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McEnroe Sr.'s vision, brashness an unlikely fit for the ATP

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John McEnroe Sr. believes in giving players more leeway on which tournaments they choose to play. benchmark value is individualism, tennis has historically lacked strong leaders. An American sports fan used to seeing such czars as Pete Rozelle of the NFL or David Stern of the NBA at the helm will be disappointed by tennis' disparate factions and the often contradictory ways the sport operates in everything from marketing to scheduling. Then again, Rozelle and Stern never had to grapple with a sport in which athletes hailing from every continent are in large part also team owners. Between players, agents, sponsors, governing bodies, media entities and others who freely cross-mingle in each realm, it's hard to imagine a sport more splintered than tennis.

The ATP -- the group that operates the men's professional tour -- is but one of the game's significant bodies. This fall, the ATP is conducting a search for a new CEO, a step which has raised perennial questions about the ATP's mission. Formed in 1972 as a players union, the ATP reorganized itself in 1990, creating a partnership between players and tournament directors that is at one level attractive -- but also fraught with peril. Is the ATP the league or the union? What responsibility do players have for ensuring the success of tournaments? How does a tournament director's agenda differ from a player's? Why are some tournaments graced with deeper fields than others? How do ATP events thrive in conjunction with the four Grand Slam events, each of which has taken major strides over the past two decades to improve their facilities and global reach?

Outgoing ATP CEO Etienne de Villiers began his term in June 2005. In a sport that all too often has let cronyism, ex-players and disparate soldiers of fortune grab at pieces of the pie, de Villiers' background outside the sport -- including 15 years as a Disney executive -- was intended to bring a new, refreshing perspective. And though players were no doubt pleased to see the de Villiers reign increase prize money for the first time in five years in 2007, he proved exquisitely tone-deaf in grasping the need to consistently engage with his player constituency. This was painfully clear when de Villiers and his team decided to change the date of the longstanding Hamburg event from May to July, an action that triggered a \$76 million lawsuit and, perhaps even worse, incurred the anger of such top players as [Rafael Nadal](#).

The ATP won the lawsuit. According to ATP board member [Justin Gimelstob](#), "That was a watershed for establishing our ability to establish a calendar and hold tournaments accountable for their professionalism." An added benefit was the case so politicized the likes of Nadal, [Roger Federer](#) and [Novak Djokovic](#) that each of these three opted to take seats on the ATP Player Council -- the first time since the ATP's early years players so highly ranked opted to play a leadership role. Earlier this summer, Gimelstob was amazed when he and his fellow ATP board member David Egdes spent 90 minutes in a Cincinnati hotel discussing board matters with Federer just after he'd lost a match. Said Gimelstob, "Having these top players involved is only going to raise the bar for all of us."

But for de Villiers, the Hamburg suit -- even in victory -- proved conclusively that he lacked credibility with players.

So what kind of CEO is needed now? It's not easy to find someone who concurrently understands the sport's nuances and has the skills necessary for leading a sport in the 21st century.

Michael Catlow is a recruiter with Boyden, a global executive search firm that recently conducted a search for the CEO of Golf Australia. According to Catlow, "You've got to challenge the board of an organization to really say what it wants. What do you mean by 'a tennis person'? There's a changing of the guard here. The days of players managing clubs and teams are behind us. The guys putting on the Olympic Games are not former athletes. They're people who understand how to bring together all the stakeholders and put on a first-rate event. But at the same time, the world of sports isn't just like a corporation where you tell people what to do and they do it or they get fired. Sports require understanding a great many egos." (The search firm the ATP has retained, Spencer Stuart, has a longstanding policy of declining to speak about current searches.)

ESPN commentator Cliff Drysdale was the ATP's first president back in 1972. According to Drysdale, "I would like to see this new gentleman understand the dynamics of trying to get the game to work together with the Slams. There's now an imbalance between the Slams and the ATP. Slams are selling their TV rights for big money, but the other events are paying to get on TV."

Drysdale also believes there's a delicate balance between serving players and the game's broader interests.

"You need someone who understands the business of competition, who can relate to the players, but also lead them," Drysdale said. "You can't just bow to the instincts of a 22-year-old athlete who has his own agenda. I don't blame Nadal for this, but with Hamburg, for example, he wanted more clay-court tournaments."

One familiar name gunning for the job is John McEnroe -- that is, the *father* of the famous ex-player and commentator. A Wall Street attorney for more than 40 years, most notably with the highly regarded firm of Paul Weiss, McEnroe was jet-propelled into the tennis business in the summer of 1977 when his precocious namesake rocketed from the juniors to the Wimbledon semifinals. Often in conjunction with various management firms, McEnroe has managed his son's business affairs with all the iron-fisted skill and hard-edged leverage you'd expect from a man in control of a player who wasn't just a star, but a supernova.

Besides his work with John and, later, Patrick, John McEnroe Sr. briefly served as legal counsel in the early '80s for Bjorn Borg, Jimmy Connors, Vitas Gerulaitis and Guillermo Vilas, the cornerstone of his work with them an effort to keep the ATP from mandating where these top players should compete.

Much like his namesake, McEnroe is pursuing the job with a bold, attacking style intended to vanquish the competition. According to McEnroe, the ATP's search "is a ridiculous waste of time and money. They don't need due diligence when they're dealing with me. What the hell does a Disney executive [de Villiers] have to do with tennis?"

There's a phrase consultants use: If your only tool is a hammer, you see the solution to every problem as a nail. The tool that has built McEnroe's highly successful career is the law -- not marketing, not communications, not sales, not sponsorships, not a love of the fans, but a rich, thorough and impassioned sense of the law and how understanding and shaping it properly can aid his clients.

Given his background as a player advocate, it's no surprise that McEnroe's campaign says little about the game's future direction but is instead anchored solidly in his belief that the players are what he calls "the engine" of the car that is the pro game. A letter

McEnroe has sent to the ATP spells out the crux of his vision, right down to the selected deployment of capital letters lest his point go misunderstood: "The rules for participation on the Tour are an abomination. My own view is that NO player should be required to play in ANY TOURNAMENT if he doesn't wish so to do. Also, as long as a player's ranking entitles him to entry, he should be able to enter any tournament without requiring a minimum of tournaments each year. This is a position I have held for over thirty years."

According to McEnroe, "I want to talk with the players and find out how many top 10 players they think should comprise a tournament field -- and do so without jeopardizing their bodies." This proposed libertarian-like approach is a contrast to the current system that has mandated for more than a decade that the top 50 players are automatically entered in the four Grand Slams and the nine Masters Series events (beginning in 2009, the latter figure will be cut by one event). McEnroe has astutely noted the dysfunctional aspects of this system, particularly since top players have been known to withdraw from these events for reasons of personal pragmatism. Then again, the Masters



Though he increased prize money, Etienne de Villiers has been heavily criticized since assuming the role of Executive Chairman of the ATP Tour.

Series events -- which were originally known as the "Super Nine" and will be rechristened "1,000-level" events in 2009 -- have indeed created exceptionally deep, impressive and consistent player fields for the ATP throughout the world.

Those who recall the days before the mandated entry era cringe. Said Drysdale, "Back in the '80s it was a free-for-all, with variations in prize money, inconsistent depth in player fields, exhibitions cutting into the tour. The days of playing wherever and whenever were a disaster."

While certainly McEnroe's credentials -- most notably his blood relationship with two of the game's most powerful people -- should warrant an audience, it's hard to imagine the ATP board shares his affinity for a deregulated entry environment. It's also confusing as to why he would criticize the search process in such a bellicose manner instead of merely welcoming the competition.

But perhaps the biggest factor in the ATP's quest for leadership is the sport's altered geography. For more than a decade the professional game's epicenter has been shifting away from North America. While tennis struggles for recognition on this continent, in the growing market economies of Europe and Asia, its popularity is often exceeded only by soccer. The next ATP CEO could likely be someone with extensive experience and even a base in these regions.

Said Drysdale, "There doesn't need to be another housecleaning. You need someone with good PR skills who can get into the locker room, be hands-on with the players and look at some of these bigger issues too."

Joel Drucker is based in Oakland, Calif., and writes for Tennis Magazine and Tennis Channel.

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