

# the Jimmy Connors ENIGMA



Like him or not, Jimmy Connors was instrumental in taking the country club out of tennis in the 70s, plain and simple. Important stuff. Nonetheless, just as he was back then, he remains a polarizing figure. Those who jumped onto that decade's tennis boom bandwagon loved what he represented, and still do. The patrician crowd, tennis' hierarchy at that time, not so much. A residual of that sentiment, it seems, remains.

Just when Connors was seemingly fading into the sunset after coaching Andy Roddick a few years ago, he's back stirring the pot with his recently released book, *The Outsider*, and, kind of a shocker, by signing on as Maria Sharapova's coach in July after her early round loss at Wimbledon.

Before his arrival on a finally genuine pro tour — after winning the NCAA title as a freshmen at UCLA in '71 when college tennis was a common path to one's development as a player — tennis, still in the early stages of the "open era," continued to be stifled by the stodgy, blue-blazered shamateurists with their holier than thou trappings of elitism and exclusivity.

I remember the period well. My own big break — a coveted invitation (the wild card of the day) to the Newport grass court lead-up to Forest Hills (then the US Championships) — came in 1964 as a 17-year-old, well before Connors' rise and before tennis did open up in 1968.

The player's bold boycott of the '68 Wimbledon Championships succeeded in putting an end to the International Tennis Federation's draconian policy of banning players from all tour events who "turned pro" and accepted above the table pay for play.

Connors himself was particularly singled out and denied a chance to capture the '74 Grand Slam — all four majors in the same calendar year — when the ITF ruled him ineligible for the French Open because he had signed to play in Billie Jean King's upstart World Team Tennis league.

In his revealing memoir, Connors traces his evolution from the rough and tumble public park courts of blue collar East St. Louis, Ill., to becoming the #1 player in the world, a position he held for five straight years, 268 weeks total.

Its candidness has spurred controversy, just as Connors did as a young player and even well into in his prime. Much of the feedback I've received towards it and him personally — I was on staff at the Jimmy Connors Tennis Center at Sanibel Harbour back in the '80s — surprisingly negative.

Yes, he was brash and in your face if he thought he was being wronged. He was not one to ever back down, especially from anyone in authority wearing the blazer uniform of the day. He was not representative of the gentlemanly sportsman demeanor that was expected at that time, best personified by earlier champions like Rod Laver. And hooking-up with savvy tour promoter, Bill Riordan, who became Jimmy's point man, didn't help with tennis' cognoscenti.

It took years for Connors to win the public over — the arrival of a younger, untamed rival, John McEnroe, set the wheels in motion — culminating in his spectacular last hurrah at the 1991 US Open where, at 39, he staged repeated improbable, dramatic comebacks over much younger men to reach the semi-finals with frenzied, unanimous crowd support.

The public backlash, especially about his book's outing of Chris Evert's career "decision" regarding their early-on courtship, a private matter for all these years and opportunistically represented by the media in the worst possible light, was not surprising. Other issues have, unexpectedly, triggered a piling-on, such as when Arthur Ashe and company formed the ATP, a first-ever player's union to finally give them a voice in their own careers; Connors was the only player in the top 100 not to join.

And there's more in the book that has been viewed as loutish behavior by those who will not be dissuaded by the many more touching, heart-warming revelations and regrets that are also openly shared.

Prior to my time at the JCTC, my view of Connors was, like most, from a distance. Once there, I saw first-hand something I wasn't necessarily anticipating. Promotional events were first class and often. One such event, a cocktail reception being held in the lobby of the luxury spa built into the stadium, was crowded with VIPs. A lone young lady was manning the reception desk. As Connors made his way through the crowd to the desk, she looked up and asked, "Can I help you?" clearly not having any idea whom she was talking to! Oh, this is going to be interesting, I thought, standing in close proximity. It didn't disappoint.

Jimmy politely said, "I'd like to sign for my massage."

"Name please," she replied.

No, no, no. I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"Connors," he said.

Still nothing. Finally, mercifully, she sorts out his chit. He signed, thanked her and went on his way. No one ever knew that she had dissed the very one whose name was on the facility. It never came up.

But that was the Connors we came to expect: Unassuming tennis royalty, down to earth with the rank and file, in complete contradiction to the in-your-face, competitive, completely self-absorbed image perceived by those on the outside.

On another occasion, I saw him going out of his way to stop and engage a landscaper who — again clueless as to Connors' identity — was trimming the hedges, telling him what a good job he was doing and how he appreciated it.

And how about asking me, practically apologetically, if I could keep restringing his trusty T-2000s with his favorite 17g gut until "we" got the tension just right.

Then there was the long ago forgotten Frying Pan Challenge. A character named Jim Barker, the self-proclaimed Florida frying pan champion, showed up with a camera crew from the local CBS affiliate along with a racket bag filled with the Head, Wilson and Prince pans of the culinary world. Connors, going right along with the gag chose,

if memory serves, an aluminum Teflon model for, one could only surmise, its lightness and maneuverability.

A brazenly overconfident Barker got quickly deep fried with Connors instantly adapting to his pan of choice, his flat strokes predisposed to the task, Barker's jaw dropping. Connors could play metal.



The crowd delighted in him laughing, joking and trash talking his way through the match with the same humor he displayed, still just a kid practicing at the Jack Kramer Club in LA, where he played good club players right-handed to hustle some spending money well before the big paydays to come.

What you think you see is, still, not always what you get. Sharapova knows.

A Kris Kristofferson lyric from his song "Pilgrim, Chapter 33" just might be apropos for the James Scott Connors' paradox: "He's a walkin' contradiction, partly truth, party fiction, takin' ev'ry wrong direction on his lonely way back home." ■■

Opposite page: Jimmy Connors at the 1978 ABN Tennis Tournament in Rotterdam, Netherlands, holding his Wilson T2000 steel racket. Source: Nationaal Archief Fotocollectie Anefo Item number 929-6576

Above: Jimmy Connors attends the Charles Evans PCF Pro-Am Tour benefiting the Prostate Cancer Foundation at the Ross School Tennis Facility on August 22, 2010 in East Hampton, NY.



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