

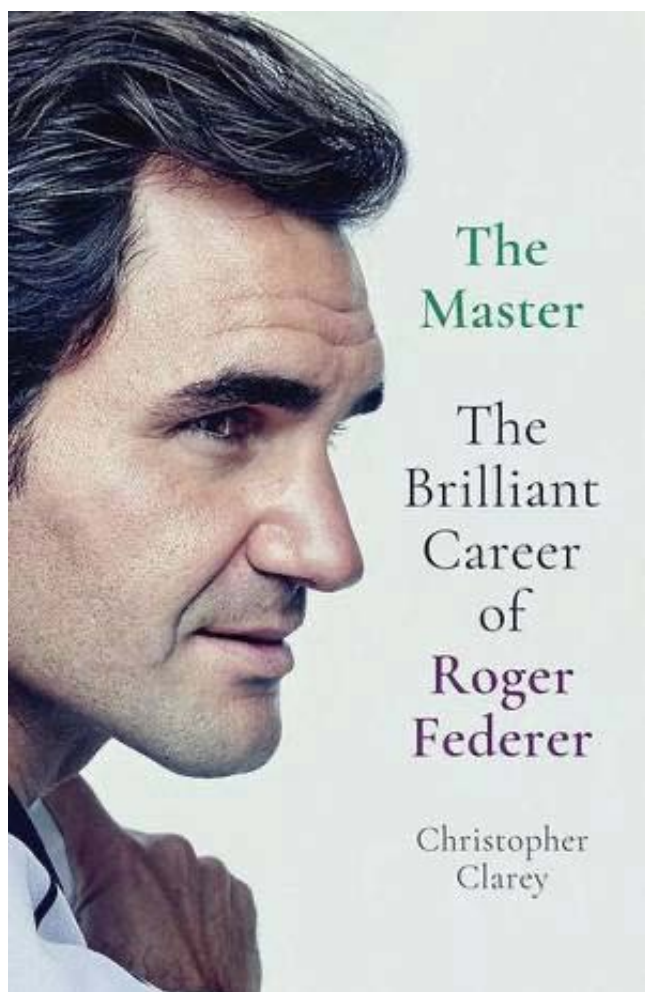
‘The Master: The Brilliant Career of Roger Federer’ review: A chronicle of greatness



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A peek at the mammoth physical, intellectual and tactical efforts of a high calibre team on whose combined acumen rests the Roger Federer phenomenon

Anyone wanting to write on Roger Federer must contend with the surfeit of readily available information on the subject. After all, the important elements – his Swiss-South African origins, early years of training in Basel, his teenage tantrums, the untimely demise of his Aussie coach Peter Carter and how it left him shell-shocked but also goaded him to take full ownership of his talent, the years of absolute dominance followed by a three-way rivalry with Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic, his wife Mirka’s role as a shield against off-court

pressures – are either common knowledge or a Google search away.

Inner circle

Yet, unlike so many biographies of sporting stars – some on Indian cricketers come to mind – which begin promisingly before dwindling into banality-filled hagiographies, Christopher Clarey’s *The Master: The Brilliant Career of Roger* pulls off the difficult feat of seamlessly assimilating known facts with original

observations. He draws on anecdotes and insights culled from interviews with some 80 people, including Federer and his inner circle, his rivals, and an array of coaches, agents and tour officials to craft a fast-paced narrative that will keep not just the Federer fan but any sports buff hooked from the first line to the last.

Clarey opens up the shiny hood of Federer's on-court elegance to give us a peek at the mammoth effort – physical, intellectual, tactical – of a high calibre team on whose combined acumen the wondrous artefact known as Roger Federer is mounted.

For starters, a major character in the Federer story is the late Peter Carter, who coached him early on. One of Australia's top juniors in the early 1980s, Carter never made it big. He juggled satellite tournaments, inter-club events, and coaching in order to get by. Fortuitously, tennis coaching paid better in Switzerland than in many other places, prompting Carter to set up base in Basel, Federer's home town, and the rest, as they say, is history. Had it not been for Carter's struggles, forcing him to take up coaching to supplement his earnings as a player, would Federer have achieved tennis greatness? Possibly, but who knows what form it would have taken?

It was Carter who moulded Federer's distinctive free-flowing technique, and bequeathed him the famous one-handed backhand. This was at a time when the double-handed backhand had already become coaching orthodoxy, as it offered the extra power needed to take control of baseline slugfests, and the stability for aggressive returns – the cornerstones of a winning formula mastered by the likes of Djokovic, Daniil Medvedev and now Emma Raducanu.

Imperfection worries

Another key factor in Federer's success, and his longevity in particular, is Pierre Paganini, his fitness coach. A decathlete who wanted to train soccer players, he was unsure of the job market and decided to hedge his bets – getting a business degree, and taking classes at a Swiss hotel school before he “eventually listened to his inner voice” and earned a coaching degree. Clarey's description of Paganini's innovative training drills based on the concept of “explosive endurance”, a fitness requirement that is especially critical in tennis, make for

fascinating reading.

With fitness and court craft taken care of, there was one other element that needed fixing: mental strength. Put simply, Federer was being held back by his temperament. Despite his breathtaking talent, or perhaps because of it, he was lazy, short-tempered, and an entitled brat who, in the words of a former ATP official, “couldn’t handle imperfection”.

Enter Christian Marcolli, who was a psychology student at the University of Basel when Federer approached him after reading a newspaper article. Federer began collaborating with Marcolli at a time when “consulting a performance psychologist was... still widely viewed as a sign of vulnerability,” writes Clarey. Marcolli, who went on to specialise in performance psychology and work with Olympic gold medallists, equipped Federer with the “tools to change his patterns and manage his emotions more systematically”. Federer, by then “already a successful junior player,” transformed into “a phenomenal one.”

Mirka as a ‘rock’

Apart from Carter, Paganini, Marcolli, and a rotating cast of other professionals at the top of their game, there was Mirka, whom Federer has described as a “rock”. In what is unusual on the men’s tour, she travels with Federer and is involved with every aspect of his tennis, from match strategy to media relations, business negotiations, and the hiring/ firing of coaches and support staff.

Clarey’s brilliant pen portraits of the various characters in the Federer story – those enabling the magic on court as well as his adversaries – make this book much more than a biography. It is also an enthralling foray into the dynamics of sporting excellence.

If Federer’s early challengers such as Lleyton Hewitt and Andy Roddick – gifted contemporaries in the junior circuit who achieved Grand Slam glory ahead of Federer – drove the Swiss to push himself harder, for the likes of Nadal and Djokovic, Federer’s seeming invincibility was a provocation, which they repurposed into a launch pad for their own journey to sporting greatness. All their stories, deftly inter-woven with the biography of the eponymous hero,

make *The Master* a compelling read that provides telling glimpses into the hyper-competitive, frequently unfair, emotionally eviscerating, winner-takes-all ecosystem that every tennis pro must negotiate.

The Master: The Brilliant Career of Roger Federer; **Christopher Clarey, John Murray/ Hachette India, ₹699.**

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