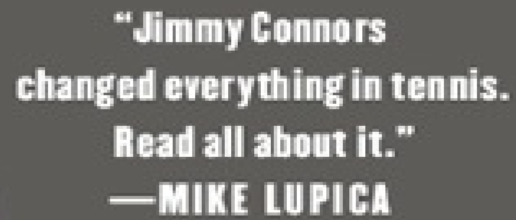

THE OUTSIDER

A MEMOIR

JIMMY CONNORS

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A Memoir

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Dedication

To Patti

Contents

Dedication

1. Out of the Shadows
2. Shaping an Attitude
3. Nothing Would Ever Be the Same Again
4. Lose Like a Man, Win Like a Man
5. The Main Locker Room
6. Nasty Entertainment
7. Love Game
8. Twin Peaks
9. Battle of the Balls
10. No One's Cup of Tea
11. The Point's Not Over 'Til It's Over
12. Meeting My Match
13. Björn Again
14. Back from the Dead
15. Cracks in the Foundation
16. House Divided
17. Road Warrior
18. Torment
19. Resurrection
20. Not Dogging It
21. A Friend Remembered
22. Open Heart
23. My Visit to the Big House
24. Passion Play

Acknowledgments
Index

Photographs

About the Author
Credits
Copyright
About the Publisher

1

OUT OF THE SHADOWS

I'm 29 years old and for the last three years people have been telling me I'm finished, washed u done.

That doesn't sit well with me. I'll say when I'm done and I'm not done yet. I haven't even reache my peak. Screw 'em.

It's 1981 and I lost my hold on the number one ranking in the world in the previous year, and eve though I've claimed 17 titles since then, I haven't won a major tournament. There's an element doubt creeping into my daily training: Do I still belong? Can I still compete at this level? I'm n winning. I'm being pushed onto the back burner. That's hard to take.

I'm up, I'm down. I think I'm good and then I don't win. I get up every day and do the right thing but the results aren't improving. I'm getting to the semifinals, and I'm losing matches I should wi Not good enough. Winning lesser tournaments along the way is fine, but it's not the majors and that what I'm looking for. Anyone else in those years would have been content with my record—but n me and obviously not the media. This has been the most frustrating three years of my career.

"You're not going to reach your prime until your thirties," my mom keeps telling me. "My prime What the hell, Mom? What was the last six or seven years about?"

"You wait," she says. "You haven't played your best tennis yet."

My wife, Patti, our two-year-old son, Brett, and I are living in North Miami at Turnberry Isl Florida. We moved down from Los Angeles for the tennis, but distractions are everywhere. This is playground for the wealthy. Rich people come here from all over the world for the gambling, disco restaurants, golf, and—I'm guessing—drugs. In the evenings I can go down to the courts and pla tennis against guys who bet $5,000 a set they can beat me if I play them right-handed. Guess wha They can't. The extra cash is nice, but the fun and laughs is what it's really all about. But I have on one thing on my mind: reclaiming my position at the top of the tennis world.

I continue to work my ass off every day, practicing two and a half hours in the morning with th Turnberry Club tennis pro, Fred Stolle, a former Grand Slam champion from Australia. He stands i one corner of the court and hits the ball to the opposite corner so I have to run the whole width of th court in order to return the shot. Then he moves to the other corner and I do the same thing from th other side. Then Fred comes up to the net and stands over on the right side so that my forehan passing shots have to go up the line and my backhand has to go crosscourt. Every drill I do is designe to replicate a situation I'm going to face against my toughest opponents. I've never hit a shot in match that I haven't practiced over and over.

Later in the day I play a couple of sets with my longtime friend David Schneider, a former top Sou African player, who practices with me whenever I want to fine-tune what I worked on with Fred th morning. Afterward, David and I have a Coke and relax as buddies. It's nice to let tennis go and b able to talk about other things.

It’s difficult balancing tennis with family life, my friends. When I’m with my family, I feel like I’r slighting the tennis. When I’m practicing, I feel like I’m slighting my family. When I get up at 6:3 a.m., Brett is eating breakfast and watching *The Smurfs*. I want to spend time with him, but I know have work to do on the court. When I’m playing tennis, I feel I should be spending time at the po with Brett and Patti. There are conflicts everywhere I turn. When friends visit, I want to go out ar have fun with them, stay out late, but then I am slighting both my tennis and my family. If I go dow to the restaurant for breakfast I’ll see 10 people I’m obliged to say hello to and that will hold up m day.

Mom is on the phone. I talk to her at least 10 times a day. This may sound like a lot, but Mom is als my business manager. My schedule is made six months in advance, so not only is she “checking in” a a mother, mother-in-law, and grandmother; she is letting me know about commercial offer upcoming tournaments, and all the numerous details involved in my career.

If any of the calls lasts more than a few seconds, it’s because she knows I’m having problems. She concerned about me. I have to push myself further than I want to, train harder, practice longer. I’r older and things don’t come as easily now. I don’t mind the physical part. It’s getting into the righ mental state that I find tough. I haven’t been winning the way I expect to, but I have to find a way act as if I am, so I won’t talk myself out of it. I don’t want to fall into that trap of saying, “Oh, sh maybe they’re right. Maybe I am finished.” I have to find my self-confidence, even though I’m n sure where I left it. Things aren’t working out for me, so to get myself through it I have to be twice arrogant. That’s how I’ll cope. I can’t go out there and just be half-assed; I’ve got to go all the way. have to be prepared, I have to be in the best shape possible, and my game has to be ready.

Wembley, England. November 14, 1981.

Wembley is a big tournament at the end of the year, but it isn’t a Grand Slam, and yet this isn’t ju another match. I’m down two sets to love, looking across the court at . . . John McEnroe.

I love playing Borg, Lendl, Nastase, Panatta, and Gerulaitis. The list of great players from my era as long as my arm, but to play Mac is beyond the realm of just tennis. He’s my gauge; I look to him see the level I have to reach to be number one again.

Mac is the best player in the world. He’s just won Wimbledon and the US Open. When McEnroe w coming up he wanted everything that I had. I was number one in the United States and he wanted tha I was number one in the world and he wanted that. Then he took it all. And now I want it back.

I’m not just going to roll over and say it’s too tough, that he’s too young (seven years younger to b exact). Even though Mac and I clash at every turn, we’re so much alike it’s scary. I’m Irish, he’s Irish I’m left-handed, he’s left-handed. I’ve got a bad attitude, he’s got a bad attitude. I’ve always said would love to play myself, and Mac is as close to playing me as I’m going to get.

This McEnroe match could be my return to winning in a big way. I know my game is getting bett again, and now I have a chance to prove it by beating Mac in the final.

Unfortunately, I’m down two sets to love. All I can do is to figure out how to stay out there or more minute, one more point, one more ball, one more anything to keep putting some pressure on Ma —that’s all I want to do. I made my reputation on my all-out aggressive style of play and I’m going live or die again today with that. I’m not just going to wait for something to happen. I’m going force the action.

But, right now, I’m not in it. Mac is the show. He’s doing everything right and I’m like a bit playe in his future Broadway production of *Kicking Connors’s Ass*. I’m getting steamrolled, but, in tenni sometimes even the smallest thing can change the course of a match. It might be a shot, a call, a

interruption from the stands, anything to relieve the pressure and the tension. Of course, that kind small change can work against me, too. It wouldn't be the first time I let myself get sidetracked.

Mac is under what I call "confrontation time-out," which means he hasn't emptied his bucket ye there's still more to come, and he's resting up for a second assault on the umpire. He's sitting in h chair looking up at him, and then he starts in again.

"You don't know the rules. You don't have the right to tell me anything."

I wander over to a kind, sympathetic face in the stands, a girl who looks like she's feeling sorry f me because I'm getting hammered. I suck up a few words of encouragement from her and then g back to the business at hand. That one small moment is all it takes for me to feel like I'm a part what's going on around me. I loosen up. Now I have a chance to go inside my head and confront m demons; it's that place where I can dig up something from my past to help me push on to the win.

I look back at the way my grandfather, Pop, trained me. There was only one way to do it: his wa Anything else was unacceptable. He pushed and pushed. I could jump rope with the best of them, b Pop sometimes went too far. As a kid I'd pick up the rope and start jumping for 10 or 15 minute Then I'd ask, "How much do you want me to do, Pop?"

"Why don't you do five more minutes?" he'd say.

I'd be jumping rope for five more minutes and Pop would be walking back and forth in front of m talking.

"You know, Jimmy, it might be better if you do 10 more minutes."

In that five minutes I had been jumping, I'd be trying to get the most out of that time, and I'd thin "God, now 10 more minutes?" I mean I had pushed it hard from the time I picked up the rope, so do keep going full-speed, or do I slow down because he might come back and say 20 more minutes?

All the time I'm jumping, I'm worrying about picking up my feet and doing it the right way, becau if I miss I have to start over from the very beginning. I'm trying to concentrate and work.

"OK, Jimmy, you have 20 minutes."

At this point Pop is talking to me about nothing in particular, asking questions about school, m friends, where I want to have lunch. He's walking around, trying to get in my way, doing anything ar everything to distract me and mess up my concentration.

It almost seemed like a game to him. And I would be thinking, "Son of a bitch! What's going o here? I'm exhausted!"

Looking back, I realize he was helping me build the mental and physical strength I would need cope with the best tennis players in the world.

Pop was telling me in his way that no matter how prepared you are, there will always be somethin going on, either on or off the court, that will take your mind off your game. How I deal with that down to me.

It's the beginning of the third set now and my footwork is better and I'm more prepared to hit shot My returns become more penetrating, deeper, faster, so Mac has less time to react. I start dictating th course of play.

Once I break serve in the third set, my confidence level rises for the first time in the match. I' hitting my groundstrokes closer to the lines, with more control and accuracy. Because of that, Ma gets to the ball late, giving him fewer opportunities to impose his game on me. Even though we' similar in some ways, our styles of play contradict each other. When one of us is really on top of h game, it detracts from the other. His strengths are serving and volleying; mine are hitting from th

back of the court and moving the ball around. So, unlike the first two sets, where Mac was servi
great and coming into the net, which is his comfort zone, now he has to play the way I want him
play, from the baseline.

After I win the third set, I've turned the momentum in my favor, and even though I'm still down
set, I know that no matter what Mac plans to throw at me, I'm ready for it. Still, I want to make sure
don't get too cocky. That's still John McEnroe across the net and you can never take John McEnro
lightly. Ever.

I go up a service break in the fourth and the crowd senses a turning point. They're getting the
money's worth and now they're cheering for both sides. However, the more excited the fans get th
easier it is for me to get lost in their enthusiasm. So now it comes down to this: how to keep my wi
about me when everyone around me is losing theirs. My job is to make the crowd go crazy, not to jo
them.

There's no doubt my mental game has caused me problems in the past. It seems like nothing ever ru
smoothly when I'm going to play. I've even forgotten my bag or racquets because I was thinking to
much about the match.

Once when I was about to play the finals of the US Open, my limo—I always had a car and driv
take me to and from my matches—got rear-ended two blocks from the hotel. Now we have to g
through all this crap of exchanging license numbers and names and I'm going to be late for the tit
match. So what do I do? Do I tell the driver to speed up and find a shortcut to the stadium? No, it
back to the hotel to start all over again. There's been a change in my routine. I have no choice.

Are you asking yourself, "Why would he do that?" It's a thing called OCD: obsessive compulsi
disorder. Yup. I have it. Didn't know that, did you? Well, neither did I at the time.

When I turned pro at the age of 19, I started having what I used to call "twitches." They showed u
the first time I went to Wimbledon. My first "twitch" occurs when I'm playing Centre Court and
walk over to get a Coke. I take a drink and start to put the can down, but my hand won't let go of th
can.

"Time, Mr. Connors," the umpire says, noticing my bizarre behavior. "Time, Mr. Connors."

Put the damn can down and get the hell back out there, I'm telling myself. I can feel the umpi
looking at me. Time is running out. But I can't let go of the can.

"Time, Mr. Connors. Time, Mr. Connors," the umpire says again.

The can doesn't feel right in my hand. For some reason, it doesn't feel solid. Twenty thousar
people are watching me trying to put down a can of soda! I'm saying to myself, LET GO OF TH
FUCKING CAN!

Finally, after about 25 times, the can once again feels comfortable in my hand and I'm able to put
down. I'm ready to play again.

I go to serve and now I can't stop bouncing the ball. I bounce it 30 times, trying to get the ball
feel right. Believe me, I'm not trying to throw off my opponent's game with all the bouncin
although that might be a fortunate side effect. It's just that I won't be able to stop bouncing the ba
until it feels right in my hand and connected to my brain.

It was only when I was in my mid-thirties that I saw a television show on OCD, and I realize
Damn! I've got that. I thought I was just superstitious, fidgety, and nervous. Who knew they had
name for it?

I've had the symptoms of OCD since that first trip to London and throughout the rest of my caree
It was exhausting. Any action—from putting something in the fridge over and over again to moving

chair to the perfect spot—could pop up at any time and totally occupy my thinking. I've probably ha the symptoms of OCD since childhood, but they didn't become pronounced until the stress ar excitement of my first Wimbledon.

Even now, when I let my dogs out at night before going to sleep, it happens. Long after the dogs a back in the house and in their beds, I can't get my mind off the door. Lock, unlock, repeat. Is the doo closed? No, that didn't sound right. Push in the door. That doesn't feel right either. Sometimes m hand is willing but my mind isn't, and sometimes my mind is but my hand isn't. Obviously, it's no rational. If I had the answers, I'd probably have a cure.

Sometimes my kids will mess with me. I'll be in bed—comfortable, horizontal, and ready for a goo night's sleep—and they'll come in and say, "Dad, I wonder if that door is locked." Now I'm up agai walking around the house six times, making sure everything is locked and locked and locked ar locked and locked and locked. For the most part, though, it happens more when I'm by myself. It embarrassing and tiring, but I've never looked at it like it was a debilitating disease. I pretty much ju laughed at myself. What the hell. But if you see me when you're out to dinner, don't think I'm goin to be your evening's entertainment unless I'm your waiter and you bought my book. In that case, I' give you a show.

It's the fourth set and still tight. Mac probably thinks that if he doesn't end it now, I'll probably brea his will in the fifth. After I win the fourth, I can see the change in his body language. I can sense h confidence slip.

Two sets all. Mac trips and twists his ankle. I'm not surprised; the court is a carpet laid ov hardwood. It's difficult to play on. It can bunch, give a little bit, and there are dead spots. Mac wall off the pain and prepares to get back to business. He would have played me on a broken ankle. I have played him on a broken ankle.

Our rivalry is about respect. He's able to bring out more in me than any other player, and I hope I d the same for him. I'm fighting my ass off and so is he. There is nothing fake about our rivalry. Mac the one player I can watch limping around the court and feel good about saying, "Fuck that guy."

The ump tells Mac to play on. So he does. He serves and takes the point. His next serve hits th lineswoman right in her stomach—it had to hurt. I look at her, grab my stomach, and double ov sympathetically. She smiles, the fans laugh and then applaud. I'm loving it.

I win the game, and at the changeover there are fireworks. Mac is sitting in his chair, yelling at th ump.

"It's your stupidity. All right? It's your stupidity. That was part of my injury time. That was 2 seconds of my injury time," Mac says. "You only make it worse when you say play on when I actuall hurt myself!"

He's got a point. You get 20 seconds in between points. You also get three minutes of injury time the ump was wrong to tell Mac to play on. Mac could have called for a trainer if he wanted to, but th ump didn't seem to know the rules. When someone is the umpire in a match between Mac and m he's sitting on a ticking bomb; in fact, he's sitting on two ticking bombs. It's just a matter of time. It not if, but when.

So I'm hanging around on my side, thinking, "Screw him, let him fight his own battle," even thoug I know he's right. I've fought enough on my own.

"It doesn't have to be continuous if I hurt myself!" Mac yells at the umpire.

I'm ready to get back on the court, but at the same time I want to stay in my chair and hear th conversation. Hey, what the hell? What's another 30 seconds when some good insults might b

coming from Mac? But I'm disappointed this time, because Mac says nothing as he stalks back on th court.

I'm ahead in the fifth and serving when Mac hits a backhand passing shot down the line. It's out, b it's called in. Here we go again. I'm so close and then this shit happens. I head for the umpire.

"We've been playing over three hours and I know you must be very tired," I say. "You've bee doing a lot of running and everything. So just try and pay a little bit of attention." Sarcasm—th weapon of champions.

I'm playing well. The match is going my way and I can feel it. The extra work is paying off. I tal the next points easily. Connors, 40-love, triple match point. Mac hits a backhand return into the ne and then it's over. I was down two sets and I battled back to win, 2-6, 3-6, 6-3, 6-4, 6-2.

This is what's it's all about. This is boxing at 90 feet. Throwing blows at each other until there's onl one man left standing.

I've always said the next best thing to playing and winning is playing and losing, because at lea I'm playing tennis, I'm in the game. I could never ask for anything more than that.

I've always gauged the mettle of someone's character by the way they figure out how to continue losing fight. I always knew which guys would stay in there and battle to the end, and I knew the gu who wouldn't, and believe me there were more of those.

Those three years of criticism—hearing that I was finished, that the game was passing me by, th other players were pushing me aside—gave me a gift: They made me understand that I needed tenni I needed to go out and win. I needed to see sold-out stadiums—the proof that I was winning. I couldn let the critics beat me. Even if what they were saying was "Come on, Jimmy, we expect more of you And if some of the fans were actually trying to get rid of me, I needed that motivation as well. It a made me work harder. What they didn't know was that it was the greatest compliment they could hav given me. Those years were hard and frustrating, but I never once, even for a second, lost my love an passion for tennis.

My grandmother, Two-Mom, always told me to keep a little mystery about myself in life, and that what I did during my career. As a result, there was always a lot of speculation from so-called exper and critics who thought they knew me. If they're reading this, they know what I'm talking about.

Well, now it's my turn to tell you about myself. I'm just simply telling my story, and this is the wa it is and I accept full responsibility for anything and everything I ever did, have done, will do in th future.

Are we clear? OK, good. Now turn the page.

2

SHAPING AN ATTITUDE

I'm eight years old and I'm watching a thug beat the shit out of my mother and my grandfathe
There's blood on the court. I can't help them. I'm powerless. This day will transform me more tha
any other event in my life.

My older brother, Johnny, and I are playing tennis on the public courts in Jones Park, in East S
Louis, Illinois, with Mom and my grandmother, whom we call Two-Mom because she's like ou
second mom. There are five hard courts in a row and no one else is around. Two guys in their earl
twenties come over to hang out, and they get on the next court. They place a large transistor radio
the foot of the net post and turn it on full blast. The music is so loud we can't hear Mom giving u
instructions across the net. She asks them politely to turn the music down. They ignore her. They a
screwing around, yelling and swearing. Mom asks them, again, to please turn it down or move over
court. They call her a bitch. We keep playing.

My grandfather, who is chief of the parks police, comes over. Pops, as we call him, likes to watch u
practice. He isn't happy with the guys next to us, but neither is he looking for trouble. We stop an
watch as Pop approaches them.

"Boys, would you mind turning that down a little?"

One punk starts to bend down; I think he's going to turn off the music. Instead he throws himself
my grandfather, catches him off-guard, and tackles him to the concrete.

The punk straddles Pop, grabs him by the shirt collar, and starts banging his head into the court.

I don't even notice my mom run over to help her father. When she goes to grab the young guy by th
shoulder, he whirls around and punches her right in the mouth. Her teeth go flying. Two-Mom move
toward Johnny and me, but she can't shield us from seeing our mother fall bloody onto the tenn
court.

Then the punks just run away. It happens so fast that it feels like a bad dream, but it's all too real.

Two-Mom shoos everyone into the car and drives us home. Mom's friend, Booth, takes Mom int
the bathroom and puts a towel on her face. At one point Mom pulls the towel away. What teeth she ha
left in her mouth are shoved through her lips and gums. Johnny screams, "Put it back! Put it back
Booth gets mad and pushes Johnny out of the bathroom. Dad arrives and we take Mom and Pop to th
hospital.

In the emergency room, the doctors treat Pop's head wound. Then it's Mom's turn. They pull out he
last remaining teeth and she gets hundreds of stitches in her mouth.

That night we try and make Mom comfortable on the couch. Then Dad, Johnny, and I go back to th
courts and search for Mom's teeth. We think maybe we should save them because they might be abl
to put them back or something. We just didn't know.

The next morning, Mom is resting on the couch when Johnny and I ask if she wants to go hit som
tennis balls. We're too young to realize how injured she is. Yet Mom gets up and goes out into th

backyard and hits balls with us. Nothing would ever keep her from playing tennis with her boys. Sh
won't be able to pronounce any words for a month. She literally has to learn how to talk again. M
mother will struggle with the injuries to her mouth until the day she dies, but she never complains
makes a big deal out of it. She never brings up the beating or uses it as an excuse.

Johnny and I talked about that day for years after it happened. We'd ask each other: Who does tha
How does that even happen? How do we let something like that pass? There's no question it had
lasting psychological effect on both of us, but eventually we came to grips with it the best we could
took my anger and used it in my tennis. Johnny dealt with it by channeling his rage in another way-
by taking it to the streets.

After watching my mom get battered, the need for revenge ran strong in me, and I found I could u
that emotion to achieve it. If she could hit balls the very next day after getting beat up, then I cou
play for one hour or five hours, no matter how bad my body ached. There's a line that Patrick Swayz
has in the movie *Road House*. After he gets stabbed, the doctor, played by Kelly Lynch, asks Swayze
he enjoys pain, and he says, "Pain don't hurt." I understood that.

I could always find something to drive me, and most of the time it was those feelings of anger ar
rage that bubbled up from the past. My mother taught me how to harness those emotions. She calle
them Tiger Juices.

"Get those Tiger Juices flowing, Jimmy," she'd say to me.

Al Lynch "Pop" Thompson had been a lifeguard before he became chief of the parks police, and h
was pretty famous around East St. Louis. There are still people in the area who talk about him fro
his police days, when he would ride around town on a huge white Harley. People knew him to be a fa
man, and he wouldn't hesitate to help you if you needed it. Pop wasn't big, but he was wiry and guy
knew not to mess with him, because in his younger days Pop had been a Golden Gloves middleweig
boxer. He had his own style and attitude, and he built up a reputation good enough to be able to get
the ring with Joe Louis. Exhibition or not, it was still a great honor to fight the Champ.

In 1975, when I played Rod Laver in a Challenge Match at Caesars Palace, in Las Vegas, I flew Po
out to watch. This was the first time Pop was ever on an airplane. (He used to work for the railroad, s
he always took the train.) I knew from my many visits to Caesars Palace that Joe Louis was a memb
of the "Caesars family." He had value as a sports personality and people loved being around him, s
Caesars Palace made him an official greeter. It was good for business. He would socialize with th
guests, and they, in turn, would spend more time in the casinos.

After the match, Pop accompanied me to the post-match festivities. Try to imagine how proud I wa
when I saw Joe Louis at the cocktail party, knowing that Pop had been in the ring with him. I took Po
up to say hello to him.

"Mr. Louis, this is my grandfather, Al Lynch. He trained me, and, at one time, he boxed with you."

Mr. Louis looked at Pop and said, "And I knocked you out, right?"

Pop grinned, "Yeah, but you knocked everybody out."

Years later, my grandmother, Bertha, Two-Mom, told me that the first moment she hit a tennis bal
she fell in love with the sport. She couldn't afford lessons, but because she was a natural athlete, sh
was able to teach herself how to play, figuring out on her own how to improve her strokes and h
footwork. Soon Two-Mom became an established player in East St. Louis and the surrounding area
She and Pop then made a deal: He would teach her how to swim and she would teach him how to pla
tennis. They went on to win several local mixed-doubles titles, and by the late thirties and early forti

Two-Mom was one of the top-ranked women in the St. Louis district. She had a calm temperame
and, like a human backboard, she returned everything.

Two-Mom gave my mom, Gloria, her game. When my mom was a teenager, she played the Missou
Valley circuit and won district and municipal titles indoors and out. She and Two-Mom would ofte
play doubles. In 1939, they played each other in the semifinals of the Heart of America invitation
tournament, in Kansas City. Mom was 15 years old and lost 6-0, 6-0 to Two-Mom—her mother. Prett
tough lesson to learn, right?

That was the thing about growing up with these two women who loved tennis. There was n
sentimentality involved. It was all about the game.

When I was old enough to play her, Mom didn’t take it easy on me, either—she’d hit that ball rig
down my throat.

“See,” she’d say. “If your own mother can do that, imagine what others will do to you.”

In 1940, at 16, Mom was the youngest player in the women’s Western Open tournament, i
Indianapolis. By the time she was 19, she had competed twice in the US National Championships,
Forest Hills. She moved to Los Angeles, where she lived with her best friend, Pauline Betz, the gre
champion of her time, and played on the professional circuit. When Mom wasn’t playing, she w
teaching tennis to kids and coaching Hollywood celebrities like Mickey Rooney, Gilbert Roland, an
Errol Flynn.

For Pop, however, and the majority of fathers in the forties, a daughter was not meant to travel a
around the country playing tennis. She was supposed to get married and start a family. When he to
her it was time to come home, Mom, an obedient Midwest girl with a Catholic upbringing, did ju
that.

Back in East St. Louis, Mom met my dad, “Big Jim” Connors, whose father, John T. Connors, wa
the mayor of East St. Louis. My dad had gone to Notre Dame and then served as a US Air Forc
second lieutenant in the Second World War, working as a bomber instructor. When he didn’t return t
finish his education, his father arranged for him to manage the tollbooths on the Veterans Bridg
which crossed the Mississippi River between St. Louis, Missouri, and East St. Louis, Illinois. He ke
that job until the day he died, in January 1977.

After the war, Dad just wanted to have fun. He was a snappy dresser, good-looking, well buil
cultured, and an all-around class act. When he proposed to Mom, she said yes immediately. The fir
years of their marriage were good, with a lot of friends in the area and a great social life. When m
brother, Johnny, was born, in April 1951, Mom understood it was time to stay home and devote herse
to the new baby, but Dad didn’t see any reason to change his routine much. He liked hanging out wi
his friends; it was his life and he was going to live it the way he wanted.

I wasn’t born to play tennis. In fact, I wasn’t supposed to be born at all. (All right, I know what som
of you are thinking; maybe it would have been better if I hadn’t made it. Too bad.) After my mothe
had Johnny, she had a tubal pregnancy and a series of miscarriages and was told she couldn’t—an
shouldn’t—get pregnant again. But she did and I was born, fragile and small. Mom said I was a litt
dishrag.

When Mom was pregnant with me, the family moved into a newly built house on 68th Street. A ta
chain-link fence enclosed the backyard, and the whole yard was littered with debris from an ongoin
construction project nearby. Mom convinced some of the workers to clean out and level the backyar
for her. Then she got them to spread out a layer of concrete gravel. Two-Mom helped Mom pai

white lines on the court, and they built a backboard out of two pieces of plywood. We even had a pi
of gravel left over to patch up the court after it rained or after we'd used it as a bike track. People
East St. Louis didn't have tennis courts in their backyards, not even one that was makeshift, roug
uneven . . . and perfect.

I first picked up a racquet when I was three and a half. They didn't have junior racquets back the
so Pop cut down a couple racquets for Johnny and me. Johnny could just about wrap his hand arou
his racquet grip, but it was more difficult for me. My racquet was still too heavy, so I picked it up wi
both hands. Who knew that this would have such an impact on the game of tennis?

As I got a little older and a little stronger, Mom said, "Maybe we should take that hand off th
racquet?" But that didn't work out, and she figured I'd give it up in a few years anyway. Back the
hardly anybody used a double-handed backhand. Sure, Pancho Segura, the great Ecuadorean tenn
champion, had a two-handed forehand, but backhand? When I first started playing, people not on
picked apart my style of tennis—"You can't play like that," they said—but they also considered m
too small to ever make it. Really?

The two-handed backhand has some obvious downsides: You have to move quicker to get to the bal
because you don't have as much reach, and your footwork has to be more precise to get in position
use it correctly. The upside is once you get to the ball, you have the extra hand for power an
direction. Unwilling to conform to other people's thinking, I stayed with what I thought could wor
When Chris Evert and I came on the scene, the game of tennis changed. We both had two-hande
backhands and we were winning everything. The two-handed backhand became the fashion and almo
everyone started copying us. And players are still using it today.

I was the only lefty on either side of my family. When I was five years old, my mom wanted
make sure I was naturally left-handed, because I could play baseball and hit a golf ball right-handed.

"Let's try something new," she said one day. "Put your left hand behind your back and try and pla
right-handed."

I did as I was told, but my left hand immediately shot out without my even thinking about it an
grabbed the racquet. Mom looked at me for a moment.

"OK. I guess that's the way it's going to be," she said.

In the beginning, Mom and Two-Mom would bounce balls to me and I'd try and hit them back.
was always casual and easy, never forced down my throat. It was good to have that court in th
backyard, but make no mistake, it was there for a reason—so my mom could teach lessons for fiv
bucks an hour during the summer and supplement the family income. If I didn't want to play, I didn
have to. If I wanted to ride my bike or play baseball, it was no big deal. Mom would say, "Be home b
five o'clock." When I came home she'd ask if I wanted to hit a few balls. If I did, she'd put dinner o
the back burner. If I didn't, we'd sit down to eat. No pressure.

Of course, back then nothing was ever a big deal. Our every moment wasn't scheduled like it is wi
kids today. My Mom, Two-Mom, and Pop had a way of educating me so that I didn't even realize
was happening. I watched them working hard and taking care of business. I could see, without havin
them say anything, that you did your job before you did anything else, and sometimes it too
sacrifices, but in the end your hard work earned you rewards.

We weren't looked after every second of the day; as children we were allowed to make mistakes an
take responsibility for ourselves under the guidance of our parents and grandparents. If we wanted
learn to ice-skate, well, there's the ice. Go skate. If we wanted to shoot BB guns, OK. Pop set up a rif
range in his backyard. Go shoot BB guns. I could play tennis and then grab my dog, Pepper, m
miniature schnauzer, to go horse around with my friends. I wasn't a kid that needed to be entertaine

all the time. I liked riding my bike to my grandparents' house, which was about 10 minutes awa having some ice cream, and hanging with Pepper. Back then we had only four channels on TV, and or of the highlights was Friday night at the movies. The movie went on at eight o'clock, and instead going out, I would stay home, pop some popcorn, lay on the floor with Pepper, and that was m evening.

But in those early years, it wasn't really tennis that I took to; it was the time spent with Mom ar Two-Mom. Oh, yes, I can hear all the snide comments about my being a mama's boy, but you kno what you can do with that. I learned everything from them and owe all I've ever had in my life to the mutual guidance.

I liked hanging around while Mom was teaching the local kids. I'd listen to the instructions she w giving her students and hope that some of it would rub off on me. Two-Mom was the greatest ba picker-upper of all time, and when Mom was teaching, Two-Mom would have an old-fashioned app box and go around the court doing her thing. The box was always full—she took no breaks.

In the summer, Mom would teach eight or nine hours a day. When lunchtime came around, Two Mom would stick a sandwich through the fence so Mom didn't have to stop. After having those two role models, was I ever going to give up? These were the kinds of lessons I learned without anyor saying a word.

As the years passed, tennis became a bigger part of my day. Along with teaching tennis, Mom als had to carve out some court time for me. You have to remember that we are talking about the 1950 and 1960s, way before indoor tennis clubs came into existence. Anywhere I could play was a privileg

Being brought up in Illinois was no picnic. Cold winters and hot, humid summers were the norr There were times when we had to chip ice off our backyard court so that we could practice. remember one winter when Mom, Two-Mom, and I were going to play on a locked court. We had bucket of balls, racquets, and a little pick to work the lock and chip off the ice, but we decided instea to just go ahead and climb over the chain-link fence. Mom, who was always worried about everyor else, said, "Come on, Two-Mom, we'll help you over. Be careful on top." Two-Mom ignored us ar just flung herself up and over the fence like it was nothing. When Mom climbed up, she got her swe pants caught on the prongs at the top, and it took both of us a while to get her untangled and down. C course, by then, we were on one side, locked in, staring at the balls and racquets we'd left on the oth side. How can you not laugh at that?

In later winters, we would go to St. Louis's National Guard armory, crossing from Illinois in Missouri. Almost every day, Mom and Two-Mom would pick me up at school at 2 p.m. Getting ther was hard work; depending on traffic, it would usually take us an hour and a half to drive across th bridge and to the armory.

During my junior-tournament days, I was playing bigger and better kids my age and not winning. Ho did my mom keep me interested in tennis, keep me from not being bored or discouraged? She told m that I had the basics down and that, if I kept going, I would grow into my game. How did she kno that? I wish she were alive today so I could ask her. I'm Irish Catholic and not the most religious gu in the world, but I still go to church every Sunday to discuss a few topics with Mom. Maybe someda I'll get some of those answers I'm looking for. One thing I do know is that, during her years c training me, Mom had that "Fuck it" attitude toward anything that interfered with her vision for m Maybe that's where I got my own defiant attitude.

So it was easy for me to play kids a few years older and tolerate losing, because I wasn't under ar

pressure—yet. I wasn’t supposed to win. I would just go out there swinging away and gainin
~~experience. Mom knew that, as my game got better, the kids my own age would become my~~ futu
competition.

“If you can’t beat kids your own age,” she’d tell me, “you can’t beat anybody.”

So, I ask you, how was it that a woman from East St. Louis who loved playing and teaching tenn was able to come up with a style that fit a personality like mine? Well, she was a genius. Obviousl I’m prejudiced, but I listened to her instructions and understood that if I did what I was asked to d that there would be rewards at the end. Once I had mastered the fundamentals, I could improvise– introduce different shots, different spins, and ways of directing the ball—anything that would mal me a better player.

Mom could have taught anybody. She was able to get inside the mind of anyone she was teachin and identify the right buttons to push to get maximum result. If you talked to any of her old studen today, they’d tell you the same thing.

Mom also understood what it took to keep me eager to get back out on the court. Practice w measured in quality not quantity. As a young boy, practice would last under an hour, and tha remained the case pretty much throughout my career unless I was deliberately pushing mysel Sometimes I’d be on a roll, thinking I had it all figured out. I couldn’t wait to play more, but that exactly when Mom would walk on the court and call it a day. We quit when she decided I’d ha enough. She never let me over-practice. Some of my buddies I grew up playing against, like Vita Guillermo Vilas, and Brian Gottfried, would be on the practice court for two or three hours, but for m it was 45 minutes. As a result, I always looked forward to my next workout.

Mom didn’t always get it right. But as a kid, if I got annoyed at her, which was rare, I kept it myself. When I was older and more independent, there were times when I thought she was interferin in my extracurricular life. Occasionally I would get so pissed off at her when we were practicing that would slam down my racquet and storm off the court, yelling at her, “Get out of my life!” But th didn’t last long.

A lot has been written about my mom being a stage mother, so let me set the record straight. Wh was it OK for Joe Montana’s dad to teach his son football or Wayne Gretzky’s dad to teach hin hockey but it wasn’t OK for Gloria Connors to teach her son tennis? Mom stepped right into a man world and a man’s game during the height of the Women’s Movement in the 1970s. Up until tha point, people weren’t used to dealing with a woman in the business end of tennis; both men an women players had men as managers, and men organized and ran tournaments. Along comes th feisty little woman from East St. Louis whose son was proving to be a winner, and they had to de with her. When Billie Jean King was in the forefront as the first woman athlete to enter th boardroom, Mom had already been doing exactly that behind the scenes, fighting the establishe tennis bureaucracy. Now, if I hadn’t been winning, they could have dismissed her and it wouldn’t hav been a big deal. But my mom represented me. And not only represented me but was my mother, coac and friend.

She paid the price for treading into that traditionally male-dominated territory by having son pretty aggressive criticism thrown at her by the tennis establishment and the media. They would sa she wanted my success more than I did because she had never had it herself, that she hadn’t been goo enough so she tried to make her son good enough. They called her “domineering” and “Dragon Lady If it got to her, I never knew about it and neither did anyone else.

3

NOTHING WOULD EVER BE THE SAME AGAIN

What people seemed to miss entirely was the real story: Mom, Two-Mom, and Pop taught me th basic fundamentals and technique. I am proud of that, because I think it has become a lost art. B they also had a plan for how they wanted me to play, and they instilled it in me from the ver beginning. No compromise. The game they taught me was a woman's game, but given to a man to be men. It was both a very simple and yet complicated way to play, and no one else played it. No one.

Before the violent attack on Mom, the concrete courts at Jones Park played a big part in my tenn education. They had these steel nets that made a cracking, *twang* sound when you'd hit the ball in them. Also, the steel net didn't catch the balls; it would shoot them right back at you. So not only d you miss the shot; the net never let you forget it. I can still hear that sound today. On the tennis cou at home, the bounce was uneven and the space behind both baselines was tight, so that's where learned to take the ball on the rise. But at Jones Park the surface was smoother and we could pla longer rallies, which gave Mom a better opportunity to assess how Johnny and I were progressing.

Mom would stand behind me, watching my every move, how I set my feet, whether I moved m body into the shot or got my racquet back soon enough, and every other little detail that helped m improve. If she saw something wrong, like I was tossing the ball too far in front of me on my serv she would stop the session immediately and explain what the issue was—and not just when I w young—that strategy continued even after I had become the best. I always looked her square in the ey as she spoke; anything less would have been unacceptable. Why did I look her square in the eye Respect. I knew that she meant to help me and I wanted to make sure I absorbed what she was saying

My game was simple, but here are the two key ingredients. First, preparation. That was th foundation; be ready, racquet back, straight back, just like a gate swings. No excess motion. There's lot of wasted motion in today's tennis, but that's not how I was taught. I was told to turn, bring th racquet back, and use my body to drive the ball. Today it's all arm power and swinging away with a open stance. Maybe you've even tried this yourself. It might be easier, but to me it's not as effectiv Mom never gave me negative criticism. She was always positive, even if what we were working o wasn't quite where she wanted me to be. Mom would say, "Getting better, Jimmy, but it's not quit there.

"Move those feet. On your toes. Racquet back and time the ball."

OK, OK, I got it.

"If you've got it, then do it again and show me," she'd say.

Now, here comes the second and most important part: footwork. This is what made my game what became. This was the hard part, and believe me, I worked on it every day.

My grandpa took great interest and pride in seeing both Johnny and me play tennis. But he knew n to get involved too much when it came to giving advice on our games. The looks Mom and Two-Mo used to throw him if he offered an opinion that wasn't asked for were enough to shut him up. Instea

he took on the role of my physical trainer, working with me as if I were a boxer.

~~He trained me like a boxer. He was tough. There was no discussion about the best way to train.~~ H way was the only way. Jump rope, pick up your feet, and don't miss. If you missed, you would have t start over. No margin for error.

In my early teens Pop bought me a pair of heavy boots to run in. By then we had moved to a house the top of a steep hill in Belleville, outside East St. Louis, and Pop had me running up that slop wearing those boots and carrying a weighted bag.

"Lift those feet high as you run, Jimmy," he'd say. "This is gonna do nothing but be good for yo when it counts."

Pop was also the ultimate "Don't give a shit" guy. I remember after I had just lost 7-6 to McEnroe the fifth set of the semifinals of the 1980 US Open. It was a really long, grueling match, and I w exhausted. On my way back to Florida, I stopped to see Mom in Belleville. When I arrived, Pop w sitting at the kitchen table, leaning back like he always did, with his hands locked behind his head. I' standing there, just off the plane with Patti, the baby, the nanny, and 15 suitcases.

"Well, Jimmy, have you had time to figure out how to beat McEnroe yet?" Pop asked.

Wait! What?! I stared blankly at Mom and Patti.

"No, Pop, I've been kind of busy, but I'll get right on that."

That was my Pop. No nonsense. You're out there doing it, so do it right. From Mom, Two-Mom, an Pop's point of view, I should never have lost. I knew my performance was a reflection on them Mediocrity was unacceptable, and pushing my limits started at an early age.

Although Johnny and I rarely played on the tennis courts at Jones Park after Mom's attack, we sti went there with Mom, Dad, Two-Mom, and Pop to enjoy the facilities all year long. During th summer we fished in the lake, messed around in rowboats, and swam in the pool. We'd meet up wit our friends for games of softball, while all around us families would be enjoying picnics an afternoons out. Not after dark, though. When the sun went down, a different kind of crowd came ou and those guys were looking for trouble.

I never looked for trouble, but one day when I was about 10 years old I found it. During the winte the lake at Jones Park would freeze over so we could go ice-skating. People would build bonfires o the shore to roast hot dogs and marshmallows, and the kids who were old enough would have the jugs of Mogen David wine. One time, I was skating toward shore to get to the bonfire when I hea CRACK! CRACK! CRACK! The ice gave way a little. I knew what it was, but I was thinking, "I ca make it." Then the ice gave way a little more, but I still believed I could make it. Then, before I kne it, I was neck deep in the freezing water, looking up and thinking, "Fuck, I didn't make it."

I was wearing about 30 pounds of winter clothes and starting to sink when suddenly I felt this b hand on my head. I had a buzz cut with a little tuft of hair in the front, and Pop grabbed me by that tu and hauled me out. That was the day I decided that I wasn't ever going to do anything that caused m great pain. Except, well, play tennis for 47 years.

Actually, the park was responsible for teaching me another lesson. Right past the tennis courts Jones Park was a line of lady cigar trees that had these big bean pods that Johnny and I would try an smoke. They were hard to light, but when we did take a hit, I usually ended up coughing my guts u and feeling sick. Cigarettes never stood a chance with me after that.

Pop was behind one of the most thrilling and dangerous experiences of my childhood. Beyond th lady cigar trees were the railroad tracks, a stretch of the line used by freight trains and coal cars th passed through at about five miles an hour. This was too tempting for Pop.

"Come on, boys," he said one day after tennis, and that's when we learned to ride the railcars.

Pop taught us how to run alongside the railcar, grab the post, and jump up on the step. Getting o was harder. You had to hang from the ladder on the side of the car and time your jump to make a so landing in the bushes. Many a time I ended up with an ass full of stickers. Just all part of the learnin process.

Once we got on the train, we saw a different way of life. The boxcars were filled with guys trying make it from one place to another. Back then we called them hobos. So there we were, just off th courts, dressed in pristine tennis whites—although we weren't country-club boys—and hopping into boxcar with hobos. Can you imagine how we felt? But there was never any tension, because we we with Pop, and Pop was always "packing heat." Watch out!

We usually didn't ride farther than the St. Louis rail yard, but once we stayed on as far as Kansa City, which was about 300 miles away. I had never been farther from home in my life on the trai When we got home from riding the railcars with Pop, Two-Mom would give him grief and Pop woul just laugh it off. He was good at that.

Once Johnny and I were old enough to ride the railcars on our own, it was our favorite way to trave If Johnny had to stay after school, he would grab a train home. If we wanted to head off into the loc hills, we knew a perfect spot where we could make a soft landing.

Pop was full of fun lessons. Johnny and I would usually walk or ride our bikes to school, b sometimes we drove. It sounds crazy, but it's true. Pop taught us to drive his police car in Jones Par when I was eight years old and Johnny was ten. Pop would sit shotgun and Johnny and I would tak turns cruising along the paths. Thank God we were quick learners, because not long after we g behind the wheel, we had to take Pop to the hospital. We'd been at a swimming pool where he wa teaching us some new dives. He did a speed dive from the shallow end, hit the bottom, and split h forehead open. He surfaced dizzy, disoriented, and bleeding. Johnny grabbed the keys to the police c and we managed to get Pop into the backseat, where I held a towel to his head. Johnny jumped in th driver's seat and hit the gas. He weaved through traffic, laid on the horn, and sped to the hospital. B the time we made it, there was so much blood in the backseat you would have thought Pop had bee shot.

Driving became no big deal for us: hopping in a car without a license or adults; you're on your ow taking full responsibility. Whenever Pop would come over we'd take his police car out around th neighborhood. We'd visit our friends, go to the store, or drive ourselves to school. Pop never minde walking over to pick it up later. Remember, this was back in the 1950s; if you did the same thin today it'd be called "breaking the law." Occasionally, someone would see us driving past, trying t peer over the dashboard, and call the cops. When we were pulled over, we'd simply explain to th officer that Al Thompson was our grandfather and we'd be off the hook.

He'd say, "All right, then. Say hi to your pop and be careful going back."

What a time we had back then.

Mom didn't mind, but Dad didn't like us driving at all. He was busy working on the bridge all day s he wouldn't be around when we took the car, but he'd hear about it later.

Dad was a straight-shooter. If we ever did anything wrong, which we did—a lot—we always had t stand up to it. There was one time we snuck off to the house of a guy who pissed us off for som reason and slashed his tires. When Dad found out what we had done, he made us go over the ne morning before school to apologize and pay for the damage. We had no money, but Dad wasn interested in excuses. So how could we pay it off? Well, it was either a job or the belt, and I preferre the job. If you were out of line, you were out of line, and you had to do something about it. Never hi

from your screw-ups.

~~Dad might not have been as involved in my upbringing as much as Mom, but he wanted us~~ to c well in school. Unfortunately, I was never very good at it.

Johnny and I went to St. Phillip's grade school, 20 blocks from where we lived. In first grade, Mo would drop me off at school, and every day she would stop by the grocery store to decide what to p on that night's dinner table. By the time she got home, I'd be waiting on the back porch with Peppe That didn't sit well with her, so back in the car and back to school I went.

School was torture for me from the very beginning. By the second grade, I'd settled down a littl mainly because the headmaster, Monsignor Forney, let Johnny and me play tennis during recess o one of the two courts he had built next to the baseball diamond. It was unusual in the 1950s for a grad school to have tennis courts—and a stroke of luck that my own school was one of them—but th monsignor loved the game, and he also got to hit with us once in a while. We loved it, too, because got us out of school. To most of our classmates, tennis wasn't a real sport. White socks and whi shorts? Come on, get real. If you didn't play baseball, basketball, or football, you'd better be able run fast.

The kids used to give me a hard time, constantly teasing and pushing me around, especially after th monsignor let me leave school early in the third grade to go play at Jones Park. Johnny looked out f me as much as he could. He was good with his fists and protected me because I was small for my age

Even when Johnny wasn't around to help, I didn't care how the kids at school treated me. I figure I'd be leaving East St. Louis, anyway. Mom had told me tennis was my way out of there, so I put u with the bullying and got on with it.

In class, I was a clock-watcher. I'd look at it every three minutes and the day would just drag on. M attention span was nonexistent, and it was an effort for me to read. I'd read lines multiple tim because I'd lose my place or keep reading the same lines over and over again. Then I would forg what I was reading and have to start all over. Like I still do today.

It wasn't until I was an adult that I discovered I had something called an ocular-motor senso deficit. That's the new, twenty-first-century version of you can't read. My eyesight was good, but m eyes didn't have the ability to work together. If I could have read with just one eye, I probably woul have done OK, but I couldn't track the words using the two of them. No wonder I also had a sho attention span and had trouble with reading comprehension.

Looking back, I have no idea how I was able to play tennis at all, but on the court I had perfe vision. I was able to see the ball quickly when it came off my opponent's racquet and track it into m hitting zone, trying to keep my eye on the ball until I made contact. Not bad for a guy who couldn follow words on a printed page.

This eye problem was the reason why I always insisted on three-paragraph contracts in busines You tell me what you want me to do, I'll do it, and you'll pay me. I couldn't read 20 pages of contract. I had no interest in the small print.

It wasn't until I turned 45 and got reading glasses that I was able to see clearly. It only took 3 years. On a flight from California to New York, my wife, Patti, will finish an entire book while I ca read only about 60 pages. When I play tennis these days, I don't wear my glasses; it's to uncomfortable, because I wear progressive lenses. It's better for me to see the ball come off m opponent's racquet, because I have a feel for where it's going. Once it crosses the net, I lose sight o it, so that by the time the ball gets close to me, it's a blur. Basically, I make my contact with the ba by memory. After playing for so many years, it's funny how that works.

So all you guys on the Senior Tour didn't know you were playing Mr. Magoo, did you? Funny wh

you'll do to keep playing a game you love.

In many ways, I guess we were a pretty regular 1950s American family in those early days. I sa pretty regular because some interesting characters used to visit our house from time to time.

My dad's father, John T. Connors, passed away before I was born, and I'm sorry I never got to kno him. My brother was named for him. John T. had been the police commissioner before he was electe mayor. There was a lot going on in City Hall during those years. Because of its river, railroad, ar stockyards, East St. Louis was closely connected to Chicago. Back in 1947, Grandpa Connors w among 19 officials indicted for malfeasance for ignoring evidence of gambling and electio irregularities. For my grandfather to have survived as mayor for as long as he did, he must have bee strong-willed and one hell of a mover and a shaker. I sometimes wondered how many of his charact traits I ended up inheriting. As time went on, I discovered more than a few.

One of my grandfather's friends, who was also close to my parents, was Frank "Buster" Wortma Buster owned the Paddock lounge, in East St. Louis, where our family would go for dinner c occasion. One night, when Johnny and I were about eight and six years old, respectively, we were the restaurant when a group of men burst through the front door. They looked around, rushed over to corner of the room, and started shooting at four guys who were halfway out of their seats. A bunch c Buster's men surrounded our table and rushed us all into the kitchen. It turns out that Buster was th target and the shooters got the wrong table. I don't remember seeing him much after that. It was on years later that I found out that Buster had been a bootlegger, a gambler, and a member of the Shelto Brothers Gang during Prohibition. He then went on to take over St. Louis's illegal gamblin operations in Southwest Illinois.

After my dad got out of the service, as a favor to my grandfather, Mayor John T., Buster offered t let my dad open up all the gambling for him in Granite City, a steel town near our home. Dad starte doing that, but then Grandma Connors found out and put a stop to it. That was when Dad became th general manager of the Veterans Bridge, where he pulled in $10,000 a year. Talk about a life-changin decision.

But not every character from Mayor John T.'s interesting past got us caught up in the middle of gunfight. One night, right around Christmas in the early 1980s, I had just come back to visit m family in Belleville after a full year on the road playing tennis. We decided to go meet Johnny Charlie Gitto's Italian Restaurant, in downtown St. Louis. The owner, Charlie, had been at Johnny wedding, and he was glad to see Mom and me and made a fuss whenever we'd come in for dinne Two of Charlie's more colorful friends, Ralph "Shorty" Caleca, and his driver, Joe, were in th restaurant, and Johnny invited them to join us for dinner. Shorty had been one of the top bosses c organized crime in St. Louis in the 1940s, and he still held a great deal of power.

Let me back up for a second. From the time Johnny and I were little kids, Mom would sing a jing to Dad just before the holidays: "*All I want for Christmas is a gray cashmere sweater with a white fo collar*." We'd hear it every year, and the joke was that she never got the sweater. For some reason, th night at dinner, we got to talking about that jingle. Shorty, who was in his late seventies at the tim suddenly growled:

"What'd she say? What'd she want?"

Johnny gets a call the next day from Charlie saying that Shorty wants to see him. So Johnny goes the restaurant and there's a box with Mom's name on it.

"This is from Shorty. He says Merry Christmas to your Mom," says Charlie.

Johnny brings the box home and we put it under the Christmas tree. The next morning, Mom oper

the box and I think you can guess what was in it.

I played my first junior event when I was seven years old. Mom drove Johnny and me a hundred mil to Flora for the Southern Illinois tournament. It was my first real tennis competition that was part of circuit, and it was a big deal for me. Johnny won the event, and I was happy for him. I saw what it w like to walk off with the trophy.

I always looked up to Johnny, and it was right around this time that he started becoming intereste in other things besides tennis. We would be practicing, and Johnny's shots would suddenly go flyin over the back fence. Mom knew he wanted to be somewhere else, and she let him go. I wasn't lil that. If I was on the court, I was there for the duration, trying to do the right thing.

The following year, Mom and I went back to Flora and I won my first-ever competition. I'd spe the year playing small events around the district, gaining experience and learning what it took to wi Johnny didn't go with us, because by that time he was a confident ten-year-old helping Dad out at th Veterans Bridge tollbooth. He worked on the bridge through high school and always seemed to com home with a pocket full of dimes and quarters. He had a knack for that.

As we got older, Mom could see we needed more than just the backyard or Jones Park to hit balls play doubles against other kids. However, finding a better place for us proved to be a challenge.

The Knights of Columbus building on State Street, East St. Louis, was a Catholic social club th had a small basketball court behind a huge set of wooden doors that were locked but not very secur There was a gap at the bottom of the doors that was just large enough for Johnny, Two-Mom, Mon and me to squeeze through on our stomachs. There we could practice, uninterrupted, against the wa and on the hard wooden floor. After we finished, we'd play basketball with Mom and Two-Mom.

It was at the Knights of Columbus basketball court that I began to refine a technique that Mom ha been drilling into both Johnny and me from our very first lessons in the backyard: hitting the ball fl and early. On those floorboards, if you didn't attack the ball, it would fly past you before you had tim to set yourself. I sometimes wonder if Mom was aware of the progression from the backyard court Jones Park to the Knights of Columbus and then on to the armory. Had Mom planned it or was she ju seizing opportunities as they came her way?

Mom first took us to the National Guard armory in 1963, and I couldn't believe how big the place wa Its heavy steel doors looked large enough to drive a tank through. Above the doors was the militar crest with words carved into the stonework: ARMORY, 138TH INFANTRY, MISSOURI NATIONAL GUARD.

Inside the armory's huge gymnasium, tennis courts were marked out on the highly polishe floorboards. The armory was the only indoor tennis facility in St. Louis, and I was from the wron side of the Mississippi River. Finding a game was hard, I was small, my mother was my coach, and wasn't a member of the clique of kids from the good side of the river. In their eyes, I was an outside taking up valuable court time. But Mom figured out a way to make them accept us. She offered coach some of the kids if they would hit with me. I would hang around all day on weekends and durin vacations, if there was a latecomer or a no-show, I'd be out there like a shot, offering to play wi anyone. That sense of being an outsider has never left me.

If I laid the foundation of my game at the Knights of Columbus, I took it to a new level at th armory. Balls came off that surface like lightning and would be gone before you knew it. There was n time to stay back and let the ball come to you. You had to move to the ball, meet it on the rise, an attack it. The three years I played at the armory set me apart from a lot of the other players of m generation. Many of them, like Borg, sat back, waiting for a mistake. I took the game to them, lookin

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