

FoxSports



- February 23, 2010

In many ways, McEnroe shows his love of the game

DELRAY BEACH, Fla.

Player. Entertainer. Mentor. John McEnroe shows his devotion to tennis in many ways.

The two-mile strip of restaurants, bars and boutiques along Atlantic Avenue in Delray Beach is lively enough at the best of times, but if you barricade a block, throw down a tennis court and put John McEnroe out there you get a crowd. A big one.

Prior to his street exhibition against Ronald Agenor, the former Haitian Davis Cup player, McEnroe had given a press conference on the terrace of a place called the Oyster Bar. Passers-by stopped to listen and, although the setting was a little different, McEnroe found that, once again, the world was his oyster.

It has always been that way, ever since I watched him reach the Wimbledon semifinal as a wildly mercurial 17-year-old. The rantings and ravings became part of his public persona as much as his equally outrageous talent and it would have been a stretch, back in the 80's, to have envisaged him turning into the wise and amusing commentator that he has become.

Nor, in the days when he used doubles matches with Peter Fleming as his method of training – work out in the gym? Hah! – that McEnroe would have developed the will, stamina or fitness to continue playing competitive tennis into his fifties.

He has stuck with it because he loves to compete; loves the limelight and, in contrast to what Andre Agassi is trying to tell us – not very convincingly – in his book, he loves the game.

Which is why he has still not given up on his long fostered dream of having a John McEnroe Tennis Academy in New York. Finally realizing that the idea of working with the USTA to create one at Flushing Meadows was a pipe dream, he has now settled on the possibility of Randall's Island in the middle of the East River.

"We're working on the details now," he said. "I have always wanted to try and re-create what I experienced at Port Washington when Harry Hopman, the great Australian coach, was in charge. Try and lend kids some inspirational leadership."

McEnroe is painfully aware that his attempts in this direction have been the only aspect of his all-embracing tennis career that has not been a stellar success. His tenure as U.S. Davis Cup captain was short lived and brief stints as a coach have not exactly turned him into a new Hopman.

"No one listened to a word I said," he grumbles with typical candor. "I'd like to point to the blame on others, if possible, but I suppose I didn't have what it takes."

But, in his unique way, he still retains the ability to entertain. Once he emerged onto the makeshift court to hit with Agenor, all-miked up for the crowd, he went through the usual routine of screaming half-heartedly at the umpire who happened to be the mayor of Delray Beach, and then punctuated backhands with his off the cuff humor.

"Do we stop playing if the lights turn red?" he quipped. It was a rhetorical question. On court, McEnroe has been driving through red lights his entire career.

The next day, he wandered into the player's lounge at Delray's splendid public tennis facility which, this week, is hosting an ATP event, brandishing his Dunlop racket – a model specially designed to look as if it was made of the wood that constituted the famous Dunlop Maxply with which he began his career. Given the chance, McEnroe would change the game back to wood rackets in a nano-second.

He also thinks that the length of men's matches at Grand Slams might need a little revision. The competition at the top of the game is now so intense that five-set matches stretching past the three-hour mark are becoming common place.

"And only the U.S. Open uses a tie break in the fifth," he points out. "Maybe the other Slams should look at that. And maybe play the breaker at five all. It was played at eight all when I started. Physically, the toll on the body is much worse now."

The body, having received a massage from veteran ATP trainer Bill Norris, looked in pretty good shape a little later when he went out to play Mats Wilander on Center Court. The Swede, 45, who owns three things McEnroe covets more than most – a trio of French Open crowns – was not able to prevent his 51-year-old opponent from sweeping to a vociferously acclaimed 6-4, 6-3 victory.