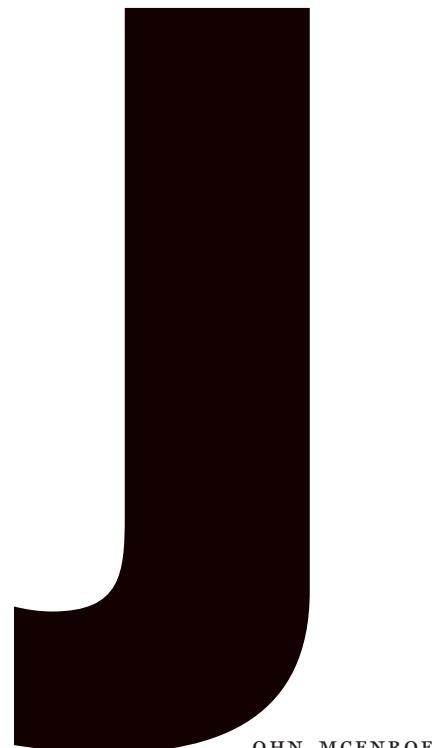


COACH MCENROE

THE FORMER ENFANT TERRIBLE IS OUT TO SAVE U.S. TENNIS, BEAT HIS BROTHER AT HIS OWN GAME (AGAIN), AND MAYBE THIS TIME, COOL IT WITH THE TANTRUMS.

BY LARRY PLATT





JOHN MCENROE is rolling his eyes. A petulant sigh and exaggerated shoulder slump come next. Of course, there's nothing new about the McEnroe eye-roll. It is, no doubt, what the first-grade teacher at St. Anastasia School saw, prompting the phone call home to tell John and Kay McEnroe their son was bored and probably too bright for the school. Later, we all saw it on Centre Court and at the U.S. Open, when his epic blow-ups ("You cannot be serious!") made him the poster boy for anger management—a man the *Times* once called "the worst advertisement for our system of values since Al Capone."

Right now, the 51-year-old tennis legend is reacting to news his younger brother Mark has just whispered into his ear. The brothers are on the sideline of one of the twenty courts at their \$18 million, state-of-the-art tennis facility on Randall's Island, a partnership between McEnroe and Sportime, which owns and operates thirteen tennis clubs in the region. Some 100 girls, ages 7 to 18, are competing today for a scholarship to join the John McEnroe Tennis Academy, which opens next month. This isn't just a case of a celebrity lending his name to a building—John McEnroe wants to rejuvenate the sport in New York, and while he's at it, save American men's tennis, which hasn't produced a class of champions since Sampras, Agassi, Courier, and Chang a generation ago.

"Why would they do that?" McEnroe asks Mark, referring to the whisper. Mark is the middle McEnroe boy; the youngest brother, Patrick, heads the United States Tennis Association's player-development

program, meaning that the brothers McEnroe will be competing against one another to discover and nurture the next great players, a competition that has already sparked some McEnroe family fireworks. Mark has just pointed out a girl who can't be more than 12. John had seen her before at the facility; he'd hit with her and given her some pointers on her serve. But now Mark has told him her parents are thinking of homeschooling her so she can focus more on her tennis. That's what touched a nerve in McEnroe, who believes that complete immersion in the sport from prepubescence on has created a generation of robotic, burned-out, and one-dimensional players. His way, what he aims to make *the way*, involves a more balanced approach, in which tennis is part of an elite prodigy's life, not the definition of it. It's how he sees tennis in his own life. Patrick, on the other hand, takes the more conventional, contemporary approach—the sport is so competitive now there's no way to make it to the top without total devotion. He and the USTA seem to view John as something of a romantic crank, however well-intended, blindly bent on restoring the old ways.

McEnroe has spent much of the 26 years since he last won a Grand Slam singles title rebelling against, as he once put it, being "some tennis dude." But now, happily married to former rocker Patty Smyth and a doting father to six children, McEnroe has put tennis back at the center of his life. He has established himself as the game's smartest and most respected television commentator. He plays on the Champions Tour, in World TeamTennis matches, and in exhibitions (earlier in the day, he hit balls with a group of kids, wearing a T-shirt that read "I Feel Pretty Damned Good For My Age"). And he swears the academy represents a genuine commitment, the blueprint for his next twenty years and beyond. In middle age, the onetime enfant terrible seems to be seeking a larger purpose, a legacy even. The question is whether he can make something as ambitious as the academy work—and not lose his mind trying.

He takes a long look at the potentially homeschooled wonder child on the court in front of him. He's sure her parents' all-tennis-all-the-time leanings destine her to become a tennis victim-to-be. "What is wrong with people?" McEnroe says. "I wouldn't have made it that way. It's a joke, that's what it is. A farce!"

JOHN MCENROE'S OFFICE, perched above kids whacking forehands down on the courts, is lined with mementos of his eighties superstardom. There he is backstage with a Jack Daniels-swilling Keith Richards and Tina Turner. There he is

onstage with Sting, both men strumming guitars (Eric Clapton gave McEnroe lessons years ago). There he is with Nelson Mandela, who, upon their first meeting, told McEnroe he'd listened on the radio to the epic McEnroe-Borg 1980 Wimbledon final while imprisoned on Robben Island.

McEnroe in person is a fidgety presence, a coiled ball of energy. He doesn't sit behind his desk so much as rock back and forth, gesticulating wildly, eyes darting. Then there's the voice: He spits out words in italics, a kind of verbal artillery. At the height of his fame, he once donned a wig and fake beard to avoid being recognized. The first store clerk who heard him speak said, "You're John McEnroe?"

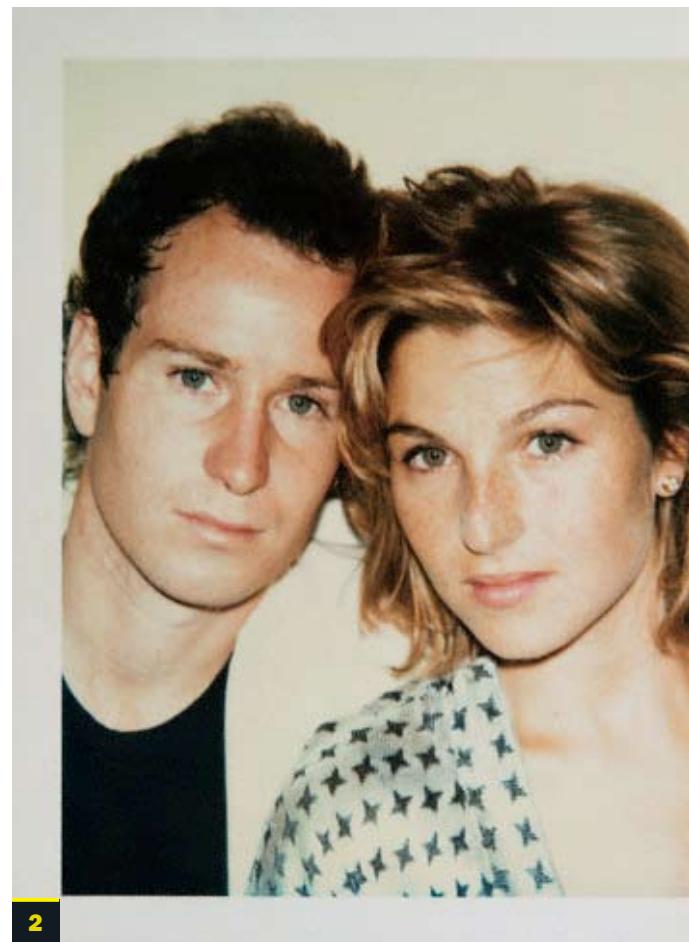
His accomplishments on the court speak for themselves: seven Grand Slam championships, five Davis Cup titles, and 77 singles titles (third all-time). Despite his outsize success, McEnroe was rarely happy. "There was so much expectation that I put on myself, it was hard to enjoy the moment as much as I would have liked, even though I was really doing well. By the time I got to my late twenties, I felt, 'Why am I a part of this, if I'm not really enjoying it?'"

As his playing days came to a close in the early nineties, McEnroe went through an ugly tabloid divorce from his first wife, Tatum O'Neal, and retreated to planning and later opening his eponymous Soho art gallery. Friends say it was a dark period. But then he met Smyth at an L.A. Christmas party he attended with his three kids. She was touched by his patience with them. They married in 1997 in Hawaii; McEnroe has said that their blended brood (Smyth had a child from a previous marriage, and she and McEnroe went on to have two more children) gave him his humanity back. Today, McEnroe is often in the stands for sporting events (his kids play tennis, but none seriously). At home, there are raucous family Scrabble matches. He often travels with the close-knit Team McEnroe—Smyth and the kids, ages 11 to 24—in tow. For the past fifteen years, McEnroe has dabbled in art and rock music, but neither pursuit ever really took. His Johnny Smyth Band played area clubs a while back; a couple of times, wiseass audience members pelted him with tennis balls.

For a time, McEnroe's main connection to the game was his TV commentary. People tune in because you never know what the idiosyncratic and ever-candid McEnroe will say. "Some of these announcers shouldn't take themselves so seriously," he says. (With respect to this year's U.S. Open, he says he has a feeling about Rafael Nadal, but that he's not counting out Roger Federer, who is now working with Pete Sampras's old coach, Paul Annacone. "Roger could show



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- 1 McEnroe arguing with an umpire at Wimbledon in 1980.
- 2 With Tatum O'Neal, in a 1986 Andy Warhol photo.
- 3 With Patty Smyth this March.
- 4 With John McEnroe Sr. and Kay McEnroe at a 1981 charity event.
- 5 At Xenon in 1981.

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up with a chimpanzee,” McEnroe says, “and he’d be a factor.”)

But lately, thanks to an obsessive workout regimen, McEnroe has gotten more serious about playing again. He is leaner than he was in his prime. He exercises with Chris Chelios, who played in the NHL into his forties, and 46-year-old surf legend Laird Hamilton. His friend and broadcast partner Ted Robinson says that those workouts have given McEnroe the idea that he can play tennis again at a high level, at least for a set or two. McEnroe recently squared off against Andy Roddick on Randall’s Island as part of a WTT match. For a while anyway, Roddick—the 28-year-old top American player—had all he could handle, barely winning the one-set match in a tiebreak, with McEnroe hitting sharply angled volleys and deft drop shots like it was Morning in America again. It’s likely, of course, that Roddick didn’t exactly approach the event with the intense zeal of McEnroe, who, for days afterward, bemoaned not getting enough depth on the backhand-slice approach shot he tried on match point. “I’ve lost that half-step, which is the thing that separated me,” McEnroe says, running his hands through his still-wavy, if thinning, grayish hair. He’ll hit again this afternoon and then get a massage, in preparation for another WTT match tonight. But first he sighs, “It’s frustrating. Sometimes I think if I had that step now, I could show these young guys how I could cut balls off and play the angles. It would be a different story.”

In another sense, McEnroe hasn’t lost a thing. In his prime, he could make his anger work for him; his infamous blow-ups were often followed by stunning displays of “I’ll show you” tennis. That temperament, at least, is still there. At a recent L.A. exhibition match against Andre Agassi to benefit one of Agassi’s charitable foundations, McEnroe, refusing to play the nostalgia card, stalked the court, shattered rackets when Agassi broke his serve, and snapped at a courtside fan. “Just because you pay some money,” he said, “doesn’t mean you get to be an asshole!”

MCENROE IS CATCHING up on some paperwork. He has final say on the hiring

of every one of the academy’s 25 coaches, and he reviews reports from his staff on each candidate, in search of the right final mix. He wants some coaches who specialize in teaching beginners, some who coach girls, and some, like Director of Tennis Gilad Bloom, a former top touring pro, who have experience handling elite players. There’s an acoustic guitar in the corner of his office, which rests near a photo of him with Jack Nicholson. “Those other things are still serious hobbies,” he says, gesturing to the instrument. “But now I’m sort of figuring out a way to enjoy tennis more. I’m still hard on myself. Not as hard as I used to be. But I get it over it faster.”

McEnroe has talked about opening a tennis academy for years. In effect, he’s proposing a new way of developing the next generation of players, at a time when the United States lags well behind Europe. (For the first time since computerized rankings began in 1973, there is no American men’s singles player in the sport’s top ten). Actually, what he’s proposing is a return to the old ways. McEnroe was a product of Long Island’s Port Washington Tennis Academy in the seventies, under legendary coach Harry Hopman. It was the golden age of New York tennis; not only did the club produce McEnroe and Vitas Gerulaitis, but also top players like Peter Fleming, Peter Rennert, and Fritz Buehning. “We had normal childhoods, if you can call growing up in New York normal,” McEnroe says. He played soccer for four years at the tony Trinity School on the Upper West Side, and basketball for two (“the coach didn’t realize what a gem he had,” McEnroe jokes). After school and on weekends, he’d play tennis a few times per week at Port Washington under Hopman’s low-key tutelage.

Not devoting himself entirely to tennis enabled him to be a kid, he says. He and his buddies jumped subway turnstiles while shouting “U.N. delegate!” and he drove a ’72 Pinto nicknamed the Deathmobile. He spent a year at Stanford, and it was only after making the semifinals of Wimbledon at 18 that he started playing tennis full time. He was also able to form a worldview before the trappings of celeb-

rity took hold.

The populism that led him to take on his sport’s class pretensions was cemented at Trinity, for example, with its tweed-jacketed, pipe-smoking headmaster. It was McEnroe’s first taste of the stodgy upper class he’d later wage war against at Wimbledon. (Not that he wasn’t a product of the Establishment: His father was a partner in a major white-shoe corporate law firm.) The John McEnroe Tennis Academy is his attempt to resurrect the ethos of his youth by using Port Washington as its template, with McEnroe playing the role of Hopman. Kids will come to the academy after school for elite coaching and competition, and McEnroe will be, in his words, the “inspirational leader” like Hopman, whose mere presence inspired McEnroe and the others because they so wanted to impress the old man, who had been the Davis Cup captain in his native Australia before settling in Long Island.

McEnroe cites Andre Agassi as an object lesson in the dangers of the current, all-consuming way of teaching the game. In his 2009 best-seller, *Open*, Agassi detailed his antipathy for the way he learned the sport. “You read Andre’s book—it’s like tennis’s version of *Lord of the Flies* down there at the Bollettieri Academy and those places,” McEnroe says. “Now, if Andre hated it as much as he said he hated it every ten pages—he must have said it 100 times—he would have stopped playing. So there’s part of him that doesn’t want to admit he actually liked it. But I think he’s right that these people who think that in order to succeed you have to give up everything at 10 and focus exclusively on tennis are crazy.”

McEnroe has long had a tempestuous relationship with the tennis Establishment. When the sport suspended him in the mid-eighties for his boorish on-court behavior, none other than Jack Nicholson and Mick Jagger separately approached him at a party with the same message: “Johnny Mac, don’t you ever change.” McEnroe later said, if you’re 26 and the best player in the world, who are you going to listen to: “Jack Nicholson and Mick Jagger, or some old farts in the United States Tennis Association?” For more than a decade, though,

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McEnroe flirted with the USTA about partnering on an academy at the U.S. Open tennis center. As a boy, McEnroe worked as a ball boy at the former U.S. Open site, and the tournament was the scene of some of his most dazzling professional triumphs. McEnroe thought the partnership would be a “no-brainer.” But the USTA, perhaps threatened by the bigness of McEnroe’s personality and concerned about how serious a commitment the celebrity was willing to make, ultimately wasn’t interested.

Enter Sportime CEO Claude Okin, whom McEnroe had gotten to know through World Team Tennis. Okin, a self-made entrepreneur, grew up in a middle-class family on the Upper West Side — “when the middle class still lived on the Upper West Side,” he says. He shares McEnroe’s vision of a teaching center in New York that would allow elite players to learn the game without devoting their entire lives to it, revive the New York tennis scene, and perhaps open up the country-club sport to a new, more diverse group of athletes. Not that there wasn’t some trepidation early on. “When I first met John, I was concerned he was

going to be this scary guy,” Okin told me, laughing. “Unpredictable, unmanageable, and sort of hard to be around. And there are moments when he’s iconic John—he can be bristly, he’s used to getting his way. But I got to know the other John—the family man and the teammate. He’s a patient, loving guy and a good listener. I became convinced he wanted to work with kids and have an impact on the sport in some way that didn’t feel like he was going to be bucking some authority that would hold him down and stifle his creativity.”

THE CLASH WITH Patrick was on display from the first press conference McEnroe held to announce the academy in May. McEnroe was in a particularly pugnacious mood, and he ripped into the USTA, and his brother. “I haven’t spoken to [Patrick] about it specifically, but he hasn’t called to congratulate me. I don’t know what that means,” McEnroe said. He went on to blast the USTA for not funding his venture, and for never producing a great player. “Call my brother up,” he urged reporters. “Ask why does their portfolio have \$150 million

in it? Are they saving it? What are they saving it for? Why don’t you check that out?”

Roughly a week later, both brothers were in Paris for the French Open and they sat outside over dinner at Le Stresa, a trendy Italian restaurant John has frequented for years. John was mad that Patrick hadn’t called him. “I said, ‘John, c’mon, I’ve been at your academy, I’ve toured it with you personally,’” Patrick says. John was also angry that Patrick was quoted questioning whether his brother would “show up at 8 A.M. and work with the kids until 8 P.M.” It sounded like a challenge to John’s commitment. Recent history suggests it’s a fair question. In 1999, McEnroe lobbied the USTA to become the Davis Cup captain. There can be no second-guessing McEnroe’s playing commitment to the Davis Cup, the international team competition. He’s arguably the greatest Davis Cup player in history—and he played even when other top players, focused on their singles rankings, refused. But he was given a lucrative three-year contract as coach, only to resign after fourteen months. During that time, he alienated top stars like Pete Sampras, who was said to be annoyed by McEnroe’s lobbying him to play, for all to hear, during McEnroe’s on-air tennis commentary. He reportedly showed up for a captain’s meeting in his bathrobe. His replacement as coach was none other than Patrick, who has had success, winning the Cup in 2007.

“John’s approach was, ‘I’m John McEnroe and Pete Sampras will pick up my phone call and come play for me,’” says *Tennis* magazine’s Peter Bodo, who partnered with Patrick on his recently released book, *Hardcourt Confidential*. “Patrick’s approach was to sell guys like Roddick and James Blake on being a team. Patrick’s approach worked.”

Back in his office, shirtless after his afternoon hit (“I left my goddamned forehand in Europe” he had grumbled to himself, while, across the net, a 13-year-old nervously returned his sizzling groundstrokes), McEnroe bristles when it’s suggested that his Davis Cup flameout could be seen as dilettantism. “That [Davis Cup] wasn’t even coaching,” he snaps, toweling himself dry. “It was begging guys to play for you. It has nothing to do with my commitment to teaching 8-year-olds. Gimme a break.” He goes on to describe the Davis Cup as “on life support,” and then, somehow, suddenly, in that stream-of-consciousness way of his, he’s settling old scores: “No one cares about the Davis Cup. How many people know I won five Davis Cups and seven majors, but that I rarely played the Australian Open? Then you look at a guy like [Ivan] Lendl, who won eight majors, but he won three or four Australians. I don’t know. Maybe I should have played two more Australians

“SEE, I’M ANNOYED NOW. I’M FRUSTRATED BECAUSE THINGS AREN’T THE WAY THEY’RE SUPPOSED TO BE!”

and two less Davis Cups? I could have had more majors and still have three Davis Cups when most people don’t have one.”

Patrick, for his part, was annoyed by John’s implication that the USTA was sitting on millions of dollars. At dinner in Paris, he tried to explain that elite-player development was actually a fraction of the overall USTA budget, that things like promoting community tennis, marketing, facilities improvements, and funding of the Pan-Am and Olympic games were also priorities. At the end of dinner, John and Patrick agreed they’re brothers first—and that they both want what is best for tennis. But they also agreed that, if one of Patrick’s kids competes in a tournament against one of John’s, it will be war—not unlike the brothers’ own garage Ping-Pong battles growing up in Queens. When the check came, Patrick picked it up. “See, John,” he quipped. “This is on the USTA. You can’t say the USTA never did anything for you now.”

Patrick says their Paris dinner was a good reminder that blood is thicker than tennis, but the drama will doubtless continue. Back in his office, McEnroe gathers his team of coaches in a conference room to settle on the six finalists of girls competing for the Academy scholarship. When a particularly promising 12-year-old is mentioned, McEnroe offers a detailed analysis of her game, praising her “racket-head speed.” There’s a pause. “John,” someone says, “she’s in your brother’s program.” Another pause. “Let’s get her then!” another coach yells, drawing laughs from everyone, McEnroe included. Moments later, McEnroe decides that the girl in Patrick’s program will be the scholarship recipient.

Is competing with Patrick difficult? “It depends how Patrick reacts to it, I suppose,” McEnroe says. “I’m doing this because I want to provide a spark of energy to kids in New York. I didn’t do it to compete with my brother. You know, he’s done everything I’ve done. He’s my little brother. I wouldn’t want what he’s got to deal with—it’s not like I want to sit there and be like a politician, which is a lot of what his job requires. Maybe he’s got better political skills than I do, because I say

things honestly.” Patrick says that what worked for his brother may not work for all kids. Today, he insists, it’s sometimes necessary for a young phenom to move, say, to the USTA academy in Florida for full-time instruction.

Brothers fight, and John and Patrick have gone stretches without speaking to each other—usually, Patrick says, when John is “pissy about something.” That said, Patrick gives John credit for his career. When Patrick graduated from Stanford and decided to turn pro, their mother, Kay, from whom John inherited his mania for competition, was skeptical. She wanted Patrick to go to law school. “She said, ‘You’ll never be as good as your brother,’” Patrick recalls. “‘You’ll never live up to him.’ And it was John who said, ‘Mom, stay out of it. Patrick can make it.’”

According to Bodo, Kay’s nickname for Patrick growing up was “The Plugger.” John, on the other hand, was always the mercurial genius. “When I got to be number 30 in the world, she had trouble that I was only number 30,” Patrick recalls. “Being the 30th-best player in the world is not that bad. And John helped convince her of that.”

Kay McEnroe laughs heartily when she hears about her long-ago advice to her youngest son. “Even after he made the semifinals at Wimbledon at 18, I wanted John to be a dentist,” she says. “I told him, ‘You can play tennis in the mornings.’” Last month, when McEnroe played Roddick in the WTT match, Patrick dropped by to watch. The next week, a concerned Kay asked Mark, “Was Patrick cheering for John?”

IT’S 7 P.M., and, after stopping in at tonight’s WTT hospitality suite to schmooze with corporate sponsors, McEnroe has sequestered himself in his office to prepare for a match against another 18-year-old up-and-comer. Prior to heading to the court, where he will bask in the enthusiastic applause of his fellow New Yorkers, McEnroe stops into the conference room to see his parents, who have just arrived to catch tonight’s action. He hugs and kisses Kay and John Sr. and tells them about yesterday’s traffic nightmare on his trip

to pick up daughter Ava at camp. As they chat, a tennis official pokes her head in. “John, they’re ready for you,” she says.

McEnroe points at his parents. “Um, priorities,” he says, grabbing his bag. “Well, I guess I’ve gotta go take care of this situation.”

“Keep your eye on the ball, son,” says John Sr.

“I think I’ve heard that before,” McEnroe says, laughing, and then he’s out the door.

“I couldn’t be happier about John now,” Kay says. “The USTA put him off for obvious reasons—he was never into the Establishment. He’s said it: ‘I’m back to doing what I do best, tennis.’ And he’s doing it very much as his own man.”

She sounds relieved. Elite athletes, raised as prodigies and cheered in their youths by packed stadiums, face the abyss in their late twenties and early thirties, when the rest of us are still looking ahead. The ones who adjust to retirement find something to stand for beyond the orbit of their still-formidable egos. McEnroe’s notion of giving back to the game by mentoring the next great champion may well turn out to be his calling, and perhaps even lead him further down the path toward personal peace. But these are McEnroes, and John Sr. can’t help but interject some straight talk. “Let’s be clear,” he says. “He’s mellow now, but he’s not mellow. He still blows up out there.”

That’s in keeping with McEnroe’s description of this middle age as a “process.” A couple of hours earlier, after his afternoon hit, his legs were tightening and he was desperate for a massage. He prowled the facility in search of his massage therapist. He looked in the men’s locker room—to no avail. “Unbelievable,” he muttered. He looked in the training room. Nothing. “Ridiculous,” he said, stronger now.

In the bowels of the building, McEnroe stopped. “See, I’m getting annoyed now,” he said, the decibel level rising. “I’m getting frustrated because things are not the way they’re supposed to be.” His echo bounced off the vestibule’s walls. And then he caught himself. He took a deep breath. “I guess that’s life,” he said. There was the smallest hint of a self-aware smile. ■



McEnroe and his brother Patrick playing doubles in a 2006 exhibition match.

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