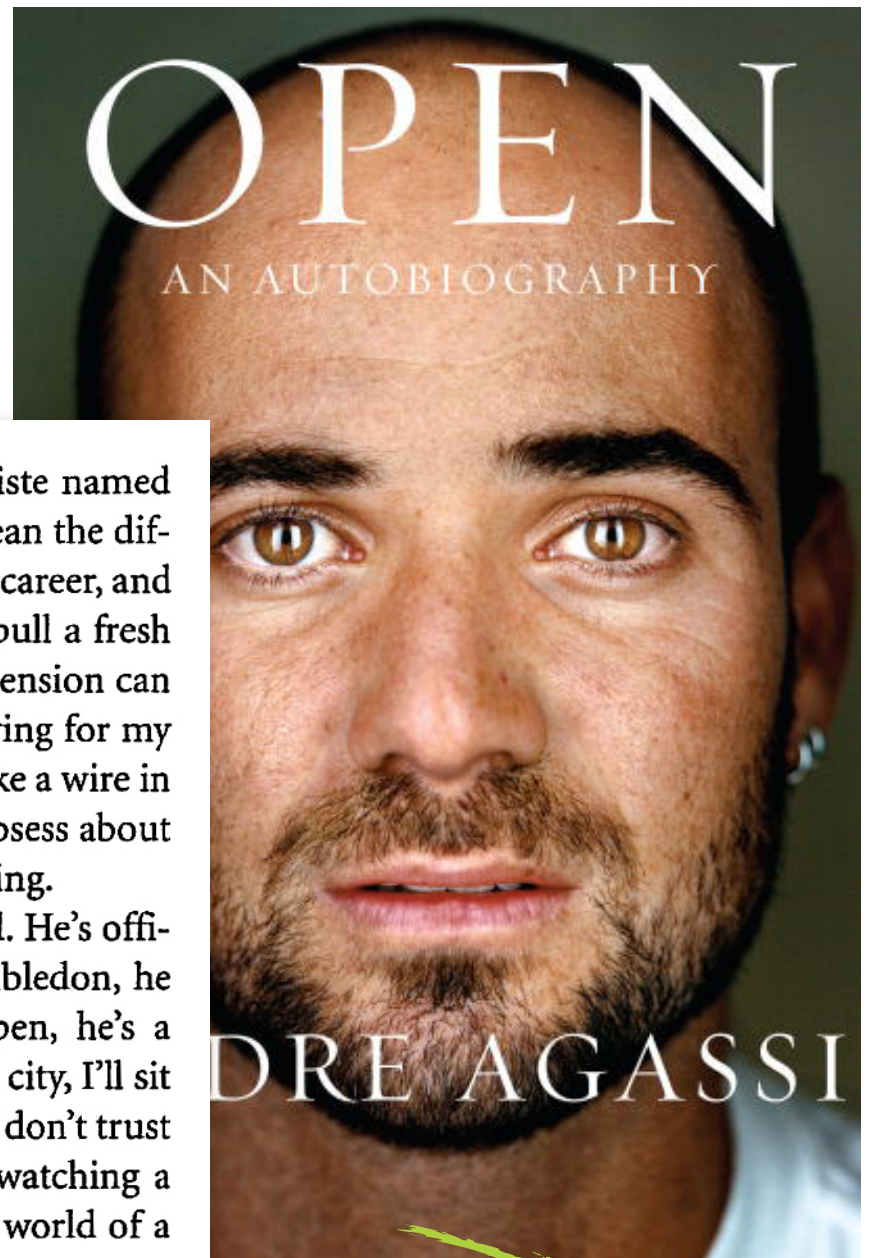


Agassi writes about Roman Prokes in his new book, *Open*



My racket stringer is old school, 'Old World, a Czech artiste named Roman. He's the best, and he needs to be: a string job can mean the difference in a match, and a match can mean the difference in a career, and a career can mean the difference in countless lives. When I pull a fresh racket from my bag and try to serve out a match, the string tension can be worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Because I'm playing for my family, my charitable foundation, my school, every string is like a wire in an airplane engine. Given all that lies beyond my control, I obsess about the few things I can control, and racket tension is one such thing.

So vital is Roman to my game that I take him on the road. He's officially a resident of New York, but when I'm playing in Wimbledon, he lives in London, and when I'm playing in the French Open, he's a Parisian. Occasionally, feeling lost and lonely in some foreign city, I'll sit with Roman and watch him string a few rackets. It's not that I don't trust him. Just the opposite: I'm calmed, grounded, inspired by watching a craftsman. It reminds me of the singular importance in this world of a job done well.

The raw rackets come to Roman in a great big box from the factory, and they're always a mess. To the naked eye they look identical; to Roman they're as different as faces in a crowd. He spins them, back and forth, furrows his brow, then makes his calculations. At last he begins. He starts by removing the factory grip and putting on my grip, the custom grip I've had since I was fourteen. My grip is as personal as my thumbprint, a by-product not just of my hand shape and finger length but the size of my calluses and the force of my squeeze. Roman has a mold of my grip, which he applies to the racket. Then he wraps the mold with calfskin, which he pounds thinner and thinner until it's the width he wants. A millimeter difference, near the end of a four-hour match, can feel as irritating and distracting as a pebble in my shoe.

With the grip just so, Roman laces in the synthetic strings. He tightens them, loosens them, tightens them, tunes them as carefully as strings on a viola. Then he stencils them and vigorously waves them through the air, to let the stenciling dry. Some stringers stencil the rackets right before match time, which I find wildly inconsiderate and unprofessional. The stencil rubs off on the balls, and there's nothing worse than playing a guy who gets red and black paint on the balls. I like order and cleanliness, and that means no stencil-specked balls. Disorder is distraction, and every distraction on the court is a potential turning point.

