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Brad Gilbert Talks a Great Game

By BENOIT DENIZET-LEWIS

It's a splendid April afternoon at the U.S. Clay Court Championships in Houston, and Brad Gilbert won't shut up. All former President George Bush and his wife, Barbara, seem to want to do is watch a little tennis. But someone (probably a Democrat) had the bright idea to sit the couple next to Gilbert, a man who has never met a silence he couldn't fill.

And with his star pupil -- 21-year-old Andy Roddick, currently ranked fourth in the world and one of the pre-tournament favorites to win Wimbledon -- facing an overmatched and fashion-challenged Robert Kendrick (orange shorts and a camouflage cap), Gilbert is even chattier than usual. "Kendrick should be penalized one game just for those shorts," Gilbert says after the first point. After an overpowering forehand by Roddick, Gilbert turns to Bush and says, "Oh, that's a nasty shot," to which the former president nods his head in agreement. "Yes, yes it was," Bush says.

Gilbert then turns to me and admits that he just might be a little more talkative than usual because he's nervous. "It's kind of trippy to be sitting next to a president," Gilbert says, his trademark wraparound sunglasses and black baseball hat covering the top half of his unshaven face. It's a face that has become as synonymous with American tennis as the two high-profile players he has coached to No. 1 rankings -- Andre Agassi and Roddick. In 1994, Gilbert helped a struggling Agassi skyrocket from No. 32 to No. 1 in the world within one year; the pair stayed together for eight years and six Grand Slam victories before splitting amicably. After taking a year-and-a-half leave from full-time coaching (he worked with several players on a consulting basis), Gilbert returned in 2003 to lead Roddick to the U.S. Open championship last September and the No. 1 ranking.

Gilbert never reached that pinnacle during his own 14-year singles career, but he made a name for himself by doing better than anyone thought he should. He overcame a weak backhand, a laughable second serve, an average net game and an occasionally annoying on-court demeanor -- if John McEnroe was famous for loudly berating chair umpires, Gilbert was famous for loudly berating himself -- to win 20 singles titles and more than \$5 million. What Gilbert lacked in natural ability ("and he lacked *a lot* in natural ability," Roddick says), those who played against him say, he made up for in preparation, doggedness and an ability to engage in "mental warfare" on the court. Dubbed a "pusher" (returns everything, waits for his opponent to make a mistake), Gilbert was respected for his tenacity and his ability to turn his opponents' games against them by understanding their games better than they did.

Agassi, who lost four of the eight matches he played against Gilbert professionally, remembers the frustration of struggling against someone who didn't seem to be any good.

"Every shot Brad hit, you were like, 'Are you kidding me?'" recalls Agassi. "His shots aren't pretty. The first time we played, I was convinced the guy couldn't play tennis."

Losing to Gilbert had a way of sending people over the edge. When Gilbert beat John McEnroe in the 1986 Masters Cup, McEnroe was so aghast that he didn't pick up a racket again for six months. "Gilbert, you don't deserve to be on the same court with me," McEnroe hissed during the match, according to Gilbert. "You are the worst. The [expletive] worst!"

No one is saying that about Gilbert now. While Nick Bollettieri still may be the biggest coaching name in tennis, Gilbert, 42, is arguably the most successful coach of the last decade. How has he done it? Gilbert doesn't profess to have any complex motivational techniques. He's not one for screaming pep talks or inspirational speeches -- he says his best coaching happens casually over dinner, when he might squeeze in a strategy session between self-deprecating jokes and long-winded asides about the Oakland Raiders or why golf really isn't a sport ("Anything where you can enhance your performance by drinking alcohol and smoking is not a sport"). His practices tend to be laid-back and fun, with onlookers sometime unsure if they've stumbled upon a tennis practice or a comedy show. There's no yelling, no negativity -- only a lot of kidding around and Gilbert's relentless positive reinforcement, all designed, Gilbert says, to help the player relax and build his confidence.

"Brad's style is really pretty simple," Roddick told me. "We make fun of each other constantly. We talk sports. We go to dinner. We have a lot of fun. We talk some strategy about the other player's weaknesses and how to take advantage of them. Then we go to business and work really hard."

It's a little more complicated than that, of course, but coaching can look pretty easy when you're working with players as talented as Agassi and Roddick. If Gilbert has done one thing right by them, he says, it's that he hasn't overcoached. "I'm not one of those guys who comes in and says, 'O.K., here's all the things you're bad at that we need to fix, and it's my way or the highway,'" Gilbert says. "I adapt to the player. Andy and Andre are completely different players, and I have to learn how to see the game through their eyes."

With Roddick, the only player he's working with now, that means seeing the game through the eyes of an athlete who couldn't be more different than Gilbert himself. While Gilbert relied on smarts and mental toughness, Roddick has relied mostly on his powerful serve and forehand. As he did with Agassi, Gilbert has tried to turn Roddick into more of a tactician on the court without taking away his aggressiveness -- in fact, Gilbert says he wants Roddick to be more aggressive, especially by coming to the net. In the finals of last year's U.S. Open, Roddick followed Gilbert's advice, serving and volleying more than he had in any other match of the tournament.

Here in Houston, with Bush looking on and Gilbert talking the former president's ear off, Roddick isn't having any trouble with Kendrick. Gilbert gives Roddick an occasional fist pump but mostly keeps an even keel. Roddick looks at him often during matches, and Gilbert tries to look confident, no matter how the match is going or what he is muttering under his breath. "Andy is so emotional out there, and I think it's really a calming influence to look into the stands and see Brad always looking confident and steady," says Doug Spreen, Roddick's fitness trainer.

During a changeover, Gilbert is approached by several fans wielding copies of his first book, "Winning Ugly," considered by many to be one of the two most important books about the mental game of tennis -- the other is Timothy Gallwey's "Inner Game of Tennis." (Gilbert's second book, "I've Got Your Back -- Coaching Top Performers From Center Court to the Corner Office," is due out in September.) In "Winning Ugly," Gilbert offers tips for the club player on when to prepare mentally for a match (not, Gilbert says, as you're walking on to the court), how to destroy your opponent's game plan and how to analyze situations on the court (so as not to play "brain-dead tennis"). Gilbert's book and coaching success have earned him a cultlike following among many tennis fans, who routinely approach him and say things like "Mr. Gilbert, your book changed my life!" or, as one perky woman in Houston told him, "Andy may be younger and cuter, but you'll always be my man!"

And as book titles go, "Winning Ugly" pretty much sums up its author. Nothing about Gilbert, on or off the court, is particularly pretty. He often calls himself "a Jewish redneck." He says the redneck part of him buys only American cars and is a big proponent of the death penalty, which he argues should be a reality television show. Like his favorite football team, the Oakland Raiders, Gilbert wants to be regarded as very tough, very masculine. But Gilbert is also a germophobe and self-described "neurotic Jew" with a lot of nervous energy. He carries hand-sanitizing lotion with him at all times, and he has a strange habit of tapping you on the shoulder as he speaks. But none of that compares to his runaway mouth. Is Gilbert self-absorbed? Nervous? Out of his mind? Even his closest friends aren't sure.

When Agassi first met Gilbert, he was initially put off. As Agassi wrote in a guest chapter in "Winning Ugly": "It really kind of bothered me. . . . I'm wondering, Geez, how come this guy's in everybody's business?" But Agassi got to know Gilbert better when the two of them played on the U.S. Davis Cup team together in 1989. "Plus I met his wife, Kim, who's a great person, and I'm thinking, If she thinks he's O.K., maybe he is."

If most of the tennis world agrees that Gilbert talks too much, they also agree that Gilbert knows more about the tactical side of tennis than just about anyone (specifically, how to recognize and attack an opponent's weaknesses). In Houston, I watch in astonishment as Gilbert regularly predicts shots before they happen. When Kendrick misses a first serve, Gilbert looks at me and says, "Twins," referring to a double fault. Gilbert likes predicting double faults -- he'll say things like, "I'm smelling a twins here" or "Does a twins sound nice right about now?"

As is often the case, Gilbert is right. Kendrick double-faults. As Kendrick unravels, Gilbert shakes his head. "Shows you how much of the game is mental," Gilbert tells former President Bush, who was, before Gilbert interrupted, happily talking to Barbara. "Kendrick's got a great forehand, and he's a strong player with a lot of talent. With a better mental game, he'd be ranked a lot higher." Sounds as if Kendrick could use a dose of Brad Gilbert.

When he was 17, Brad Gilbert (who sometimes went by the name Bradley) stood 5-foot-7 and weighed 115 pounds. He had no backhand. No net game. No serve. What he had were quick feet, a forehand and a reputation. "We called him *Bratley*," recalls a former junior player who faced Gilbert's older brother, Barry Jr., and often watched Brad misbehave at tournaments.

Gilbert threw tantrums on the court. He called balls out that were in. He was, according to his college and professional coach, Tom Chivington, "basically out of control." But he was also a winner. "Brad did more with less than anyone out there," recalls Chivington. "He just found ways to win."

The youngest of three children in a tennis-crazed family in Piedmont, Calif., Gilbert, when he wasn't playing sports or talking about sports, was making money on sports, scalping tickets outside Oakland Raiders and Oakland Athletics games. "I started scalping tickets when I was 9," Gilbert says. "I was quite the little entrepreneur."

Gilbert was competitive in whatever he did, a trait his father, Barry Gilbert Sr., his first coach, encouraged. Like his son, Barry Sr. is a talker. Getting Dad to listen, though, has been another story. Though Gilbert refuses to see his father as the classic overbearing sports parent (Barry Sr. had a reputation in junior tennis circles for being just as out of control as his son), he will, in his more contemplative moments, acknowledge the pain of never really being "heard" by his father.

"The thing that upsets me more than anything is that my dad and I can't just sit there and have a beer and relax and talk about whatever comes to mind," Gilbert says. "He'll immediately start coaching me. He can't believe I'm not paying my loan down, or that I'm not buying more property, or that my son isn't playing more tournaments, or that Andy doesn't serve and volley more. It's always his agenda. He can't turn the coaching part of his personality off. He's old school."

When Gilbert arrived at Foothill College and met Chivington, he learned that player-coach relationships (or father-son relationships, for that matter) did not have to be that way. Chivington wasn't a pushover, but he was relentlessly upbeat and always willing to

listen. "He had such a calm demeanor, such a great, positive attitude, and I felt like I could tell him anything," Gilbert says. "He's really been my model for how to go about coaching. He never berated me, never told me I couldn't do something. He would say, 'Let's work on it and get better.'"

Mostly, they worked on Gilbert's backhand, and by the end of his first year, Gilbert, who grew five inches and gained 25 pounds, was one of the best college players in Northern California. After transferring to Pepperdine to compete for the N.C.A.A. championship (Gilbert lost in the finals), he turned pro in 1982. By 1985, he was ranked No. 18 in the world. In 1990, Gilbert reached his highest ranking, No. 4, and he did it without ever getting past the quarterfinals of a Grand Slam tournament. "A lot of people say I overachieved as a player," Gilbert says, "but to tell you the truth, I'm disappointed that I didn't do better." The remark is typical Gilbert -- while he will admit to not having as much talent as other players, in conversation he will not embrace the "overachiever" label. (He does so more in his books, presumably as a marketing device.)

While Gilbert held his own against stars like Boris Becker and Pete Sampras, others -- including McEnroe and Ivan Lendl -- mostly had their way with him. Most of all, Gilbert hated playing Lendl, the stoic Czech with the machinelike ground strokes. "I couldn't figure out how to beat him physically or mentally," says Gilbert, who lost all 16 matches against him. "The man absolutely owned me." During their last match, Gilbert took a 4-1 lead in the third and final set. "I was thinking to myself, No one beats Brad Gilbert 16 times in a row! But I blew it. I had an easy volley to go up 5-1, and I missed it. Not only did I lose the match, but after I'm sitting there icing my foot, Lendl sits next to me and says, 'I could be on my deathbed with a 110-degree temperature and still beat you.'"

Gilbert was used to comments like that. What he never quite got used to was John McEnroe, who never hid his impatience with both Gilbert's game and on-court antics. That McEnroe could complain about anyone's manners on the court strikes many as the height of hypocrisy, but in his book, "You Cannot Be Serious," he did just that: "Eeyore had nothing on Brad -- he had a black cloud over his head from the moment he walked out there, and he never seemed satisfied until he got you feeling pretty gloomy, too. It almost seemed to be his game plan. He'd look like he was going to commit hara-kari in the warm-up. Then he did a running commentary while he played, berating himself on every single point (as if people cared), and justifying every mistake he made."

In an interview in *Inside Tennis* last year, Gilbert shot back: "He didn't think I showed him enough respect, well [expletive] him!" Gilbert's wife, Kim, recalls watching the pair bicker over the years. She points out the obvious -- that much of their animosity probably stems from the fact that they're so alike. "They're just two of the most competitive people around, and as intelligent as they both are, they can take boyish stupidity to incredible lengths," Kim says. "But I think, deep down, they actually kind of like each other."

One player Gilbert clearly liked was Andre Agassi, who surprised the tennis world in 1994 when he asked Gilbert -- then 33 and on the last legs of his tennis career -- to be his coach. "Andre," Gilbert says, "knew that I wanted to be a coach before I did."

Agassi, who is known for being spiritual and introspective, liked the fact that Gilbert is neither. "The last thing I needed at that point in my career was someone who thought the same way I did," Agassi says. "Brad just kept everything very basic, very simple. He built my confidence and made me believe that I could beat anyone. And he understood my game better than I did."

But the coaching went both ways. Gilbert credits Agassi with teaching him many things, including how to be nice. "I could be a real jerk sometimes," Gilbert admits. "And Andre would have none of it." Soon after asking Gilbert to be his coach, Agassi, who is endlessly polite, made it clear to Gilbert what he expected. "When you ask for balls, you say 'please' and 'thank you,' " Agassi told him. "When you ask for a car, be grateful that you got one. Because you're not Brad Gilbert, the tennis player. You're Brad Gilbert coaching Andre Agassi, and you're here with me."

Brad Gilbert takes off his shirt, revealing a muscular torso and a forest of curly, graying chest hair. The move draws some whistles from the crowd watching Gilbert and Roddick practice at the U.S. Clay Court Championships and provides Roddick, a relentless jokester, with an obvious opening.

"Yeah, show 'em what you got!" Roddick shouts from the other side of the court. "Brad's been working out!"

Over the next 40 minutes, Gilbert works on Roddick's approach shot, Roddick shows Gilbert how to slide on clay and each does push-ups if he hits a really bad shot. The highlight, though, is the spirited set they play to end practice. For Gilbert, this always demands a careful balancing act -- the coach in him wants to boost Roddick's confidence, but the competitor in him doesn't want to be embarrassed. On this day, however, Gilbert can't hit anything in. When he misses his second straight drop shot, the old Gilbert comes screaming out. "Why are you hitting a drop shot?" Gilbert says loudly. "Hit the forehand down the line!"

When the forehand down the line sails out, too, Gilbert demands -- half seriously -- that they change sides (so that the wind is behind him). "Yeah, *that* must be it," Roddick says. When Gilbert loses on that side as well, he throws up his hands. "O.K., I think practice is over now," he says. But Roddick objects: "Aw, come on, Coach, I need the practice!"

Roddick is, at 21, still very much a kid. A few hours later, before that night's match, Gilbert tries, without much success, to get Roddick to stop playing basketball with Gilbert's 15-year-old son, Zach. "He's been playing basketball all freakin' afternoon," Gilbert tells me, shaking his head. "He's not going to have any legs left for the match. He

gets mad at me for bugging him about it, but what am I supposed to do? He's unbelievable." Thirty minutes later, Gilbert and I are still talking, and Roddick is still playing. "That's it, I'm cutting you off," Gilbert says, sounding more like Roddick's fraternity brother than parent.

"I don't think our relationship would work if I acted like his dad," Gilbert told me later, adding that he is careful not to come off as too demanding or paternalistic, even when Roddick drives him crazy. "I can't stay frustrated at Andy for long, and he can't stay frustrated at me for long," Gilbert says. "Maybe it's my insecurity, but it would be really hard for me to coach a guy who didn't love me as much as I loved him. There are coaches where the players respect them, but they don't like them. I couldn't do that. I think the best part of coaching is us going out to dinner on the road, him teaching me about his bands he's into now, or what model chicks are hot, or him making fun of me for being a neurotic Jew. I try to get him about old-school Tom Petty. And that's fun. And somewhere in there, we talk some strategy. That's when I do my best coaching." Gilbert, who works with Roddick full time, won't say how much Roddick pays him. (Most coaches get a weekly salary, with expenses, and a percentage of any prize money won.)

Patrick McEnroe, the U.S. Davis Cup team coach, says that what makes Gilbert special is his ability to keep his player improving while always keeping things light and upbeat. "I had a coach for a year on the tour, and after every match, he would ask me what I did wrong out there," recalls McEnroe. "Brad is the exact opposite -- he keeps Andy focused on what he's doing right."

McEnroe says that's especially important in tennis. "Not keeping things positive and fun can be a sure way to get yourself fired," he says. "Coaching tennis is very different from coaching a team sport. In basketball, if your coach benches you, you can go talk to an assistant, or you can go and hang out with your teammates. In tennis you can't get that distance. You're with your coach more than anyone else. Sometimes that can be grating. I think Brad really understands that and understands how to pick his spots."

Still, Gilbert isn't opposed to laying down the law, a trait he first displayed the night he agreed to coach Agassi 10 years ago. As Gilbert and Agassi left dinner, Gilbert told him that they would practice at 10 the next morning. "I never practice before 3," Agassi told him. Gilbert smiled. "I'll see you at 11," Gilbert said. With Roddick, Gilbert told him that he couldn't wear his trademark visor to practice, because Gilbert found it "unintimidating."

Agassi says that he learned early on how to tune Gilbert out when necessary. "I developed a kind of filtering system that allowed me to keep all the great stuff he tells you and discard anything that wasn't useful to me," Agassi says. "But there are a lot of players out there that Brad wouldn't be able to help. Some players would end up killing him."

Roddick says he hasn't wanted to kill Gilbert yet (although Gilbert was right next to him when he said so). Roddick admits, though, that he wasn't sure the chemistry would work

when he asked Gilbert to coach him after losing in the first round of last year's French Open. "I knew about his reputation as a nonstop talker and someone who was a little out there, and I figured us working together would either work out really well, or it would be a total disaster," Roddick says. "Luckily, it's worked out well so far."

Roddick says that Gilbert's style is markedly different from that of his former coach, Tarik Benhabiles, a Frenchman who was all tennis, all the time: "Tarik's a really intense and emotional guy, and he's more about focusing on the deficiencies in your game, while Brad likes to focus more on how you can take advantage of the deficiencies in your opponent's game."

To that end, Gilbert is one of the most active "scouters" in tennis -- he always watches Roddick's opponents play the match before they might face Roddick. In Houston, I sat with him as he scouted the match between Todd Martin, an American, and Luis Horna, a Peruvian. "I've seen Todd play plenty, I've played against him, but I've never seen Horna," Gilbert told me. After watching a few games, Gilbert was impressed. "Andy told me that he thought Todd would pull the match out, but I don't know," he said. "Horna's got a good return, and that's important against Andy. And for a little guy, Horna can pop a serve."

Gilbert said that regardless of who won the match, tomorrow could be a challenge for Roddick because of the heavy winds forecasted. "It's harder to just tee off on the ball in the wind," Gilbert said. "The wind can make you play defense, and Andy doesn't like to play defense."

Late last year, I tried to keep up with Gilbert as he walked down a crowded Manhattan street carrying a laundry bag filled with Roddick's dirty clothes. Gilbert and Roddick were in town for the week while Roddick prepared to be the host of "Saturday Night Live." "I'm not above taking his laundry to get cleaned," Gilbert said. "It's just one small way Andy knows I have his back."

Did he ever do Agassi's laundry? "Oh, no, Andre's neurotic about his laundry," Gilbert said. "He does his own. He'll travel with his detergent and his softener, and he absolutely loves to iron."

After dropping off the laundry, Gilbert headed to a gym for a quick workout. On the way, I asked him if his son, Zach, a junior tennis player, likes having a famous tennis coach as a dad. "I don't know," Gilbert said, "but he's always complaining that I don't know how to coach juniors. He's 15, and sometimes he doesn't like to listen to his dad."

And sometimes, Dad can really be embarrassing. The only time Gilbert has ever been ejected from a match for coaching (tennis coaches aren't allowed to send signals or offer suggestions during a match) was at a junior tournament with his son. "Zach happened to be playing this kid whose forehand was weaker than his backhand -- I could see it plain as day, but Zach kept hitting to the kid's backhand anyway, and the kid was killing him on that side," Gilbert writes in his coming book. "I made a few gestures. All right, more than a few. I was swinging my hand, nodding my head -- doing everything I could to try to mime my very important message: hit it to his forehand, damn it!" The roving umpire caught him. "Mr. Gilbert, you should know better," she said. "That's coaching -- you have to leave." For once, Gilbert was speechless.

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