

Richard Evans, *McEnroe: Taming the Talent*. London, Bloomsbury, 1990. Illus., pp. 216. \$14.95. paper.

Meet Richard Evans, freelance journalist and tennis writer, former American correspondent for *The Evening News*, later a reporter in Vietnam and Cambodia, European Director of the Association of Tennis Professionals in 1974 and 1975, and more recently full-time tennis writer and biographer of Ilie Nastase and John McEnroe, contributor to several newspapers and BBC tennis commentator at Wimbledon.

Meet John McEnroe, friend of Richard Evans on the circuit and perhaps the most enigmatic male tennis genius since the game's inception. McEnroe in the early 1980s gave Evans permission to attempt to explain the enigma that he represents in an authorised biography. Evans, in writing *McEnroe: Taming the Talent*, has come closer than anyone else, perhaps, to that goal. And his book is valuable in providing us with interesting social and economic context for the lives of McEnroe and other international tennis stars since the late 1970s.

This is not an academic study and this revised and updated paperback edition is intended for the millions of tennis devotees and less

informed general sports fans who have hung on McEnroe's every action and word through a career spanning American junior competition and New York tutelage, emergence as an 18 year-old Wimbledon semi-finalist in 1977 and then the waxing and waning of achievement and popularity with the sporting public that have seen McEnroe become Wimbledon singles and doubles champion four times in the 1980s, and US singles and doubles champion also four times in the same period, together with a myriad of other singles, doubles and mixed doubles titles of less than Grand Slam ranking. McEnroe also held the No 1 ATP singles ranking for the world from 1981 to 1984. And, as Evans is at pains to stress among other things in his text and in the useful appendices detailing McEnroe's performances in general and against specific major opponents over his career, McEnroe (in contradistinction to a player like Connors who has played only one Davis Cup match in his life) hold the record for the greatest number of Davis Cup wins for his country over the entire history of that August competition. In seeking the answer to the riddle that is McEnroe, that generosity, and other examples of selflessness where money is concerned, should be part of the balance sheet.

Given the public's general awareness of McEnroe's playing record, the abiding question that underlies Evans' account is just why such a player has over the years antagonised tennis officialdom and galleries the world over with his outbursts, obscenities and racket abuse during the matches and less frequently with his statements and behaviour at a remove from tennis venues.

Although *Taming the Talent* takes in McEnroe's debarring from the 1990 Australian Open, it hasn't the benefit of inclusion of the inspirational tennis genius and good sportspersonship that he displayed to the admiration of the Flinders Park gallery in defeating Boris Becker in the 1992 Open. But, as Evans and McEnroe himself repeatedly admit in this account of McEnroe's life, there is something in McEnroe that means that the 1992 display might well be superseded at some later stage

in his declining career by the same rudeness and uncontrolled anger against himself and officials that he has exhibited so many times before.

Tatum O'Neal, determined, as she explains, to 'make him aware of the consequences of his behaviour', describes her husband's outbursts as 'wrapped up in some sort of tortured genius thing with him'. Evans seeks explanations of it there too, and in McEnroe's hard-edged New York background, in his fierce competitiveness and striving for perfection and in what he sees as a peculiarly American sensitivity to injustices that pass unchallenged. He compares McEnroe's wounded and often self-directed vitriol with Connors' self-preoccupation, arrogance and belittling of opponents and officials and wonders why he has often escaped unscathed while McEnroe has been pilloried by the press and by small town, conservative USTA officials. Evans also notes that although Tatum has led him to yoga, McEnroe has always sternly set his face against psychiatric counselling. McEnroe on the one hand is capable of admitting that he has a problem, that when he walks onto the court he can become a 'maniac' capable of saying anything, that something comes over him, that it's weird. And yet he holds that no psychiatrist stranger could tell him anything about himself that he didn't already know.

But there are inconsistencies, it seems to me, in Evans' account of the springs of McEnroe's behaviour and in his biographer's reactions and partial justifications of it. He deplores the tantrums and rudeness. And yet his account of McEnroe's apparent warmth as father and husband - sometimes in Evans' hands a mite schmalzy - sits strangely with the admission of McEnroe's less than charming attitude to strangers, and this in turn sits oddly with accounts of McEnroe's patience in dealing with offensive drunks in a bar in Nice. At times Evans bends too far from what are reasonable expectations of a mature adult in dealing with strangers (on the practice court in the host club, in the hotel lobby, on the plane) in order to justify McEnroe's behaviour, pleading that he was at the time, after all, the world's highest-ranking player, while at other junctures

making play of McEnroe's unassuming and unobtrusive nature. Does a certain arrogance peep in the back door? Where does arrogance shade into competitiveness and single-minded drive and perfectionism? And, in fairness to both Evans and his subject, what understanding is necessary in making judgments, given the fact that almost everything of a modern touring tennis genius' life is public - open to the camera, tape recorder, press hound, and to the often brazen public?

Taming the Talent, despite these cavils, is interesting for its insider's view of the different levels at which the tennis 'industry' operates, the players' and entrepreneurs' roles in it, its insights into the media's urge for smutty stories on the one hand and its eager earnings from the sport on the other, the pursuit at all these levels of the mighty dollar, the fickleness of the gallery and the changes for the worse in partisanship in crowd behaviour - the New York crowd singled out - which McEnroe deplores as a professional.

Graeme Kinross-Smith
Deakin University