLER

treat Mike and Bob not only as a team but also as individuals. “They act differently,” Macpherson says, “and they react differently.”

Here’s Bob on Mike: “He’s more the math guy, the organized guy. He watches what he eats. He’s gluten-free. He’s the fitness trainer, traveling with these health bars and inversion machines. He’ll spend 15 grand on this accelerated recovery program, this box with electrodes that helps you stretch or whatever. I’d spend that money on keyboards or a camcorder. He’s more sensitive too. If I rip him on the court, his level of play will drop. With me it’s the opposite.”

Mike on Bob: “He’s more creative. With our band, he does more of the songwriting, making the demos, setting up the equipment. He’s developing a tennis app for the iPhone. We have one Twitter account, but he does it all. He’s the hothead. I squirted him with a water bottle a few weeks ago. He snapped and threw his new iPhone at me. He missed, of course. It shattered in a million pieces. Then he goes over and finds the SIM card and figures out how to restore his contacts. That’s Bob in a nutshell.”

Yet asked if they ever feel an urge to dial back on the public twindom, they flash each other looks of confusion. How so?

You know, stress your differences a bit more, do things that say, “I’m a twin, but I’m also me.”

Still, two blank looks. Finally Bob offers, “Maybe that’s more something fraternal twins would think about doing.”

Handsome, smart and personable as they are, the Bryans naturally have long track records of dating. Nevertheless, at a time when their friends, such as Fish and Andy Roddick, are “falling one by one” (the Bryans’ words), Mike and Bob are unmarried. For many of their girlfriends, the “twin thing” has been insurmountable. As one former girlfriend put it, “It’s hard to be in a relationship with someone when, no matter what happens, you know that you’re not going to be the most important person in his life.”

Chastened by history, the Bryans began putting their cards on the table at the beginning of relationships, giving new girlfriends a “here’s the deal” talk. Bob’s went something like this: “The travel can beat up this relationship. There will be times we’ll see each other only on Skype. And there’s the whole twin deal. I doubt it’s like anything you’ve experienced, and it can be pretty intense. Just want you to know what you’re getting into.”

Since then each of the twins has found an intrepid soul willing to accept the challenge. Mike has been dating Lucille Williams, an event planner from Wales, for more than two years. And since early 2009 Bob has been seeing Michelle Alvarez, a Miami lawyer who once took tennis lessons from Kathy Bryan, the twins’ mother. When the two couples are together at the twins’ house in Camarillo, an hour north of Los Angeles, they can seem like participants in a reality show. Identical twins, two girlfriends, one kitchen. “In a perfect world, the girls are best friends,” says Bob. “But we know that’s not realistic and not fair to them.”

Careful to stress that this is not a Yoko-breaking-up-the-Beatles situation but rather a natural progression, the Bryans are making plans to live apart for the first time in their lives. They’ll keep the Camarillo house as a compound and buy comparably sized, comparably priced houses within a few miles of each other. Still, for brothers who slept on each other’s floors when they were assigned different roommates at Stanford and haven’t spent more than a few nights apart since birth, it will be a significant change. “It

will be weird,” says Mike. “But we’ll deal with it, you know?” Then he jokingly suggests installing a zip line between the houses.

Bob exhales loudly and braids his fingers nervously. “It’s time, I guess.”

A few years into their career the Bryans decided they’d be better served having someone other than their father as a coach. Wayne, who had groomed the boys to be both tennis stars and musicians since they were two years old, stopped traveling with them. He follows their matches online or on television—doing push-ups between points—and fires off encouraging e-mails, win or lose, that arrive before they’ve left the court.

The twins survived that change in the fam-

“We definitely feel a responsibility to keep doubles going,” says Mike. “We want our records to mean something.”



PERFECT HARMONY Bob (on keyboards, left, and poaching, above) and Mike share the same unspoken communication when they play music as when they play on the grass of Wimbledon.

ily dynamic just fine. But this one, this moving-out business, is different. Says Ganz, the twins expert, who has become friendly with the Bryans, “Most people spend their lives looking for their soulmates. With twins, a lot of times you have your soulmate from birth. Now suddenly you’re not going to live with him? Yeah, that could be stressful.”



Even with different addresses, the Bryans will still spend the bulk of their time together. When they’re not practicing and playing tennis, they’re practicing and playing music. They are the principals in the Bryan Bros Band, and despite all the athletes who cross over into music—often code for losing vast sums of money producing a friend’s album—this is no vanity project. Bob, who’s been playing piano for 30 years, plays keyboard in the band. Mike plays drums and guitar. Sufficiently modest to recognize their limitations as vocalists, they recruited a lead singer, David Baron, whose music they discovered on his website.

Promoting the band’s current album, *Let It Rip*, the Bryans played the Viper Room in Hollywood in February, and they try to perform at most ATP tour stops. They have jammed at Dave Matthews’s recording studio in rural Virginia, and they performed with Counting Crows onstage before 30,000 fans (in return for procuring Wimbledon tickets for the band). “There are so many talented musicians out there that we know that as a band, we’re playing Challengers [the tennis equivalent of the minor leagues],” says Mike. “But we have a great time with it.”

FROM LEFT: PETER READ/MILLER; JULIAN FINNEY/GETTY IMAGES

The same harmony and anticipation that characterizes their tennis is evident when they play music. Performing in front of a few hundred fans at the Delray venue, the Bryans ripped through 20 or so rock songs—some original, some covers—changing keys and improvising deftly without exchanging so much as a nod. “I feel like we keep getting better,” says Bob, “and I can definitely see us doing this full time when we’re done with tennis.”

That, though, could be a while. “We’re playing the best ball of our lives,” both Bryans contend. And so long as they’re closing in on records, motivation isn’t hard to come by. While 32 is downright ancient in singles, it’s scarcely middle-aged in doubles, in which players cover only half the court. “We’re planning to play a bunch more years,” says Mike. “Whether it’s winning at the Olympics [they took bronze in Beijing] or winning more majors or Davis Cup matches, there’s a bunch more we want to accomplish.”

Doubles is perceived as a lost art, but the reality is more complex. Among recreational players, doubles is more popular than singles. Purists who mourn the passing of serve-and-volley tennis and clever angles can still get their fill by watching doubles. But doubles is caught in a vicious circle: Until the big stars play it in the big events, doubles will be a sideshow. (At the Australian Open, ESPN devoted less than 5% of its coverage to doubles.) As long as doubles is a sideshow, however, the big stars won’t play it in the big events. “Let’s face it, the singles players don’t need the money,” says McEnroe, “and with just a bunch of specialists playing, doubles will be on life support.”

In part because of their unusual backstory, the Bryans do fine. They have a number of corporate sponsors and will make as much in prize money—\$250,965 apiece as of April 12—as any singles player outside the top 10. But after them? Put it this way: If you can tell, say, Serbia’s Nenad Zimonjic from the Czech Republic’s Lukas Dlouhy (both top doubles players), you’re in a small minority. Without the Bryans, one wonders about the fate of this subsport. “We definitely feel a responsibility to keep doubles going,” says Mike. “Some of that is being a good [soldier], but honestly, some of that is selfish. We want our records to mean something. If doubles goes away, it takes away from our accomplishments.”

If they are the standard-bearers for doubles, they are also the standard-bearers for doubles—twins, that is. Thanks mostly to fertility drugs, the number of twins born in the U.S. has increased dramatically of late. Roughly 3.2 births out of 100 are multiples, more than twice the rate in 1978, when the Bryans were born. (The rate of identical twins has remained relatively steady at four per 1,000 births.) The Bryans have emerged as models for this growing population. Their practice sessions are often watched by groups of twins and even triplets, and the Bryans are happy to accommodate photo requests and questions, trying to explain a relationship that makes a man in his early 30s smack his brother in public and then recoil at the thought of living under a separate roof from him.

In Delray, as Bob was leaving the court, a sunburned man approached and said his wife was pregnant with twin boys. Any advice? the man asked.

Bob stopped, looked him in the eye and smiled. “I’d say it could be a wild ride for you,” he replied. “And your kids, they’re lucky as hell.” □