

A Tennis Prodigy at 12 Is Beaten by the Villain

By JOHN SEDGWICK

A photograph from The Patriot Ledger in Dedham, Mass., on May 2, 1966, records the apex of my sporting career. It shows two tennis players holding silver trophies.

One is a real pro: narrow-eyed, upright, determined. He wears the half-smile of someone who has no time for photographers. He holds a large and magnificent platter. That's Teddy McBeath.

The other is clearly an amateur. His shirt is untucked, his hair disheveled. His wide grin reveals one cracked tooth. He holds a little bowl. That's me. I have just lost to McBeath in the final of the South Shore invitation championships in Hingham, Mass. It was for boys 12 years old and younger.

That rotten Teddy McBeath had won again. He pronounced his last name like the Shakespearian villain. To my mind, the resemblance went further. Teddy was just as cunning, as fierce and as diabolical as Macbeth.

The match had gone downhill from the beginning. I played brilliantly throughout the warmup, stinging my forehand, slicing my backhand and crunching my big American Twist serve. I bounced lightly on the balls of my feet; I wore the sleeves of my snazzy polyester warmup jacket pulled back to the elbow; I walked with a swagger. Boy, did I feel cocky. In the final. Me! And Teddy McBeath.

There was no umpire to say, "Players ready? Play." I just said to Teddy, "Ya wanna start?" He said O.K. Then we spun for serve and began.

Chaos on the Court

Suddenly, everything changed. The swagger was gone from my walk, the bounce from my legs. Things counted. I kept thinking: If I hit the ball out, I'll lose the point. If I hit it into the net, I'll lose the point. If I don't hit it at all, I'll lose the point. My backhands started to float, my forehands to sail. In a word, I choked. I won two games altogether. I never did any better against McBeath.

It is astonishing now to recall that at 12 I had been playing tennis for

John Sedgwick is 24 years old and writes for the Boston Phoenix, an alternative weekly.

seven years. I practiced for hours, hitting balls against the garage despite an uneven surface that sent balls flying into distant bushes. I had no vast ambitions of winning Wimbledon or Forest Hills. I just wanted to beat my brother.

A few years later, the tennis pro at our country club noticed this little fellow who could hit a pretty good ball. She encouraged me. She paid me a dollar an hour to hit balls to her students while she shouted instructions. The unfairness of this arrangement wasn't apparent to me. I would gladly have done it for free.

She suggested I play in local tournaments, and to my surprise I won one. How eagerly I awaited my trophy. How disappointed I was to unwrap the pink tissue paper with trembling fingers and discover a key chain adorned with a flimsy chrome tennis racquet.

At 11, I played in three tournaments sponsored by the New England Lawn Tennis Association. The "lawn" part was an exaggeration. Most of the courts were clay, the rest that horrid asphalt that was invariably scorching by noon.

A Has-Been at 14

I won none of those tournaments but did well enough to be ranked No. 5. Very creditable, I thought, particularly since the players ahead of me were all 12 and would have to move up to another division the next year. Except Teddy McBeath, that is.

Sure enough, the next year I came in second. I won every tournament Teddy McBeath didn't enter and was runner-up in every one he did.

McBeath and I never did as well again. In the 14's the next year I fell to No. 7. I dropped out of competitive tennis after that, a has-been at 14.

As for Teddy McBeath, I heard that he later became so temperamental on the court that his parents took him out of tournament play for a while. He had always been a master of decorum when I played him, but then, never having lost more than two games a match, he had no reason to get angry.

I still play, but only occasionally. It's hard finding players who can give me a good game, though I'm not nearly as good for my age now as I was 10 years ago. I guess when you've been ranked the second-best 12-year-old tennis player in New England, there's no place to go but down.

John Sedgwick, right, and Teddy McBeath after their 1966 final

