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To the Racket Born

Like his tennis game, Jimmy Connors's memoir is full of energy and focused force, if not finesse.

By *Edward Kosner*

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With his weird round metal racket, rocketing two-fisted backhand and bad attitude, Jimmy Connors was tennis's ranking brat three decades ago—more obnoxious than his perhaps even more talented rival, John McEnroe. Along with the chill Swede Björn Borg, the three ruled pro tennis for a decade starting in the mid-1970s. Now, Mr. Connors serves up a memoir that, like his game, makes up in energy and focused force what it may lack in finesse.

THE OUTSIDER

By *Jimmy Connors*

Harper, 401 pages, \$28.99



Two-Fisted | Connors's famous backhand in 1978. ASSOCIATED PRESS

"I make no apologies for the way I played tennis," he writes. "I was out there to win—and entertain at the same time. . . . I always accepted the fines, suspensions and screaming headlines that followed my spontaneous assholery. That is a word, right? Well, it is now."

A bad courtside manner was the least of it. Mr. Connors, it turns out, suffered throughout his career from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. He discovered this at 19, during his first Centre Court match at Wimbledon, when he couldn't put down a Coke he was sipping during a changeover. He was a hard-partier—although not a druggie—and a gambling addict who once bet \$1 million on himself to defeat Martina Navratilova in a challenge match. (He won in straight sets despite being restricted to a single serve per point and with Ms. Navratilova allowed to hit into half the doubles courts.)

None of these kinks kept Mr. Connors from winning more men's singles titles than any other player (109), eight Grand Slams (including five U.S. Opens) and ranking as the world's number one men's player for five straight years.

Mr. Connors calls his book "The Outsider," but he was actually to the racket born, although not in any WASPy tennis-club sense. His grandmother was a self-taught tennis champ in their gritty hometown of East St. Louis, Ill. His mother, Gloria, was even better. Little Jimmy picked up his first racket at three and a half. Even cut down, it was too big for him, so he had to hold the handle with both hands. He was 7 when he played in his first tournament, although he couldn't take a set from his mother, he says, until he was 15.

Pancho Segura, the bantam Ecuadorean with the signature two-handed forehand, took over as his coach in 1968. He would diagram strategy on cocktail napkins, but Mr. Connors never strayed from the game he learned from his mother: He was nearly always the aggressor, took the ball early, hit it hard and flat. No topspin for Jimbo, certainly not on that backhand. He was relentless and undaunted by injury.

Numb on painkillers, he played the 1975 Wimbledon tourney with two hairline fractures in his shin, losing the final to Arthur Ashe in four sets. Warming up for the same tournament two years later, he broke his thumb when it got wedged in the open throat of his Wilson T2000 tubular steel racket. With a series of makeshift splints, he battled his way to the ninth game of the fifth set of the final against Mr. Borg before double-faulting and losing the title.

Mr. Connors's courtship skills were no match for his hard-court prowess. His romance with the teenage Chrissie Evert turned into a celebrity tsunami when each won Wimbledon in 1974. They were supposed to get married, but there was an "issue," as Mr. Connors euphemizes it, "the result of youthful passion." Just 19 and committed to her career, Ms. Evert, he writes, decided to "take care of that 'issue.' I was perfectly happy to let nature take its course and accept responsibility" but "she had already made up her mind." They parted ways.

His next love affair, with a convivial former Miss World named Marjie Wallace, collapsed after a year when Mr. Connors, walking through the Los Angeles airport, spotted her face on the cover of People magazine with the headline "Marjie and Her Men." Eventually, he settled into a three-decade marriage and doting parenthood with Patti McGuire, a former Playmate of the Year—although he almost scuttled it with an affair.

Still, Mr. Connors's true love match was with tennis. In 1981, at 29, he was being written off. Tennis had its next wave with Mr. McEnroe, also Irish, left-handed and pugnacious, and Ivan Lendl, another aggressive and relentless player. But Mr. Connors resurrected himself and dethroned Mr. McEnroe in a five-set 1982 Wimbledon final.

His decline saw him playing in the hinterlands of World Team Tennis and the exhibition circuit. But then, in the first round of the 1991 U.S. Open, Mr. Connors found himself down two sets, 0-3, 0-40 to Mr. McEnroe's little brother, Patrick. Of course, he held serve, demolished little Mac and battled his way, at 39, to the semifinals for a real last hurrah from 20,000 tennis fans who had once reviled him.

"Something still drove me to push even when I was past my prime," he concludes. "I played injured, dehydrated, hallucinating, and delusional. It's not what you accomplish; it's what you overcome to accomplish it that sets you apart."

Game, set, match, career, Jimbo!

—*Mr. Kosner, the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News, brings more tenacity than talent to his tennis game.*

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