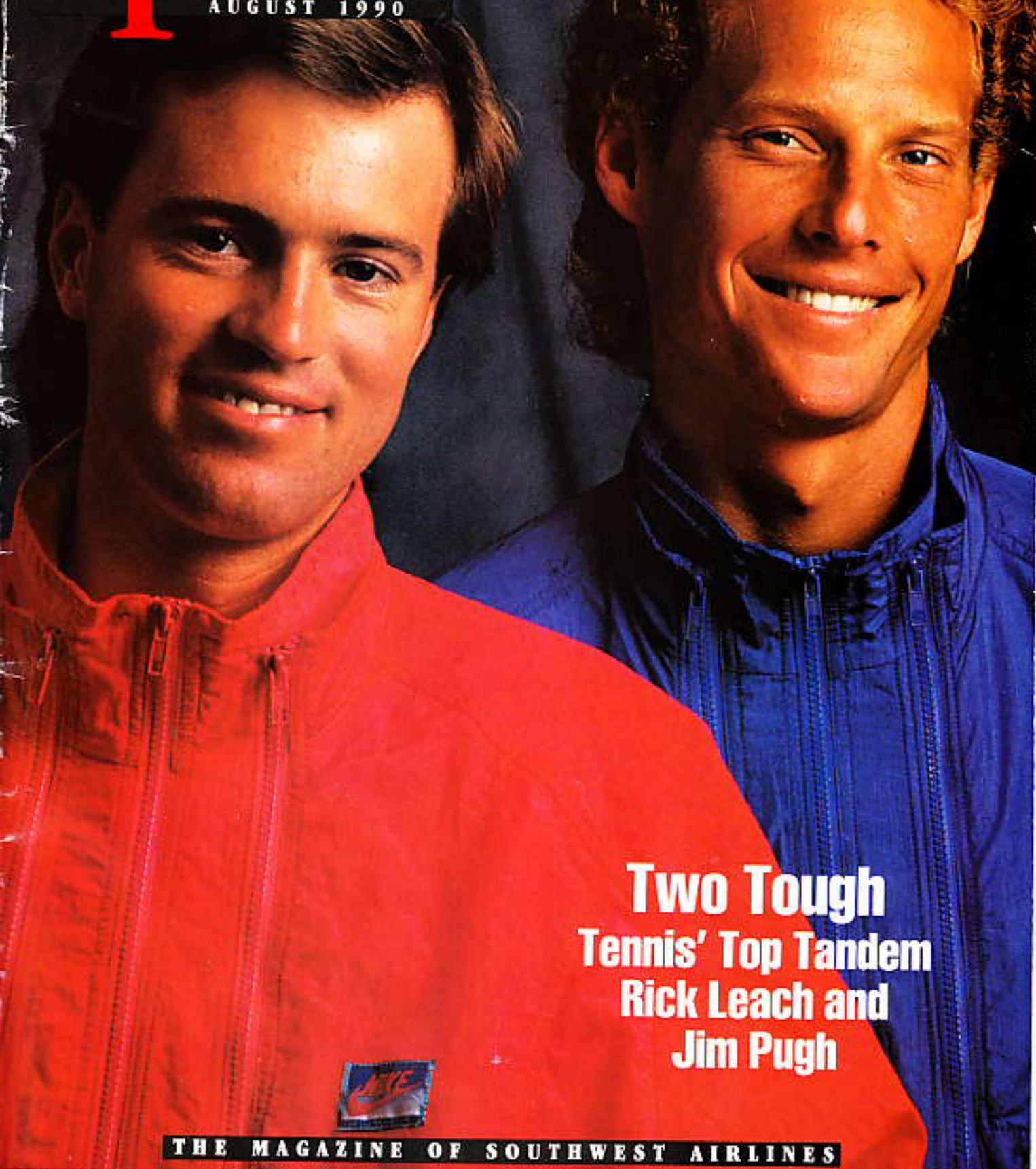


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Spirit

AUGUST 1990



**Two Tough
Tennis' Top Tandem
Rick Leach and
Jim Pugh**

THE MAGAZINE OF SOUTHWEST AIRLINES

Split Decisions

Divorced parents reentering the dating arena face joy and frustration

ON A COLD AFTERNOON in late November two years ago, John Murray, now 38, went for a drive through Albuquerque. John is a professional: well-educated and reasonably well-off working as an industrial radiographer for Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque. Yet when he saw a woman hitchhiking with her young son on a wind-blown street corner, he thought, "Here's a woman who is just like me." He stopped to offer her a ride.

After a trip to the bank, John asked her to lunch. "How long you been divorced?" she asked.

Was it that obvious?

"Your self-esteem is in the toilet," he said.

John's self-esteem may have been fewer-bound, and his judgment about how to meet women may have been less than stable that first autumn he was separated from his wife of 10 years. But John believes his heart was in the right place, and it still is. When it comes to looking for female companionship, John's heart is with his sons, Sean and David, 8 and 6. For their sakes, as well as his own, John prefers to date women who—like him—are divorced and have children. Only someone who has been through the rigors of single parenthood could understand what it's like for him to have 50 percent custody of two young boys.

"People who haven't had children or have never been married don't understand that [children] aren't like dogs," says John. "You can't just leave out food and water and let them take care of themselves. [Some women] don't understand what an important role my kids play in my life."

John is not alone. Half of all marriages end in divorce and more than half of those involve children. For that

25 percent it doesn't matter how final the divorce is—as long as you are a parent, you're never single.

"Having children is like having herpes," John says. "They put some limitations on your life.... If the phone rings it may be the kids. Someone may be hurt. They can spoil your plans. They can get sick or in a fight."

Spontaneity is out of the question. Every move a single parent makes must be premeditated—especially private moves from first base toward home. Romantic liaisons are best reserved for the days of the week that the kids are with the other parent.

The problems facing a single parent who is out dating involve more than logistics. They involve feelings, not the least of which is fear: What if the new love interest doesn't like the kids? What if the children can't shake their hope that Mom and Dad will get back together? What if the kids become jealous of the attention the parent gives this outsider? What if the children try to exercise veto power over the date?

Even if the children aren't vocal about their dislike of this new love interest, they may express displeasure by acting up at home or getting poor grades in school. "It all comes down to a central issue," says Joan Rossman, director of the Women's Counseling Services of New Mexico in Albuquerque. "How can you get your personal life in order and still be sensitive and attentive to the needs of your child?"

Being attentive to the kids' needs isn't the hard part for John Murray. What's tough is navigating safely through the unfamiliar, and sometimes frightening, singles scene.

John didn't date much when he was a teenager at an all-boys' Catholic high school. He joined the Peace Corps in the mid-'70s (*continued on page 51*)

By **PATRICIA J. O'CONNOR**

DATING AFTER DIVORCE

(continued from page 41)

where he met and married the only woman with whom he had been seriously involved. Twelve years later, while his ex-wife is engaged to be married, John is learning how to date.

John has found that it is best for him and his sons if he goes on what he calls "gang dates" with people from groups like Parents Without Partners. "It's not a make-it-or-break-it activity like going to a bar where I have to worry about whether my shirt is tucked in right or I have a stupid first line. With Parents Without Partners you can enjoy the activity for itself. It's not like—pardon the chauvinistic expression—hunting."

Because John has shared custody of his boys, he can't keep his lady friends a secret. Nor does he want to. John makes a point of always introducing his dates as friends. "I've never used the word girlfriend because I've never felt that close and because none of us is ready for that," he says. "But I don't tell the kids I'm going bowling with Smitty and then go out on a date, either."

So far, Sean and David are understanding. Now that their mother is remarrying, they make suggestions to their father. "Why don't you marry so-and-so?" they ask.

John would like to marry again, when the time, and person, is right. But he has more to consider than just himself; the woman has to be right for his sons, too.

"I'd bring her into the circle and see how she interacts with the kids," he says, thinking ahead. "If the kids express distaste then, whoop, we've got a problem. We've got to make a choice. If it can't be worked out, I'll say, 'I'm sorry.'" The engagement would be off.

"Going back to my Catholic background, they say the bond between spouses should be primary and everything else—the kids and everything—should revolve around that one relationship," he says. "I suppose that's true, but the bond between me and my kids is so strong I don't know how I can put anyone else ahead of them."

The bond between the custodial parent and child typically gets stronger right after a divorce, says Dallas psychologist Richard Warshak, Ph.D., who specializes in father-custody and family psychology cases. They turn to each other as anchors in a shared storm. The child tends to feel protective and possessive of the parent. Dr. Warshak

remembers one 5-year-old boy who punched his mother's boss in the nose because he was the first man he saw after his father abandoned the family.

The dynamics of the "mini" family may change depending on who goes with which parent, says Warshak. A boy growing up with a mother who hates her ex-husband may end up having a hard time liking himself. "If a mother encourages her son to turn against his father, she's asking him to turn against a central part of himself," says Warshak. A girl growing up with Dad may take on the role of lady of the house then feel rejected when Dad asks her to move from the front seat to the back to make room for a new love. In both cases, "The child takes on the role of friend or quasi-adult. When the parent starts dating, the child gets demoted to just a kid and that's a hard adjustment for the child," continues Warshak.

The adjustment may be particularly hard for mothers with teenage daughters, says Albuquerque counselor Jayne Knoblauch, MA. Of all the parent/child relationships, "this one is probably the toughest," she says.

Because teenage girls appear to be more mature than boys their age, mothers often turn to their daughters as peers—comrades in a shared struggle. It is easy for a mother to forget that her 13-year-old daughter needs to be cared for as a child—particularly in difficult times—and not treated as a confessor. "It robs kids of their childhoods," says Knoblauch.

The divorce came like a bolt of lightning that split the world in two for Vanessa Parnell, 37, and her daughter, Peggy, 17 (not their real names). It's been nine years since her husband of 10 years left them unexpectedly for another woman. He took with him the family business—their only source of income. Vanessa, then a semiprofessional dancer, was forced to take up waitressing to pay the mortgage on their home in a mountain town outside of Santa Fe. Vanessa's parents had financial troubles of their own and couldn't help. Vanessa and then-8-year-old Peggy were basically on their own.

"I was the classic case of the displaced homemaker," says Vanessa. She didn't attempt to hide the panic and desperation she felt every month when the bills came in. "I don't think it's par-

DATING AFTER DIVORCE

ticularly wise to put on a false face and shine it on," she says. "[Working together as a team] became an issue of basic survival. I was emotionally crushed. My daughter was emotionally crushed. We had no money," she recalls. "We became very interdependent. We realized that in order to make it through the level of pain we were both experiencing, we had to bond together."

To help out, Peggy took on extra re-

sponsibilities around the house and odd jobs during the summers. And while her mother was working she studied. School became Peggy's main focus. Vanessa would have done just about anything to keep Peggy in the school she loved. That meant she had to keep the house. And she couldn't do that alone.

Vanessa met a man, and within a year of her divorce, she invited him to

move in with her and her daughter. She told herself she was doing this for Peggy—so she would have a man's influence, stability and so that they could keep the house. "I think a lot of the motivation for getting involved so soon was being petrified of being alone and not being able to make it financially," Vanessa says. Before long she realized she chose the wrong man.

"It was a six-month romance stretched out over two and a half years," she says. "I guess the goal I set for myself was to stay together until my daughter was out of high school." Peggy wasn't even in junior high when Vanessa realized that this man had to go. He was verbally abusive toward her daughter. "He used to tell her she was stupid," she says, referring to the daughter who received nothing short of an "A" through most of her academic career. "If I had not been so emotionally busted, I would have realized what was happening in this relationship."

Vanessa would have kicked him out sooner had money not been such a problem. Finally, Peggy had enough. She went to visit her maternal grandparents and asked them for help. They sent cash. The man got his walking papers the next day.

Vanessa now supports herself and her daughter with her own talents as a massage therapist and aerobics instructor. She has learned—with help from Peggy—to be more choosy about the men she dates.

This isn't to say Vanessa has only dated princes. She tends to give frogs a chance. Peggy, however, can smell a toad a mile away. "It's almost gotten to the point that I trust my daughter's judgment so much I ask her, 'What do you think of this guy?'"

Until about a year ago, Peggy, an attractive 17-year-old, preferred books or long talks over dinner with her mother to dates with high-school boys. "I was afraid that it [the live-in relationship] made her wary of dating. To see my dating failures has made her more cautious," says Vanessa.

But this year, something changed. Peggy has become rebellious. She even started dating a boy her mother doesn't much like. This fall she leaves for college out of state. Vanessa is faced with separating from her best friend and confronting the singles scene single-handedly. So far, it's not so bad.

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DATING AFTER DIVORCE

Vanessa has been dating a man during the last year. And for the first time, she doesn't have to worry about how he will get along with her daughter. She may choose a man simply because she likes the way she feels when she is with him. For the first time, she is taking care of herself first, and it seems to be paying off. "Nothing really felt right for the last eight years—except for the present," Vanessa says.

Nobody makes it from divorce court to the office of the Justice of the Peace in one easy step. The road to recovery and relationship after a divorce is full of booby traps. And the only way to make it through to the other side is to courageously step into a few, say most psychologists. Grieving, changing the color of your hair, going on dates with people you wouldn't normally allow in your front yard, making mistakes and making up for them are all part of the healing process.

For some parents who married young, being single again means having the opportunity to sow the wild oats they've been hoarding since puberty: sexual experimentation, late nights, wild parties. "Is it healthy?" asks Knoblauch. "How about normal?"

Normal or not, sexual experimentation is not one of the healing processes you should share with your kids. "Adult sexuality is overwhelming to a child," says Knoblauch. "For a child to wake up one morning and find a strange man [or woman] in your bed is not a good idea—no matter what the child's age. A series of men [or women] is definitely not a good idea," she says. Also, a parent has to be conscious of the examples he or she sets for a child. "If you're sleeping around, you're going to have a hard time convincing your child not to," says Knoblauch.

Parents must learn to set limits on their behavior around the children, as well as on the behavior they allow their children to display around them. Some psychologists suggest setting explicit rules for both parent and child. For example, a 13-year-old may have a weekend curfew of 10 P.M. The parent may set a curfew for him/herself at 11:30. If the teen catches the adult coming in late, the parent is accountable for breaking the rules. Chances are the Mom or the Dad will blow it

occasionally. That's okay, says Knoblauch. "How many people do you know who have gone through a divorce and handled everything well?"

If Jenny Reynolds (not her real name) were to have a mantra for the '90s, it would be "choice." Until she left her 17-year marriage, the 42-year-old counselor and writer had little experience choosing what she wanted. She married right out of college, had two

sons—Marty, 16, and David, 13—and assumed the role appropriate to a woman raised in the '60s. "I did everything for other people." Four years ago, she realized that if she didn't give something back to herself, "some part of me would wither and die." She filed for divorce and set about choosing the direction of her new life.

Sharing custody of her sons with her ex-husband gave Jenny an opportunity

DATING AFTER DIVORCE

to experiment with her new power. Granted, her first few choices of dinner partners might not have been grade A, but she doesn't regret anything. Every new decision was a teetering step toward becoming the person she is today—the healthiest version of herself she has ever known, involved in the healthiest and happiest relationship of her life.

One of her early choices was to get involved with a man who was as much the opposite of her husband as she could find. He was angry, volatile, compulsive. And while in his company, the formerly conservative Jenny felt a little like a rebel. For a year and a half, Jenny struggled with this relationship, which she knew was not good for her. But she liked having the freedom to make her own mistakes.

"I think I can relate to my teenagers better now," she says. "I didn't do a lot of wild and crazy things when I was young. With that relationship I let a lot of my old adolescent behavior come out. . . . Now I can say to my kids, 'Isn't it funny that I'm grown up and I just went through what you're going through now?'"

This relationship also taught Jenny about the things she doesn't want from a man. The months of soul searching, writing and contemplating that followed this breakup helped her develop a stronger relationship with herself. Only then could she accept the relationship she did want with a man.

My darling William," she calls the artist who came into her life two years ago. Until he came on the scene, Jenny had taken special care to keep her personal life separate from her children. But she didn't want her kids to miss out on knowing the closest thing she found to the perfect man.

The boys love William. They want him to spend time at the house. Sometimes David, her youngest, will say, "Gosh, Mom, you're hogging William."

Jenny talks openly with her sons about her romance, and they talk to her about their crushes and first kisses. "I feel I am much more open with my kids since my divorce," says Jenny. She likes hugging and kissing and holding hands in front of her boys. "My ex-husband and I were affectionate in a platonic way, so the kids never saw real

passion or physical joy between us. . . . This is the first time I've modeled a healthy, mutually respectful and loving relationship for my children," she says.

It may also be the first time she allowed anyone else to play the role of nurturer. One night William smoothed the hair from Jenny's forehead and listed all the things he loved about her. "And I love your sons," he said.

Everything was just about perfect until Jenny's ex-husband got a new job that required him to move to Seattle last spring. Before Jenny met William, she made an agreement with her ex to always live in the same town until the boys were out of high school. That meant she and the boys would have to move. Jenny had always wanted to move back to her home state of Washington. William, however, suffers from severe allergies and cannot live in a moist climate. He cannot go.

Jenny had to make a sad, but, in her opinion, the only obvious, choice. "Even a relationship as wonderful as this is not going to keep me from my children," she says.

Jenny and William grieved through the spring and parted in June. Jenny chooses to look for the positive side. The separation will be good for them, she says. Had she stayed in Santa Fe, she might have considered remarriage and she knows she isn't ready for that. She isn't finished spending time alone, writing, reading, riding her bike. "Living by myself leads to deeper creativity, a more spiritual mode," she says. Living alone allows her time to develop her newfound relationship with herself.

"These are the first years I ever had alone. I went from home to college to marriage. I'm never going back to not having my own private place—even if it's just a room," she says. "I'm not willing to give up my space again."

Maybe when the boys are both out of high school and living on their own, Jenny and William will come back together. And maybe, by then, Jenny will be ready to take the next step toward a more permanent relationship.

William is doing his best to understand, but sometimes the irony of their situation gets to him. "If you were the kind of mother who would sacrifice her children to be with me, I wouldn't want to be with you," he said. "But I want to be with you." ●