

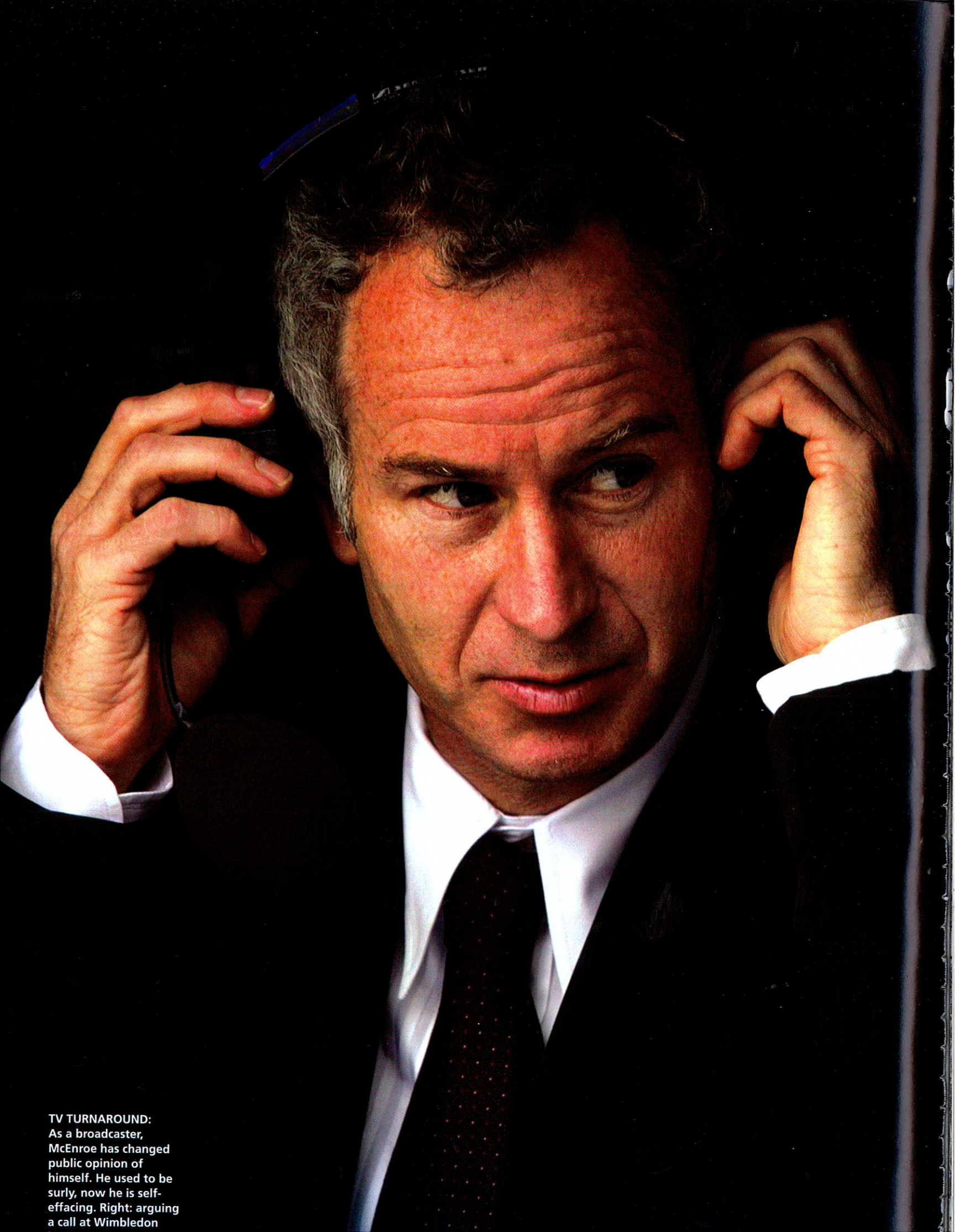
PREMIERE ISSUE / APRIL 2008

# PlayersClub

KEEP LIVING THE DREAM

**Derek  
Jeter**  
The Class  
Of the Field





**TV TURNAROUND:**  
As a broadcaster,  
McEnroe has changed  
public opinion of  
himself. He used to be  
surly, now he is self-  
effacing. Right: arguing  
a call at Wimbledon

# No More Mr. (Not So) Nice Guy

Everybody remembers John McEnroe, the brat who just happened to be a tennis genius. Here he tells how — when his skills faded — he faced reality and reinvented himself as a loveable TV commentator. Advantage McEnroe.



FROM LEFT: MICHAEL COLE/CORBIS, CENTRAL PRESS/GETTY IMAGES



**JAM PACKED:** When he's not on the court or in the booth, McEnroe collects art and plays guitar, here with Bo Diddley in 2005.

**I** ALWAYS SAID I WANTED TO BE THE George Foreman of tennis — not that our sports are anything alike, other than being one on one athletic contests. Early in his career he was a surly guy, always in a bad mood, and then he became like the most lovable guy in the world. On every level — popularity, growth as a human being, financially — he came out to be this unbelievable guy. Being a smaller version of him would be cool.

As a commentator I've been able to show a side of my personality that I was unsuccessful in showing while I was playing, when I was screaming and yelling at umpires. It's the side of me that doesn't take myself too seriously. People can see that I have a bit of a sense of humor. They can see that I care about the sport, that I'm not just milking the sport because I happen to be good at it.

I was taught that in order to succeed competitively you had to be really intense, and I wasn't able to transition the way, say, Jimmy Connors could. One second he could be going crazy and the next second

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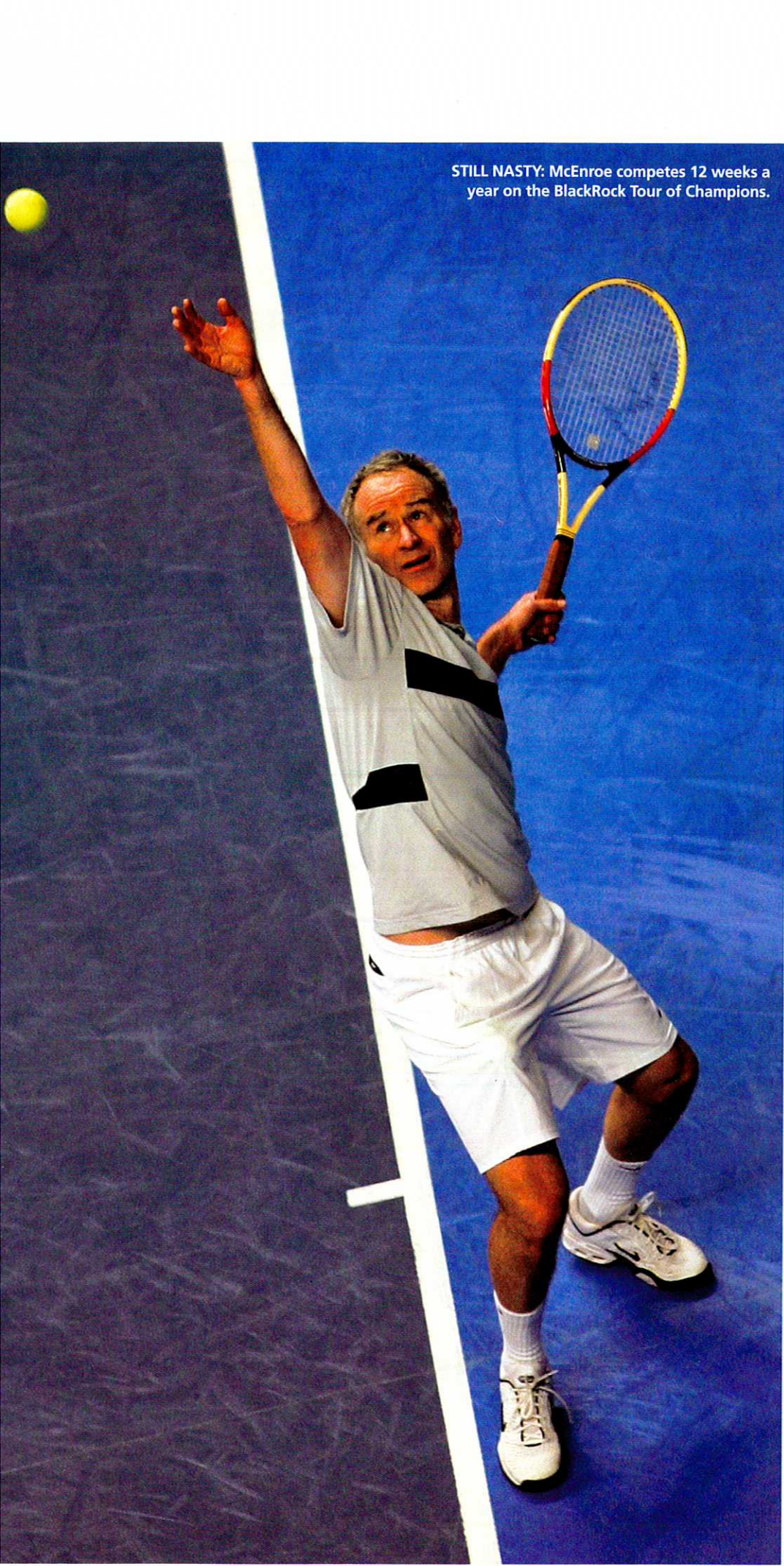
he'd have his arm around you and people would be eating out of his hands. I always thought it was amazing that he could do that, and then regain his concentration. Commentating is a lot easier.

I never thought about broadcasting until late in my career. Funnily enough, the things I said I would never do and

thought I would never do at age 25 are the very things I'm doing now at 49. So it just goes to show that you never know. What may seem lame or uncool turns out to look a whole lot more attractive when you get older.

Ten or so years into my career it sort of became apparent that I wasn't able to perform the way I had, and I was trying to fight that reality, which was harsh. Feeling like I wasn't getting any better; if anything I was getting worse. That's not a good feeling. So I had to start to at least entertain what my options were. What was I going to do with the rest of my life? Even if I had all the money I needed, I wasn't going to just sit there. It seemed to me that commentating was an area where I could bring something new.

I didn't think the people who were broadcasting at the time were doing such a good job. The first person who I thought, OK, this guy is good — was Vitas Gerulaitis, who was a player I looked up to, and a good friend. He was four years older than me, and we're both



STILL NASTY: McEnroe competes 12 weeks a year on the BlackRock Tour of Champions.

from Queens. I thought, this guy knows what he's talking about and he's having fun doing it. That really struck a chord in me. He had credibility because he'd been a Grand Slam champion, been one of the top ranked players in the world, but there was a self-deprecation, which I thought was nice. What I got out of it was, this is a tennis match, it's not something that's changing the world.

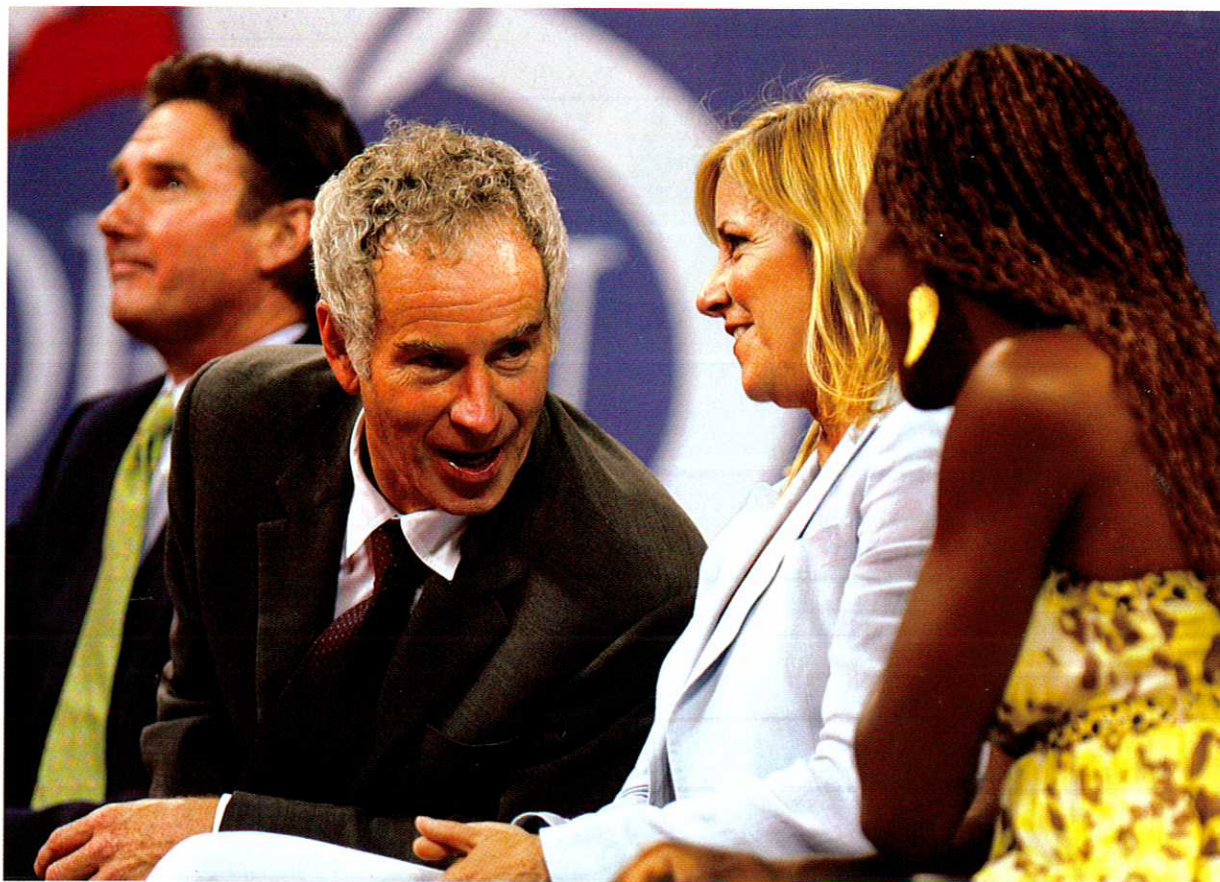
**E**ARLY ON I WAS DEFINITELY nervous, but I'm always nervous in the broadcast booth, even now, after almost 15 years. There's something about the nerves and adrenaline that maybe you need in order to perform. Early on I did feel like I had to prove something, but I don't feel a great deal different today — you still have to prove it. It's like sports: You could be Tiger Woods or Roger Federer, and two years from now you lose that edge for a year or a year and a half — it happened to me in the middle of my career. You don't know what the future is going to bring.

I've never had any broadcast training. I don't ever look at tapes of myself. Part of why it has worked for me, I think, is because it's not so polished. That wouldn't be me. If you make a mistake on the air, if something's not perfect, that brings a human side to it. I don't want it to be an act. But you have to figure out some things. It's not like you're totally winging it. You don't do that. But once you get on a comfort level of what the people paying your salary expect, then you go off and do your thing more. It's not like I can show up and stand on my head.

Which reminds me, there was one time I was doing the U.S. Open and I said on the air that if Richard Krajicek, a Dutch player at the time, loses the tiebreaker, I'll stand on my head. He was up 6-1 at the time and it's first to seven. And he lost the tiebreaker. I credit the USA Network for allowing me to back up what I said: When we came back from a commercial, I was standing on my head. You could see the blood rushing to my face. After a couple minutes I said, you've got to get me out of this, this is uncomfortable, this is tough. They let me follow through just to have fun.

Another favorite on-air moment was when I did a set at Arthur Ashe stadium, the biggest tennis stadium in the world, from the top row of the stands. It's so high up you need binoculars — you could have trouble telling the play-

**IN GOOD COMPANY:** McEnroe takes in the ceremonies at the 2006 U.S. Open with Jimmy Connors, Chris Evert and Venus Williams.



ers apart. It gave me a new sense of appreciation for people who sit there. And they let me do that. USA was the first network that really got me. When I started out at NBC it seemed like we weren't on the same page, but now years later we are on the same page, and my producer John McGuinness makes it pretty easy for me, and hopefully we put out a good show.

**W**HEN I FIRST STARTED WITH NBC, it covered the French Open and Wimbledon but didn't cover the U.S. Open. I signed a deal with USA and NBC — a cable company and a major network — but at the time I couldn't sign on with two cable companies or two networks. So I was stuck. I was only doing parts of each event. It was especially frustrating at the U.S. Open, where I would cover the first week on USA but then I couldn't cover the rest because it went to CBS. When my NBC contract was up for renewal I said I don't want a raise, I want you to allow me to do the U.S. Open on CBS. I was able to do that, and in a way I broke a barrier. You see some other guys doing it today, but no one did it before. I was the first guy as far as I know who was able to be on two different networks.

I've gotten pretty good kudos for what I've done in commentary. It's been almost 15 years now, and for what I set out to do I feel like I've succeeded to a large extent. Part of the reason is that I only do big events. When I do a two-week event, I'm working a lot of hours, and how many times can you say the same thing? You can lose perspective, you can turn into a zombie. So I give myself months between events. I'm at the U.S. Open and the French Open and Wimbledon and that's pretty much it. That's really helped me from getting burned out. It also allows me to keep playing tennis, on the senior tour, to work in my art gallery in SoHo, which I've had for many years, and to play my guitar.

This is how I view being a commentator: When I was younger my mom always

**Any athlete who doesn't take himself too seriously can make a good announcer. Look at Charles Barkley.**

baked me a lot of chocolate cake. Chocolate cake is great, but I learned that if you put icing on it it's even better. The match is the cake, that's what matters, but then you add something, a little flavor to it, some knowledge that people didn't have beforehand, teaching them the game and at the same time giving them a feeling of what it was like to be in that position. I've always set out to add that little extra flavor.

Any athlete who doesn't take himself too seriously can make a good announcer. Look at Charles Barkley. He goes up there and he says anything he wants more or less, but he backs it up with some intelligent comments. He's not just throwing it out there. And he was also one of the best players in the NBA. If you're credible, if people believe in you, then you can start to show more of your personality.

Broadcasting has been a lot of fun, and it's possible that it also helped open up some of my advertising and endorsement deals, too — what I get to do with All-Bran and American Express. I think about how many athletes are in all the different sports and how small a percentage of them have an opportunity to do this stuff, and here I am, 31 years after I went to the semis at Wimbledon at age 18, and I'm still out there.

—As told to Jonathan Lesser