
Do not tell me that Johnny Mac was anything but serious. Growing up in the sheltered Pleasant Valley Sunday world of small-town Illinois, I masking-taped one of John McEnroe’s *Sports Illustrated* covers to my bedroom wall as an act of defiance. He was everything my parents, indeed my entire small town culture, regarded as boorish and a symptom of a cultural decadence that was somehow, inexplicably urban-bred. That, of course, made him all the more attractive to this altar-boy, second-chair trumpet, Eagle Scout-wannabe. I had always shied away from the jock clique. And tennis, well, that was my sister’s game. But knowing only a modest bit about tennis really did not matter. McEnroe hooked me early on. I loved to watch him prowl the court, those laser beam eyes, that unruly hair, the head band, the sheer anxiety over every point, the dead certainty that every point made a difference that somehow resonated within a cosmic frame of reference. That was how to play, hell, that was how to live—at least to me. I struggled with understanding the finer points of the game (I always found the scoring system a bit obscure and arbitrary, and like McEnroe the god-like presumptiveness of line judges and net officials seemed fiercely undemocratic and capricious) but I knew fire when it burned. So I accepted this review assignment not as a tennis connoisseur but rather as a McEnroe fanatic, one of those threshold adolescents for whom sports became vivid and immediate simply by virtue of his presence. Long into adulthood, you wonder what made the gods of your childhood seem to flame so splendidly. Think of the post-
ers you pasted up in your bedroom. But do you really want to peek at the little man behind the curtain so confidently banging the thunder-and-smoke machine?

McEnroe, it seems, struggles with the same hesitation, save that he is both the man behind the curtain and the splendidly terrifying persona of the Wizard. He undertakes to account for his tantrums and his fiery intensity and his antics—and lamely concedes his immaturity, bad judgment, and later in his career a terrible addiction to the notoriety. I wanted to hear only that it mattered so much, that this was what a game—no, a point—was all about—or to hell with it. But McEnroe has settled into a comfortable suburban lifestyle and finds his own behavior curious—rather like Margaret Mead observing the Samoans. Too much here is given over to romantic entanglements, pop psychology diagnoses of Tatum O’Neal (another face, by the way, I had taped on my bedroom wall) and their stormy, tabloid-relationship, and a terminal fascination with his own love life. The recounting of his tennis triumphs and letdowns are related with the same sort of methodical cool dispassion that characterizes his outstanding sports commentary. A lot here moves from event to event, championship to championship, match to match in accessible and agreeable style—but too little assesses his true contribution to contemporary sports: the figure of the manic athlete, unruly and undisciplined, storming about the field of play where he is god, the fascinating knotted figure of selfishness, intensity, aggression, and stunningly undiluted ego. In short, McEnroe helped create the contemporary spoiled jock figure.

That McEnroe, I guess, really does not belong to John McEnroe—rather he belongs to those whose business it is to ponder the sports cultural mythos and its ramifications. Too many box scores, lovers quarrels and reconciliations, and random observations about the warm glow he feels from family and the support system of his sports-friends here (including, wink-wink-nudge-nudge, a future in politics?)—too little reconsideration of his genuine impact on sports culture.

Tel Francken