

coverstory

BY JAY BOBBIN

Showtime's 'McEnroe' takes an intimate, eye-opening look at tennis' bad boy



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Whatever you think you know about tennis great John McEnroe, throw it away. Because a documentary upcoming on Showtime might prove you wrong.

In "McEnroe," premiering Sunday, Sept. 4 (and available two days earlier to Showtime subscribers in streaming and on demand) takes an intimate look at the life and career of tennis' uber-decorated bad boy, whose brilliance on the court (World No. 1 ranking for four years; seven Grand Slam singles titles) was marred by temper tantrums and erratic behavior on and off it.

But that was during a pro career that spanned 1978-94, a far cry from the mature, introspective 63-year-old who is interviewed in "McEnroe." Here, the Queens, N.Y., native delves into his life and career in deeply personal fashion, touching on such topics as his family life with his wife, singer Patty Smyth, and their children; his rivalry with Bjorn Borg; his distant relationship with his late father John; his powerful will to be the best and his appalling behavior. Archival footage and interviews with Borg, Smyth, the McEnroe offspring, Billie Jean King and rock musicians Chrissie Hynde and Keith Richards, among others, augment the commentary.

The film almost has the feel of a psychiatry session as McEnroe bares his soul about aspects of his life, which was

the goal for the film's director, Barney Douglas ("Warriors").

"(I wanted it) to be something where he's almost exploring himself and 'Why was I like that? Are there other things I haven't looked at? Am I going to make the same mistakes as my father?'" Douglas says, "And I feel like that is kind of a parable for me, it's a parable for John to himself. He's going, 'This great man, who had all these things going for him when he just self-destructed.' He's talking about his father but I feel like it's a warning to himself with his own kids, not to mess it up, not to be disconnected."

Indeed, his relationship with his father is what seems to weigh on him most in "McEnroe." But he has a soulmate in Smyth, his second wife and mother of two of his five children. He talks about feeling an immediate connection with her and she seems to have a window into his psyche. She even talks about writing a song that has the lyrics, "I married a bad boy who turned out to be a really good man."

"She brings so much of the poetic insight to John," Douglas says, "and she talks about, 'I wish I'd been with him since the beginning.' I think she just understands him in a way that perhaps other people haven't ... and I think that enabled him now to be in this place where he accepts himself as well. He's found that connection he was looking for."

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