Lesson 2.3

John McEnroe - Bad Boy of Tennis

Pow! The two-year-old hit a tennis ball with his little racquet.

Yeaaa! The crowd erupted in cheers; the crowd being mom, dad, grandparents, and friends – a captive audience.

Whack! Another roar from the crowd!

"This is fun," thought the boy, John McEnroe. "Just look at all the attention I'm getting. I get more notice hitting the tennis ball than when I try to be cute, or even when I throw a tantrum. I'm just going to figure out how to hit the ball every time."

As John grew, he excelled at tennis. He won several junior tennis tournaments, but he was never first on the junior circuit. Not being number one was difficult for McEnroe to accept. For him, tennis was about rankings and proving to the world that he was the best.

As a teenager, McEnroe attended Trinity School in Manhattan, an Ivy League preparatory school. It was during this time that John's temptation to be a "class clown" got him into trouble. He played a prank that caused him to be suspended from the Port Washington Tennis Academy for six months. As a result, his parents moved him to the Cove Racquet Club, where he worked with the famous pro trainer, Palafox.

After high school, many exciting opportunities came John's way. He was able to play in Europe, where he won the French Juniors Tournament. Then he aimed for the junior's title at Wimbledon, but he wound up qualifying for the men's competition
instead. There, he advanced to the semi-finals, where the more experienced Jimmy Connors beat him. McEnroe was, nevertheless, quite the young prodigy, the youngest man to reach the semi-finals of Wimbledon.

At this point, the enthusiasm for tennis he had experienced as a child had started to fade. McEnroe was losing the ability to accept setbacks as learning experiences. He was out to prove his worth, and failure was like a personal affront. Letting his temper get the upper hand, he reacted in a manner that many considered unsportsmanlike and was labeled one of the “bad boys of tennis.”

*Newsweek* magazine’s Pete Axthelm deplored McEnroe’s actions by writing, “He is a young man who raised perfectly placed strokes to a high art form, only to resort to tantrums that smear his masterpieces like graffiti.” However, even after the criticism, and after inconsistent winnings for the rest of the year, McEnroe became *Tennis* magazine’s *Rookie of the Year* for 1977.

After being named *Rookie of the Year*, McEnroe received a tennis scholarship to Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, and led his team to the NCAA Championship in 1978. The following year, he decided to leave school and turn pro. During his first half-year as a pro, he made nearly half a million dollars. Very impressive!

Unfortunately, as McEnroe gained fame, his setbacks caused more outbursts. George Plimpton defended McEnroe’s antics in *Esquire* magazine: “He’s the only player in the history of the game to go berserk and play better tennis.”

Between 1981 and 1984, McEnroe was at the peak of his professional career. He won a total of seven Grand Slam titles in singles, and seven Grand Slam titles in doubles. The ATP rated him number one in its year-end ranking from 1981 to 1984.

In 1985, McEnroe’s success began to decline. He won eight singles tournaments that year, but no Grand Slam events. Some people blamed his declining performance on a lack of systematic training. Another factor that worked against him, though, was his lack of self-control. In a fit of anger, he bounced his racket and began yelling obscenities at the 1990 Australian Open – behavior that earned a default. Sally Jenkins of *Sports Illustrated* made this sad observation: “McEnroe’s seven Grand Slam titles amount to about half of what he could have won had he bothered to train properly and gain control of his temper.”
John McEnroe once said, "Some people don’t want to rehearse; they just want to perform. Other people want to practice a hundred times first; I’m in the first group." McEnroe did not take pride in effort and practice. He relied on his "natural giftedness." When he lost, he blamed others; he made excuses. One time the weather was too hot, the next too cold. He lost because he had a fever, a headache, a backache, because he ate too much or too little before the match. He lost because a cameraman distracted him or because the line judge cheated him out of a point. The list of excuses was long and varied.

Failure did not motivate John McEnroe; it demoralized him and caused him to doubt his ability. In 1979, he played mixed doubles at Wimbledon. During the match, John lost his serve three times and he and his partner lost in three straight sets. For McEnroe, that was the ultimate embarrassment. He was quoted as saying, "That’s it. I’m never playing doubles again. I can’t handle this." It was twenty years before he stepped onto the court to play mixed doubles again. John McEnroe did not embrace opportunities to grow and improve. Instead, he avoided failure.

Student Reflection:

1. Write a descriptive paragraph about someone you know that reflects the fixed mindset. What behaviors do they demonstrate that suggests a fixed mindset?