

ON TENNIS

Steady as He Goes: Roger Federer on Success, Staying Power and 20 Years at the French Open

By **Christopher Clarey**

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CHUR, Switzerland — Roger Federer had just finished his soup and was dubious.

“Come on!” he said. “Nobody else left?”

No, not a soul.

Of the 128 players who took part in the 1999 French Open singles tournament, Federer is the last one still playing singles on tour.

That French Open was Federer’s first Grand Slam event. He was 17 years old, wore a ball cap backward on court and still had difficulty keeping his temper in check. Even though he was Swiss, not French, and had lost in the first round of the junior event the year before, the French tournament officials had decided, after considerable debate, to give him a precious wild card into the main draw based on his clear potential.

His opponent on May 25, 1999, was Patrick Rafter, the net-rushing Australian then ranked No. 3 in the world. Though Federer did come out swinging and win the first set, he struggled to win games after that, losing, 5-7, 6-3, 6-0, 6-2, in the sunshine on Court Suzanne Lenglen.

“After the first set, he got the hang of how I play and he, like, sliced and diced me,” Federer said in an interview last month.



Roger Federer during his debut at the French Open in 1999, when he lost to Patrick Rafter as a 17-year-old wild card. Clive Brunskill/Allsport

I was one of about 10,000 in attendance that afternoon 20 years ago, and though many of the courts used in 1999 at the French Open no longer exist, Lenglen still stands.

So does Federer, now ranked No. 3 at age 37 and ready to return to the French Open for the first time since 2015.

Logically, there has been speculation that this is a farewell visit, one more chance to commune with the unpredictable Roland Garros public that has treated him much better than it has treated most through the decades.

But Federer, who won his lone French title in 2009, is quick to quash that line of thinking.

“I usually go one year at a time, and the other day I just spoke with my team about the clay-court season next year,” he said. “I was asking, ‘Anybody have any ideas yet?’”

Knowing Federer’s orderly ways, it is difficult to imagine that he has not planned his retirement down to the last gold watch. But he insisted that he was handling the process as he would an extended rally: trusting his instincts.

“I heard rumors that people said I definitely wanted to play the Tokyo Olympics next year, and that’s when I’m going to retire, but I never said anything like that,” he said. “I really don’t know. I always said, ‘The more I think about retirement, the more I am already retired.’ People ask me,

what are you going to do next? And I say, ‘Well, in a way I’m not quite sure, because I feel if I plan everything for my post-career, I feel like I’m halfway there.’ I think it would not affect my performance per se, but maybe my overall desire to want to do well.”

[By the numbers: Roger Federer’s 101 titles]

Performance has not been a problem for Federer in 2019; he has won titles in Dubai and Miami and reached the final in Indian Wells, Calif. His return to clay-court tennis has been encouraging if not yet triumphant. He lost in three sets to the clay-court terror Dominic Thiem in the quarterfinals of the Madrid Open and then withdrew from the Italian Open with a sore leg after saving two match points in his round-of-16 victory over Borna Coric.

Federer’s goal was to protect his chances of playing in Paris, and after several days of practice at Roland Garros, he appears ready to slide in earnest on the red clay that he finds closer to “powder” than the grittier clay used elsewhere on tour.

His last match in Paris was a straight-set quarterfinal defeat to his Swiss compatriot Stan Wawrinka in 2015. He actually came back to Roland Garros in 2016, but withdrew before the tournament with knee and back problems. He skipped the 2017 and 2018 events to focus on other priorities.

But he is now back where his Grand Slam journey began. Other players his age are still on tour, including his fellow 37-year-old Feliciano López, who will play in his 69th straight Grand Slam singles tournament in Paris. But Federer’s wild card put him ahead of the curve in 1999, and to rewatch his match with Rafter — when human net-cord judges were still deployed instead of electronic sensors — is to remember how far he has come.

The easy power, variety and fluidity already were evident, as was his signature penchant for letting his gaze linger on the point of contact after striking the ball. But if the manner looks familiar, the manners do not. He was volatile and occasionally volcanic then: yelling “Come on!” to berate himself rather than encourage himself and even chucking his racket after getting passed by Rafter early in the third set.

“And this was probably very controlled me in that ’99 match,” Federer said. “Imagine me not against Rafter, not on Lenglen and on some outside court. I was probably much more explosive because the respect for the place wouldn’t be the same. There, I knew it was like live TV, 12,000 people. So it was: ‘O.K., keep it together Roger. Keep it together.’ So I was on my best behavior in that match!”

Federer was working with the Switzerland-based sports psychologist Chris Marcolli to manage his emotions.

“I started to feel uncomfortable after a while when you are on TV like this, and I’d see the highlights,” Federer said. “You throw the racket in the corner and you are so frustrated and disappointed, and it’s just a bad look. And I said: ‘It just looks stupid and silly. Let’s get your act

together a little bit.' It took me a long time, but it was interesting."

Federer also realized that his emotional displays were draining his energy, but even so, he said that he still likes seeing today's youngsters lose control from time to time.

"Instead of telling them, 'Buddy, clean it up!' I'm happy the guy shows it," Federer said. "I don't want to see robots all around. I don't want to see the 18-year-old guy like super, super composed already. When you have a guy who is finally a little lively, let him be and then eventually he will channel it anyway."

Federer undeniably found his groove, winning a record 20 Grand Slam singles titles and 81 other singles titles. He surely would have won more than once at Roland Garros if not for the emergence of Rafael Nadal. Five years his junior, Nadal is 5-0 against Federer at the French Open, which Nadal has won a record 11 times.

"The problem was Rafa came alive, and Rafa was Rafa," Federer said, as if he were describing climate change, or the tides.



Federer at the Italian Open last week. "I always said, 'The more I think about retirement, the more I am already retired,'" he said last month.

Tiziana Fabi/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Though another French Open title for Federer remains unlikely, he takes pride in being back in the arena. Of the 127 other men who played singles in 1999, his former rival Lleyton Hewitt is the only one who is still playing occasionally on tour, and that is only in doubles. While the Norwegian

Christian Ruud was in the draw with Federer in 1999, the only Ruud in the draw this year is Christian's 20-year-old son, Casper.

Why has Federer endured when so many others have not? He credits his long-term plan with the fitness coach Pierre Paganini to "protect longevity" by "not chasing all the appearance fees and not going to all the smaller events" and by committing to two extended training blocks during the year.

"Already back in 2004, when I became world No. 1, that was my mind-set," Federer said. "I made the decision early, and I think that's why I am still here today. I never fell out of love with the sport."

His natural talent and body type also played a role in extending his career.

"Maybe where my talent has helped me a little bit is to shape and get the technique I have today that puts maybe less wear and tear on me," he said. "But I think I've earned it with my schedule and my buildup and maybe my mental side of the game as well.

"As much as I take things very serious, I am very laid back, so I can really let go very quickly. I truly believe this is a secret for a lot of the players and for the young guys is to be able, when you leave the site, to say: 'O.K., I'm going to leave it behind. I still know I'm a professional tennis player, but I'm relaxing. I'm doing it my way, whatever helps me decompress.'"

Federer stopped for a moment and clenched his left fist tightly across the table.

"Because if you are constantly like this," he said, showing the fist. "That's when you burn out."

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