



## McEnroe feeds off crowd in street exhibition



MAKING A RACKET Tennis legend John McEnroe hits the ball in the first "Tennis on the Avenue" exhibition against Ronald Ageron in the streets of downtown Delray Beach Feb. 19 as the prelude to this week's Delray Beach International Tennis Championships. (Lindsay Moore, FPG / February 17, 2010)

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An autographed hardback book in his hand, Craig Berg came away mesmerized after watching [John McEnroe](#) play tennis in the middle of Atlantic Avenue.

"I was greatly impressed by the sweetness, kindness and politeness of the man," said Berg, who was holding a copy of McEnroe's 2002 memoir, "You Cannot Be Serious," co-authored by James Kaplan. "He has that old reputation of being a 'superbrat,' but I saw something completely different. He's a very good man."

Many locals reacted the same way when McEnroe and former top-20 player Ronald Ageron appeared at the Tennis on the Avenue exhibition.

Kicking off the inaugural ATP Champions event, part of the nine-day [Delray Beach](#) International Tennis Championships, McEnroe and Agenor went head to head Feb. 19 in a friendly match.

"I've been coming to this event for years, and I was glad to receive the tournament's e-mail about John coming down early," said the 60-year-old Berg, who is from Fairfield, Iowa. "I'm visiting my mother for two weeks, and coincidentally, I always like to take in the tourney."

Before a standing-room-only crowd, McEnroe pulled off his usual stunts. The 17-time Grand Slam winner entertained the audience by throwing his racket to the ground, fending off hecklers and yelling at the umpire.

And in the end, it worked. The left-hander fought off two match points from Agenor to come away victorious, 14-12.

Speaking before the match at City Oyster, McEnroe, 51, described his game plan. "I think the court looked awful small, so I'm thinking serve and volley may be a real advantage in this particular case," he said. "Taking the ball early. And there's a lot of energy, trying to feed off this energy in this spot here."

McEnroe was surprised to learn he wasn't going to be playing Mats Wilander. With Wilander out, tournament officials turned to Agenor, who was once known as "The Haitian Sensation."

Agenor said afterward he appreciated the fans' support, and he proved equal to the task of presenting McEnroe with a challenge.

"It was great fun for everyone," said Agenor, who won three ATP titles during his 19-year career. "I wish all the tourneys were like this. There's a very strong Haitian community in Florida, and it is good to see all of the people here showing support."

Agenor was playing McEnroe for the first time since the latter's 6-0, 6-2, 7-5 victory in the first round of the 1985 French Open.

"It was good to be with him today," said the 45-year-old player, the son of a former [United Nations](#) diplomat and Haitian minister of agriculture. "It was nice to also see the smiles from everyone. I was happy to see that."

Those smiles greeted McEnroe's infamous tirades. He directed his catch phrases — "You can not be serious!" and "Answer the question!" — at [Delray Beach](#) Mayor Woodie McDuffie, who served as chair umpire. Inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame in 1999, McEnroe requested more lighting during warmups, wondered if he and Agenor should stop hitting when the traffic light turned red and asked if the roads could be fixed.

"At least the roads here are better than in New York," said McEnroe, who captured 77 singles titles — third-most behind [Jimmy Connors'](#) 109 and [Ivan Lendl's](#) 94. "Does the winner get a shot of tequila? I don't even know where the line is. Is that in? I just thought it was out."

The [Delray Beach](#) Stadium and Tennis Center plays host to the [Delray Beach](#) International Tennis Championships, the only tournament in the world that features an ATP Champions Tour event and an ATP World Tour event in the same week.

Tournament director Mark Baron said he was excited to welcome McEnroe, Agenor, Wilander, [Patrick Rafter](#), Aaron Krickstein, Andres Gomez, Johan Kriek, James Blake, [Tommy Haas](#), the Bryan Brothers and ITC defending singles champion Mardy Fish back to the show.

"It's great having all of the players come together for these two events," said Baron. "Each player represents their own market. That's great. Our ticket sales have been going great, the fans seem to like it, and the sponsors are excited. Having everyone in town for two weekends is a big plus. The goal is to have fun. That's the motto of our company in everything we do."

If Berg, who capped his evening with an autograph from Agenor, was any indication, they succeeded.

"Frankly, I think [McEnroe] is one of the greatest players and the best color commentators I've heard today," Berg said. "He's a champion in both fields."

Go to <http://www.yellowtennisball.com> or call 561-330- 6000 for information on the [Delray Beach](#) International Tennis Championships at 30 NW First Ave.