

# Challengers: New Zendaya tennis film reviewed by an expert in the psychology of competition

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"Tennis is a relationship," says Tashi Duncan (Zendaya) in director Luca Guadagnino's new film *Challengers*. However, this relationship is not simply between the game and the player. Rather the heart of tennis, and perhaps of all competition, is a three-way relationship between two contestants and a third person. Their presence, and observation, is what gives competition its intensity.

*Challengers* fuses sex and sport in a straightforward but effective way. Early on, at a junior tournament, we see friends Art Donaldson (Mike Faist) and Patrick Zweig (Josh O'Connor) fall in lust with [tennis](#)'s hot newcomer—Tashi. They're good, but not great. Meanwhile, she's all business, demolishing her opponents.

The two boys compete for her attention and one night she ends up in their room, where they share a three-way kiss before she leaves. The match in the morning won't play itself.

Patrick wins the film's first set and he and Tashi get together. Art, however, remains a "good friend," religiously attending her games even when Patrick doesn't. When Tashi's playing career is ruined by an injury, he is there to support her. The two get married and she becomes his coach, the architect of his international success. Meanwhile, Patrick's career remains in the doldrums, though he and Tashi maintain contact. When Art's career also hits the buffers, she suggests he play the New Rochelle tennis tournament, at which Patrick will be waiting.

## **The psychology of competition**

What's the point of all this [competition](#)? Tashi and Art are rich, thanks to their sporting success, but it's clear that wealth doesn't motivate them—and Art is nonplussed by the fandom that swirls around him.

Perhaps it is the pursuit of excellence that drives them. This, however, is

clearly not the case for ill-disciplined Patrick, who spends his time in bars and sleeping in his car, despite coming from an inordinately wealthy family. Art too seems ready to give everything up rather than ruthlessly recover his brilliance. Even Tashi, apparently the most dedicated and driven of the trio, is ready to risk professional excellence for an erotic thrill.

In his 1903 essay, [The Sociology of Competition](#), philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel argued that competition between two competitors is often aimed at impressing a third party. It is the presence of that third person that gives competition both its meaning and its intensity.

Challengers can be viewed as a representation of precisely this three-way dynamic of competition. In the film's erotic scenes, the desire for Tashi is conditioned by the sexual charge between Art and Patrick. She is attracted to them both at various times.

Having apparently "won," Art remains insecure about his status and the presence of Patrick. The borders between sporting and erotic competition are often blurred. "If you don't win, I'll leave you," Tashi tells Art. Is her incitement to rivalry between the two purely strategic, a means of pushing Art to achieve better performance? It may be. Yet she seems to enjoy the attention of either one when it is on display for the other, be it on the court or in the bedroom.

Any tension can only be held so long before one starts to tire, and it is as well that Challengers reaches its stylish pitch when it does.

The film ends with a genuine display of affection between two of the characters. This might lead the audience to conclude that an intimate two-way relationship can transcend the competitive urge to perform for another. Yet the very public and performative nature of that moment

leaves us wondering whether even reconciliation stems from the need to be wanted, and the desire to impress.

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