

KIERAN SHANNON: Roger Federer's love for tennis reminds us of the true essence of sport

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Kieran Shannon

Federer's longevity is rooted in how emotionally unaffected he was by setbacks.



Roger Federer is surrounded by fans on his arrival at Zurich Airport yesterday. Picture: Walter Bieri/Keystone via AP

Watching Roger Federer's stunning consistency and competitiveness throughout his 30s finally translate into another Grand Slam title last weekend, a conversation with another sporting great last year came to mind.

AP McCoy was out in Gordon Elliott's stables in Cullentra House, doing a piece with Ruby Walsh for Channel 4's coverage of the Cheltenham Festival which would be his first as a retired jockey.

I had been invited along to extract and enjoy some more nuggets from the two of them when they weren't talking to the camera.

Just before McCoy headed to the airport, he made a frank admission to me out in the courtyard.

"I would love to ride Don Cossack in the Gold Cup. I'd love to just walk in and someone didn't know it was me."

I asked why would he wish for such anonymity.

"A fear of failure, I suppose," he'd say.

"I didn't want to carry on too long because I didn't want people to think I shouldn't be riding anymore.

"I don't mean this in an arrogant way but I think I had a certain reputation in sport and I didn't want it diluted. I didn't want to tarnish myself. I didn't want to be a sportsperson who wasn't as good as he was."

I nodded, and name-checked Kobe Bryant who was in the final months of a 20-year NBA career. While undoubtedly one of the game's greatest-ever players, he was at the time shooting the worst individual field-goal percentage in league history and playing for a losing team, a shadow of his former brilliant self.

"Why's he doing that?" wondered McCoy.

"Same with Roger Federer."

I pointed out that Federer was still one of the top four players in the world; in his previous three Grand Slam tournaments he had reached two finals and another semi-final.

McCoy shook his head. "But he's not going to beat Djokovic or Nadal or probably even Andy Murray now."

I suggested that was maybe one of the reasons why Federer was still playing, because he felt he could take them one more time, and that he still loved simply competing, the same way McCoy would love to still compete under a different name.

"I couldn't take the risk of tarnishing myself," McCoy would reiterate.

"If I hadn't been champion jockey 20 years in a row, I wouldn't have retired. I could have rode for another two or three years."

It's seven years ago this month that Roger Federer won the 16th Grand Slam event of his career, aged 28. Had he retired there and then, he would have gone down as the indisputable greatest male tennis player ever.

But he didn't retire. Instead he played on, winning only one of the following 27 Grand Slam events.

Such a return threatened his placing in the all-time rankings; how could a player be considered the best ever when it could be reasonably argued he wasn't even the best of his own era, with a losing head-to-head record against both Rafa Nadal and Novak Djokovic?

The longer he played on, were one to use McCoy's reasonable line of thinking, the more he risked tarnishing his legacy.

Federer's motivation though would differ from McCoy's. As highly competitive as he was, Federer's motivation, to use a popular psychological model, was more task oriented than ego oriented.

Ten years ago he featured in an ad from the Nike stable in which Tiger Woods made a statement similar to McCoy's mindset.

"I hate losing." Federer though turned that around.

"I love winning."

A couple of years later, he'd explain why.

"I'm a positive person, a very positive thinker. That's why I like the more positive approach of 'I love winning', because to hate losing, to me, is a bit negative."

Something even purer than winning though has driven and sustained Federer through the years.

"I've never seen someone love playing as much as Roger," John McEnroe would astutely remark at Wimbledon last year.

"The one thing I wish I could have taken from him is his joie de vivre. He's so competitive but is able to shrug off his losses so well."

That wasn't always the case. While many of us would only know Federer as the personification of composure, in his youth and early professional career his temperament was more akin to McEnroe's.

He was notorious in Swiss tennis circles for throwing and smashing rackets. One of his first coaches nicknamed him Little Satan for his tantrums.

Once while driving through an Alpine pass on their way home from a tournament, his father stopped the family car, dragged a young Federer out in the biting cold and rubbed his head in the snow to make the point that he needed to cool off.

But he'd learn. In his book, *Fantastic Federer*, the writer Chris Bower tells of the time when a teenage Federer had to be in at 7am every morning for a week to clean the facility's toilets after throwing another racket.

Soon after he'd enlist the services of a sport psychologist, Chris Marcolli where he'd develop ways to become the model of self-control.

The old-school stereotypical view of a mentally tough winner is someone who allows themselves to be tortured by defeat when actually, as Paul O'Connell would discover in *The Battle*, the research shows athletes with greater longevity have a more measured perspective.

As the clinical psychologist Crystal Wu would observe in her book *Flourishing At Sports*, Federer's longevity is rooted in how emotionally unaffected he was by setbacks.

When he was asked in 2006 what was his biggest defeat, he'd say: "There was no big defeat for me. I'm very happy with all my results. I do not take a tennis match as a huge defeat. Every time I lose a match, I get to learn something and it gives me more experience."

Shortly after he lost that classic 2008 Wimbledon final to Nadal, Federer told reporters that he still viewed it as a triumph.

"I appreciate the tennis went up a notch with that match, and that's what I strove to do in my five years as number one – to make tennis better, more popular. That Wimbledon final achieved all I had wanted, even if I lost it."

When he lost the 2012 Olympic final to Andy Murray, he said he felt like he'd won silver more than he'd lost gold.

"I feel very, very happy."

And that's what he's remained in the subsequent years, even when he was no longer winning major titles. As long as he was still playing, he was happy.

After the 2013 season, his first year in a decade without winning a major title, he'd remark: "Clearly when you win everything, it's fun. That doesn't necessarily mean you love the game more. You just like winning, being on the front page, lifting trophies.

It's nice. But that doesn't mean you really actually love it. That maybe shines through more in times when you don't play that well. For me, I knew it, winning to losing, practice court or match court, that I love it."

That same 2013 season, he'd recruit the services of Stefan Edberg to alter his backhand; as great as he was, he knew that in order to beat Nadal, it's just something he'd have to do. So he embraced the change, the struggle, the challenge, just as he had defeat.

Last Sunday in Melbourne, the fruits of that work were evident.

The measure of your greatness isn't just your dominance and supremacy when you're in your prime; there's also something in how well you can still compete when you're in decline.

Rarely, if ever, has a tennis player being so competitive for so long on the downward curve of their career.

Over seven seasons, Federer may have won only one out of 27 Grand Slams but he still managed to reach 20 quarter-finals, 11 semi-finals and five finals in that time. And then to crown it all came Melbourne.

The last seven years haven't tarnished Federer's greatness. Instead they've enhanced it while he's reminded us of the true essence of sport.

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