



GQ Sports

Roger Federer on Retirement, Wimbledon, and Becoming Switzerland's New Tourism Ambassador

We kind of thought he already was Switzerland's tourism ambassador?

By Caira Conner

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Roger Federer is many things. He is, defensibly, the greatest male tennis player of all time. He is one of the ten highest-paid athletes in the world (last year, he pulled in **\$90 million** dollars, a few million more than his elder football-playing friend, Tom Brady). He's about to turn 40. He is 20 years and 20 Grand Slam Championship titles into his career, and he is still someone who, after 18 months of global chaos and devastation—and, for him personally, two knee surgeries and five weeks on crutches—has high hopes: Namely, to win (at least) one more (one last?) Grand Slam.

Oh, and Switzerland. Roger Federer really wants you to come to Switzerland.

We're on Zoom, Roger and I, and we're chatting about the weather. In Switzerland, where he is, and also where he is from, it's a "quite sensible" time of year. Europe's most photogenic country has recently hired Federer as its new **brand ambassador**, and hearing him rattle off a shortlist of the main attractions is like listening to the world's most handsome maître d' reciting today's specials: "Here we've got the mountains, the rivers, the lakes." In the campaign's short film, we see Federer atop a snowy peak. Federer, wearing hiking boots. Federer, **trolling Robert De Niro**. There's no big reveal in his descriptions of Swiss geography—there's snow in the winter ("a wonderland!") and an idyllic countryside in the summer ("incredible hikes!")—but hearing him encourage travelers to come, to indulge in the familiar, rugged elegance of his homeland, is a kind of ASMR after more than a year of no air travel. As he talks about his love for his homeland, and his love for his sport, he is beaming through his tiny Zoom square (initials "RF"). Somehow, it tracks that one of the world's wealthiest, winningest athletes—for whom there is no tennis question that hasn't been asked, no poetry on his talent that hasn't been written—is also *just a really nice guy*, and seemingly happy to chat, be it about his career, his age, or central European tourism.

And so it is with a sense of unfailing politeness that Federer turns to address The Question.

This is the same question that he has been asked now for 12 years. The question that has somehow always been the question, percolating and tugging at the shirt sleeve of every Grand Slam victory he's had since his dramatic, ecstatic win over Sweden's Robin Söderling in the 2009 final of the French Open. (After **that match**, Federer was just the sixth man in tennis history to hold Championship titles at all four Grand Slams.) The question was asked then because that same year he married Mirka, a former tennis player, and they had children. Later they had **more children**. It was asked in 2016 when Federer had his first **knee surgery**. It was asked in **2017**, for a cover story for this magazine. As spectators, in our collective reverence and astonishment over Federer's career, we share, too, a preternatural obsession for wanting to know when, and *how*, this is all going to end. We want to know if this is the year he's going to retire.

He doesn't have a concrete answer.

“I don’t know, I’m really relaxed about where my career is, where my life is,” he says. “And I know that this [moment] is one last big, huge opportunity for me to do something great. I mean, it’s always like this when you have achieved as much as I have.” He is not bragging. He has won titles on all three court surfaces (including a record setting 8 Grand Slams on Wimbledon’s grass), and has appeared the most number of times (31) in Grand Slam finals. In **February of 2018**, when he was 36 years and 195 days old, Federer reclaimed the No. 1 ranking in men’s tennis, making him the oldest player to ever do so. He’d made his top spot debut almost exactly 14 years earlier, in **2004**, after winning the Australian Open against Russia’s Marat Safin.

As a human being, Federer’s legacy is uncomplicated. He loves tennis. He’s proud of what he’s achieved. He loves his wife, who makes all of this possible, and his children, with whom he travels as a family unit. His “hot head phase” has long since **passed**, and he has spoken openly and frequently about his mental shift from that early point in his career, of seeing a sports psychologist as a teen, who helped him with anger management. His **foundation** supports children’s education initiatives in Switzerland and southern Africa. Some athletes double as political activists, or social media influencers; Federer will likely not—at least not publicly—be remembered as being either. His principal professional achievement has been simply making the most of his sublime talent, and his life has supported it.

In 2006, the late writer David Foster Wallace **profiled** a then-25-year-old Federer for *The New York Times*. What resulted from a less-than-30 minute conversation in a cramped ATP office was an essay so transcendent, so instantly canonical, that it has made further literary attempts to capture the beauty of Federer’s game in words somewhat redundant (even as the profile itself faced scrutiny for the liberties it **might have taken** with accuracy). A 2019 *New Yorker* **review** of Wallace’s body of work remarked how “The greatest tennis writer of his generation was writing about the greatest player of his generation. The sentence needs no qualifiers.”

Fifteen years later, memories of the conversation with Foster Wallace still linger. “I remember where we were when we did the interview,” he says. “It was in an office on the side, like sort of by the green grass they have there. It was an area where we always say, ‘I’ll meet you at the grass’ ... So I went to speak there for like, half an hour, and I walked out and I did not know what to think—if it was going to be the worst piece in the world or a genius piece. Because it was different. It was very strange. And then [the piece] came out, and I was like, ‘Oh my god.’”

His reaction to the work—even as the person whose game it was about, who had been declared in the paper of record as the greatest living tennis player—was simply like everyone else’s. “*Oh my god.*”

Federer’s won 13 grand slam singles titles since that piece was published, yet he says he still feels driven to achieve more—so long as his body is up for it. “It’s like a plane,” he explains. “I’m in a

holding spot, right? We're trying to land the plane first, and then once you've landed, *then* you can go somewhere." He explains the first thing he needs to do is to get back on tour—since our talk and in the course of writing this piece, he already has. He returned to clay, in [Geneva](#), and lost in the first round.

"Don't get me wrong," he continues. (I would never.) "I want to win more. Otherwise, I wouldn't have gone through the whole [last] year of surgeries and the process of doing five weeks on crutches and rehab. I truly believe I can do it again. [But] I first have to prove to myself that the body can take it. The mind is ready to go."

Consider that one of Roger's [idols](#), the American player Pete Sampras, retired from tennis at the age of 32 in 2003, with 14 (then the record) Grand Slam titles to his name. Sure, players are playing longer now, and, according to Federer, the younger set is much stronger mentally than he was at their age—"I was talented, and I was good, but I was maybe a little bit too confident at the beginning," he says—but *still*. Federer turns 40 in August, just in time for the U.S. Open, and the impending milestone prompts some reflection.

"I can't believe I'm 39, to be honest," he says. "Turning 40, it's like my life has gone by on the tour. I've enjoyed so many moments, I've had some tough moments, of course. I've been tired. I was hurt. I was sick. I've played with all sorts of issues. But I feel like juniors were yesterday. Do I sound like an 80-year-old person who looks back at their childhood as their favorite part?"

No, Roger: You're only *halfway* to 80. But even that—being born before dial-up internet—may have conferred its advantages. For the first decade of his career, Federer didn't have to deal with the added layer of social media in his role as a public figure, the challenges of image curation beyond what viewers had access to on their television screens, or from their seats in stadiums. What he mostly had to contend with, beyond the rigors of touring and the physicality of training, and play, was his mind.

"You've got to find a way to stay happy on the tour, because there is a lot at stake for points and money and fame and social media," he says. "And thankfully, I didn't have to go through all that [with the latter]. I'm glad that my upbringing on the tour was a bit more of a normal one. But the mind overall—you see this happening very often in sports, where you finally achieve your dream, and then the question is, can you keep pushing further? You become number five in the world, now do you want to be number three? And then number one? Do you want to stay world number one? All of these questions—for some people, maybe they think, like, it's normal. Like it's supposed to be easy. But it's not. It's very, very hard."

Working hard didn't always look so good. There is a photo of Federer from his juniors era, standing in the doorway of his [childhood bedroom](#), that's made its way across nostalgia-loving corners of the internet. It feels worth specifically mentioning the bleached-out tips of his hair.

“I mean, it’s a classic teenage guy having a lot of pimples and wanting all sorts of different hair colors,” he says. “My next move was going to be the red hair, but then I somehow didn’t do it. And then after that, I let it grow out, I cut it off, and then I had long hair after that. I had Shaquille O’Neal on a huge poster. I had Pamela Anderson because we were always watching *Baywatch* and *21 Jump Street*.” He laughs. “I don’t know, this was the time when we were walking around with the Walkman, and a Discman. The ‘90s were good for me. I was just starting to make it on tour.”

He made it on tour. And now this June, two decades later, if all goes well according to body and plan, Federer will return to his beloved grass at Wimbledon, home of his first Grand Slam in 2003. His last victory there was in the semifinals in July of 2019, over his close friend and greatest rival, one Rafael Nadal. Federer hammered out his win in four jaw-dropping, bough-breaking sets. (Novak Djokovic beat Federer in the Championship final.)

Just before our call breaks, Federer offers one last bite of wisdom for why we should all go to Switzerland. “It’s my favorite place to decompress from everything, from all of this. And time stands still there. Life’s normal. I hope you can do it one day.”

I hope I can, too. Perhaps on the way to see him at Wimbledon, playing against Nadal. Unlikely, sure, but then again, so is Federer’s entire career.