

The getting of wisdom

LESSONS LEARNED FROM LIFE

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JOHN NEWCOMBE

The tennis legend, 67, tells what he knows about ...

Fear It immobilises your body and stops you from performing at your best, so you have to learn to control it. Laughter is a great antidote. If you can look at your opponent and imagine they’re an elephant or a rat and just start laughing, your opponent might think you’re mad, but the laughter will help get rid of the fear.

Competitiveness I had a natural fire in my belly, but I give a lot of credit to my mother, who helped me steer that fire in a positive direction. There was one final when I was 12 – I was losing badly and behaving badly because I was angry with myself. My mother whispered to me as I changed ends, “Why don’t you start playing tennis and stop feeling sorry for yourself?” I gave her an angry look, but by the time I’d reached the baseline, I realised she was 100 per cent correct. I put my head down and started playing and turned the match around.

Anger I’ve only “crossed to the dark side”, as I call it, a couple of times. When I was 37, I was playing a US Open doubles semi with Fred Stolle, against McEnroe and [Peter] Fleming. McEnroe wasn’t happy with me; he was trying to hit me with a ball. He eventually hit Fred in the throat, which made me angry. I ran around the net and had the racquet right up John’s nose, “You blank blank, I’m going to kill you!” Then I came to, looked around and thought, “How did I get over here?” It’s pretty wild and windy and dark over there with Darth Vader!

Winning 26 grand slams When those wins happened, I wasn’t surprised because I’d put in the hard work. When I first went to Wimbledon at 17, I read Kipling’s poem *If*: “If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster, and treat those two impostors just the same ...” Those two lines became a motto for my life.

The decline of Australian tennis Tony Roche and I ran the Davis Cup team for seven years. When we started [in 1994], we were far from the best, but when we finished we had the best team in the world. Out of that came Hewitt, Rafter and the Woodies. But we left the position in 2000, and I’m pretty disappointed that nothing much has been achieved since.

Children The thing that Angie [Newcombe’s wife of 45 years] and I are very proud of is that we’re very good friends with our three kids. When they reached adulthood, I asked each of them what aspects about me they didn’t like when they were growing up. And sometimes, when you try to achieve what I was achieving, it’s hard to maintain contact with your kids. So I said, “I hear what you’re saying and I understand. All I can say is I’m sorry I didn’t do better.