

KING OF THE COURT: ANDRE AGASSI OPENS UP

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ANDRE AGASSI WAS FORCED INTO A LIFE HE DIDN'T CHOOSE. A DOMINEERING FATHER MADE TENNIS HIS ONLY OPTION. TENNIS GAVE HIM FAME, FORTUNE AND A BEAUTIFUL WIFE, BUT IT ALSO TORMENTED AND LED HIM THROUGH THE DARKEST ALLEYS IN LIFE. IT WASN'T UNTIL HE WAS 27 WHEN WE CAME TO KNOW THE ANDRE AGASSI OF TODAY – AS THE FATHER OF PHILANTHROPY.

At the tender age of 20, Andre Kirk Agassi was a tennis virtuoso, a rock star, a sports icon in the making, portrayed as the all-American idol that just happened to be the most adulated player in the professional circuit. He was the object of every teenaged girl's desire: the pierced ear, denim shorts, pink regalia from the shirt to his spandex, wavering hair to die for with sometimes a crazy splash of makeup to boot.

As the Canon advertising campaign billed it at the time, "the image of a rebel." Andre's famous line was "Image is Everything."

For a private figure living the public life, it was an image of a young man desperately trying to find himself. On and off the court, his image was the only thing he clung onto, the jeans and the flashy outfits just an outlet of rebellion and resentment to a sport and life he was supposed to love. But, he hated it — a lot. A lifetime of hate led to depression. His depression led to an escape by way of drugs. Drugs led to the annus mirabilis of 1997. Image, as it turned out, wasn't everything.

"That year was the bottom and it was the top and one of the most formative parts of my life; there is no question about it," Agassi says.

In 1997, Agassi had an epiphany as he so often stated throughout the

course of my exclusive interview at the Tournament Players Club in Summerlin, Nevada. For a born-again Christian Armenian-American like Agassi, the word "Epiphany" and the January 6 commemoration of the manifestation of Christ certainly resonates with millions of Armenians around the world. But his story isn't directed for a specific religion or heritage, rather, for those looking in search of the tools and inspiration for the harmonious pastures in life.

Throughout the interview, the 39 year-old Agassi had plenty of anecdotes, but the expansive version comes through 386 pages of print via his newly-released autobiography, *Open*. Agassi says the book-writing process was a cathartic one and it was liberated as atonement for his actions in life. The book reveals the trials and tribulations of 1997, a year that changed the most renowned Armenian athlete ever known.

Whether it was his rise to stardom on the express elevator, his hair or lack thereof, delving into the world of crystal meth, rolling through Roland Garros commando, or countless other sincere and limpid anecdotes, *Open* introduces an uninhibited Agassi to the world.

With that, three years removed from tennis, Andre Agassi served another winner — his painfully honest pen as sharp as his devastating backhand.

Q Your autobiography has to be one of the most candid memoirs ever written, hence the title *Open*. What triggered you to write the book?

A My first impetus was reading the book by J.R. Moehringer, whom I've collaborated with, called *The Tender Bar*. I was reading his book slightly before retirement and it was a really emotional time for me and his book gave me a lot of strength and escape. It had a profound impact on me. After I retired, I quickly thought to myself, what if my story could impact others? So that was what started it. Then I set out to just understand my story. It was important to me. I wasn't sure if I was going to finish the book and turn it over at first and give it to the world. But I did think to myself, that I wanted to know what my story was because I knew all the stories in my life, but what is my narrative? And how does it look through a literary lens? So I started the process and then the process kind of led me and I felt like early into it, that it was a book that had to be written.

Q You were adored by millions across the globe. What do you want to say to those whose opinion of you has changed after reading your book?

A We are all in process. We all go through our own learning curves. We all strive everyday to understand ourselves better and when you are playing a sport like tennis for a living, you have no time to really look at yourself and understand yourself, yet, you are asked to communicate who you are on a continual basis. So it's nice to be able to take a hard look at myself and then share the truth about me. For those who form opinions without reading the book, I disqualify it, and for those who have an opinion after reading the book, for better or for worse, I accept those realities.

Q The biggest bombshell in the book was your revelation that you used crystal meth. Did anyone from your inner circle know about it prior to the book and has the reaction been different from the one you had anticipated?



Andre Agassi confessed in his riveting and therapeutic memoir that his hatred for tennis held him on ad-court his entire life until he finally rallied back and took sole ownership of it at the age of 27.

Just my assistant Slim knew. Not even my wife (Brooke Shields) at the time, which kind of speaks to my usage; it wasn't insane. People want to figure out how much I used it and I refuse to give a number because I can't be sure and I just don't know. But it was obviously not enough where I couldn't just turn my back on it and walk away. That's the whole point of drugs. I think when you don't allow yourself to stand next to somebody and to count on somebody, you get pretty lonely and when you start to use drugs, you think less of yourself and you want to hide that part from the people close in your life, because you want to hide from yourself. The reaction to it hasn't surprised me; I pretty much knew that it flies in the face of the perception of me. I knew there would be some shock to it, anger, disappointment. And I definitely knew no one can process it, especially in a headline. It's taken me years to come to terms with the reality of me. But my hope is that through this book, they not only understand me better and more personally, but they can even understand themselves a little better.

Q Looking back at the day you forged your letter to the American Tennis Professionals to cover up your drug use and the second chance that followed it, what type of newly found perspective did you see in life?

A I value every decision of my life, from how I choose to go about my work, my foundation, to how I choose to treat people, to the time that I am going to give to everybody. It was atonement from that day forward for me, to make myself the best that I could be, to make others better for their time spent with me and it changed who I was to the core.

Q During your career span in tennis, sports have seen every case of drug use and athletes are condemned for not being up front and contrite. Why do you think you were criticized for being so honest?

Because I lied about it. That's the worst of what I did, not using. When you make a decision to hurt yourself and take a drug, that's one thing. Lying about it causes angst for people, and I understand that.

Q Is the revival of Andre Agassi and the overcoming of 1997 the person we know today?

A I wouldn't be who I was and who I am today without 1997. It was the bottom and it was the rise, it was the year that saw the worst of me and saw the best in me. It showed the lowest of the human spirit, and the hope of the human spirit. When I hit rock bottom and chose tennis for myself, I decided to take ownership of my life. That's the power of this story. It's not the drug use, it's the ownership, it's the choosing your life part that is inspirational to people. It'll give others tools to get themselves out of a life maybe they don't want to be in. It needs to be in there and I think anybody that reads the book will understand where it fits and why.

Q Your 1997 South Africa trip really changed your outlook on life. You write, "God wants us to grow up." What type of an impact did your meeting with Nelson Mandela have on you?

A It was an epiphany for me. Here is a man I revered, a man that despite his years of imprisonment showed no signs of bitterness, almost angelic, almost saintly. His ability to forgive and ease the pain of others was mesmerizing and it came at a time where I was pretty low in my life. Not that my journey would ever compare to his, but he made me feel that everybody's journey is important. Everybody's choices are important. So it was a huge and powerful time for me. I had already started the journey back and he just put air under my wings.

Q The public opinion in the media has been that you wrote your book to sell books. What are your thoughts on this?

A I think anybody that reads the book will quickly understand how honest I am. Honest isn't just the stuff that has been sensationalized. Honest is the real attempt to look deep inside yourself and reconcile your contradictions. I had a lot more to lose than to gain. Writing the book has been three years of my life. I've cared about this. I've labored over every word and I've done it for the real attempt to make a difference in people's lives. I think it's going to help a lot of people and give them tools and inspiration. I am not in the business of selling books.

Q With your dad writing *The Agassi Story* in 2004, did it make you want to clear some of the things he wrote about you for the record? He didn't even really read his own book. He wanted to tell his story and he trusted some people to do that and I think he felt that the results were less than ideal. I used his book for certain information and to confirm things with my father, but there was a lot in there that just isn't true and, I felt, wasn't accurate. My dad told me I'm not

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Q Dossier

Mike Agassi

Born in Iran to Armenian parents Noonia and David, Emmanuel "Mike" Agassi is the father of Andre. Mike says his father's last name, Agassian, was changed to Agassi as a life-saving measure because of the Turkish massacres of Armenians at the time. Shortly after his arrival to Las Vegas in 1963, the former boxing Olympian met Kirk Kerkerian and became a casino captain at the MGM Grand. He built such a relationship with Kerkerian that he bestowed Kirk as Andre's middle name. In tennis circles, Mike is known as the autocratic father who forced the game he loved and obsessed about onto his four children. His dreams of his kids reaching No. 1 in the world were finally fulfilled through Andre, but as *Open* reveals, it came at a very high price.

going to read your book because I was there. I didn't read my book because I was there.

Q Your father wrote, "Andre's not afraid to throw a match in a crisis," specifically bringing up the second round of the 2000 U.S. Open when you found out your sister Tami had breast cancer and the 2001 French Open after you learned a lady friend of yours was succumbing to cancer. For the record, is this true?

A Well, to say throwing a match is overstating it. In tennis, you have nowhere to hide and if you are emotionally unprepared, there is no way around it; you will not win. So there were times in my life when my mother had breast cancer and my sister Tami had it earlier in the year, and I was just emotionally overwhelmed. It wasn't that I threw the match, but I definitely knew that my heart wasn't there.

Q Armenian men are generally considered "old school." Do you think it is the same with your father?

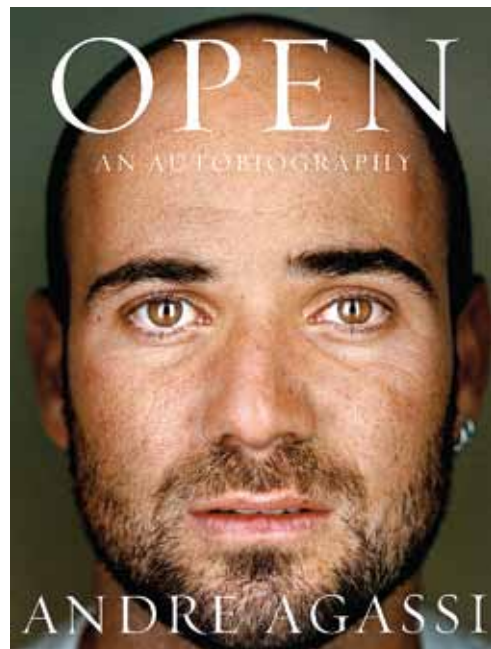
A He's a pretty old school kind of person and very disciplined, but he doesn't have a lot of psychology to him. He speaks what's on his mind without filters, and when you are a little boy, some of those things can come out pretty tough. He wanted the American dream for his children and he was willing to do it at any cost so his kids can have a future. One of the things I have seen with him that I see in Armenians across the board is that he is fiercely loyal and a very generous person, which is another characteristic that I find that culturally exists.

Q Reading both sides of your stories, I took that you two had a rocky relationship. Is this a fair assessment?

A Tennis interfered with our relationship. I was sent away when I was 13. I think that was the hardest part of it all, being raised by myself. I felt abandoned in a certain way. But my father had a rough relationship with some of my siblings, and I think that he was trying to protect me from that. So I had to come to terms with a lot with my father, and there was a time when it was hard for me to talk to him because he would always push me on my tennis, even as a 25 year-old. Every time I would talk to him, it was about what I needed to do better, because that's the way he thought. That was his way of caring, to help you improve, and the only way to improve was to highlight the weakness and harp on that. So that was tough for me for a while.

Q You have been very descriptive of how you were browbeaten by your father, and he has admitted to it as well. What will you do differently with your two children?

A My son is into baseball which makes me love it too. But I define success for my children by them learning empathy in life and how to see life through other people's lenses. They need to choose their life and need to care enough about it to pour themselves into it. It's how you as a parent define success for your children that is most important. ▶



📖 Dossier

Andre Agassi

Born April 29, 1970, Andre Agassi was destined for tennis superstardom as his father taught him tennis before he was able to walk. With tennis balls hanging from his crib and a paddle taped to his hand, Andre was forced to master tennis throughout his entire childhood. He would eventually rally with Bjorn Borg at the age of eight, tear through the junior's circuit and hustle the rich bare to their pockets at the encouragement of his father. At 13, Andre was sent 3,000 miles away to Nick Bollettieri's tennis academy in Florida. After honing his game, he dropped out of high school in ninth grade and at 16, turned professional. By 1988, he was No. 3 in the world and officially a star. He won his first Grand Slam at the 1992 Wimbledon. In April 1995, Agassi reached No. 1 in the world for the first time. After a newly-found commitment, dedication and regimen, at 27, Agassi enjoyed the most successful stretch of tennis of his career until September 2006, when he retired after the U.S. Open to a resounding farewell in New York City. He finished with a career record of 870-274 (76%) along with 60 titles, eight of which were Grand Slams. In 2001, Andre married tennis great Stefanie Graf, winner of 22 career Grand Slams. Together, they have joined numerous charitable and benevolent causes, including the Andre Agassi Foundation for Education, Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy, Athletes for Hope, and many others. They have two children, 8 year-old son Jaden and 6 year-old daughter Jaz. They live in Las Vegas.



“The three most influential people in my life were my father, my trainer Gil Reyes and my wife Stefanie Graf... I am a man in process, a man who will hopefully be different tomorrow than he is today.”

📖 **The Andre Agassi College Preparatory Academy is for at-risk children who are “written off by society.” How do you think your revelation about crystal meth will impact them?**

It's the truth. Anybody who's interested in the story will read the book. If they do that, they will have the tools to avoid and escape the pitfalls that they could've stepped in. But drugs are a hard subject. It's the fear of every parent. Drugs isn't the first problem, the problem is needing to escape your life. So my hope with these kids and my school, as my own children, who I wrote this book for, is that they understand how to choose their lives, so they don't find themselves waking up in a day where they feel like they need drugs. There is a lot to learn from that.

📖 **Where do you see your charter school 10 years from now and what do you hope it eventually becomes?**

I hope it's paid for in perpetuity, meaning I hope that it can continue despite me being here or not. I hope it impacts and inspires certain changes on our entire public educational system, starting in Nevada, because we are 50th in the United States for the kids that we put in college.

📖 **Your charity has made millions of dollars and dreams come true, is it taking on any projects in the near future?**

This is my focus, the Andre Agassi Foundation for Education. My focus is this school and to

take a bite out of education and to see if we can help change it. It's our most precious commodity, our children and our future. Vegas is our home. This is where our family is, my school and my foundation. Although, we do need a few more Armenian restaurants (laughs).

📖 **Can you talk a little about your Armenian heritage? Did your father ever talk to you about your Armenian roots?**

He told me about life growing up in Iran, being a Christian-Armenian in a Muslim world. He tells me a lot about how he was raised by his Armenian parents. He always told me as a kid, when somebody says you are Iranian, you make sure you tell them you are Armenian. He is very proud of his Armenian heritage although he's never been to Armenia. But he'll drive from Las Vegas to Los Angeles just to have an Armenian dinner. We used to do that a lot. We'd go spend two days in L.A. just to enjoy two dinners and then drive home.

📖 **What are some of the places you remember going to?**

You've got to ask him. He talks about them with great passion. I was a little kid when I used to go with him. We have one here called “Habib's Persian Cuisine,” which is a beautiful restaurant that has my Armenian favorites.

📖 **What are some of your favorite Armenian foods?**

I love the sweet rice with the *tadik* on the bottom. Dolma with grape leaves is just one of my favorites. I could eat them like popcorn! I'm a grease person, not a sweet person. I go hard on dinner, then forget about dessert.

📖 **How has your Armenian fan base treated you throughout your entire career?**

They've treated me like family, really, a lot of support. I always seem to give a little extra time to an Armenian. One of the dear and close friends of mine is Sargis Sargissian, who lives in Las Vegas as well. So there is an extra bond that I feel. He's trying to talk me into heading over with him one time back to Armenia. So it's something that maybe my life will allow before it's done. It's on my to-do list. I'm interested in the life, the culture. It's part of my blood, so the older I get, the more important it becomes.

📖 **What Armenian traits have you picked up during your lifetime?**

When I go to my aunt's house, she'll have the music playing and that sort of thing. She spends a couple of days preparing the proper Armenian meal which is a lot of fun to experience. But I don't have a distinct knowledge. My father, my aunt and my friend are the closest, but everyone else that's a part of my life is part-German, or part-Vegas.

📖 **As a role model in the Armenian community, what would you like to tell your young fans to achieve the highest levels, such as yours?**

First, I'd say thanks for all the years of support and for treating me like family and then I would tell all of them to strive for your dreams because it is possible to achieve and set the bar high. 📖