

# Roger Federer may be out with an injury, but he's present — and forthcoming — in a new book



Review by [Michael Cavanaugh](#)

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Roger Federer is such a master of timing, it's only apt that an expansive new biography about him arrives at an uncanny moment.

Last week, the Swiss tennis legend looked squarely into the camera and shared the news: He would need another knee surgery “to give myself a glimmer of hope to return to the tour in some shape or form.” The emotion in his voice was as clear as his message: His recovery holds no guarantees about whether he will return to competitive tennis, to say nothing of the rarefied heights he has occupied for decades, as one of the greatest ever to hold a racket.

Federer, who turned 40 this month, will miss the U.S. Open, which began Monday. Because he is at such a career crossroads, the time is opportune to reflect on the man behind and within the image — to consider how a sensitive and hot-tempered teenager evolved to become not only an equipoised champion, but also his sport's preeminent global ambassador.

“The Master” (subtitled “The Long Run and Beautiful Game of Roger Federer”) unfolds with the mostly chronological precision of Swiss clockwork. New York Times tennis correspondent Christopher Clarey makes the most of more than 20 years of journalistic access to Federer across six continents — experiences that include waiting for him in a chauffeured car outside a packed stadium match near Buenos Aires, tagging along on an early-morning private flight out of the California desert, brunching with the star before panoramic views of Lake Zurich. Clarey provides a window into the “low-friction” world of Federer as a wealthy athlete, but not before showing the sometimes high-friction risks of devoting your life to the pursuit of tennis glory.

Federer — so often likened to a maestro, a painter, a ballet dancer — can make the game look artfully effortless, such is his uncommon fast-twitch grace. Clarey appreciates the technical qualities that make Federer such a physical outlier, such as how his eyes stay fixed on the contact point just a bit longer than everyone else.

Yet the good reporter must go deep beneath the beguiling artistry and trove of trophies, including a record 20 major titles — tying him for the time being with Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic, the other members of the sport's so-called Big Three. In search of formative moments, Clarey carefully traces the origin story, even traveling to the South African neighborhood where the Swiss 23-year-old Robert Federer first fell for an 18-year-old co-worker named Lynette, Roger's mother.

That is just the first of several fortuitous twists of fate. The author pinpoints some of the key tumblers that had to click into place for the young talent to become the branded superstar that is “Roger.”

The adolescent Federer, for one, had to choose tennis over soccer, which he (like Nadal) probably could have played professionally. Coaches and his parents had to help him harness his rambunctious energy and strengthen his emotional fragility. “These are the pivot points,” Clarey writes, “like Robert Federer requiring his temperamental son to find his own ride home in Basel” — underscoring how young Roger was not “coddled in light of his potential.”

Through scores of interviews, “The Master” highlights some of the more publicly undersung but crucially influential members of Federer’s long-evolving team, including fitness trainer and confidant Pierre Paganini; performance psychologist Christian Marcolli; and late coach Peter Carter, whose tragic 2002 death seemed to prompt a profound maturation in Federer. The book also illuminates how the Olympics romance between teen Roger and fellow Swiss player Mirka Vavrinec blossomed into a relationship that would blend her personal and professional roles within Team Federer — and into a marriage that has been a bedrock of his long-term success.

The book also deftly peels back layers on some of the biggest matches of Federer’s career, including a 2001 Wimbledon victory over Pete Sampras that heralded teenage Federer’s ascent; his comeback Australian Open title in 2017; and historic Wimbledon heartbreakers in losses to Nadal in 2008 and Djokovic in 2019 (interviews with both those rivals deepen the book’s reflections).

Insights from a host of Hall of Fame players round out this portrait of Federer as an easygoing locker-room presence with a requisite killer instinct once he steps on the court, even with tour players who are friends. He is also the down-to-earth multilingual humanitarian who embraces being a citizen of the world. “I consider myself really like a regular guy,” he tells Clarey, “with a fascinating life as a tennis player.”

Federer calls this professional echelon, at its best, a total “out-of-body experience” — and that was before he became one of the world’s highest-paid athletes.

So what drives Federer to consider yet another post-knee-surgery return, after many months ahead away from the game? What drives this 40-year-old family man when he seems to have everything? The seeds can perhaps be seen in what he told Clarey in 2012 of his life on tour:

“I feel very fortunate, and I guess that’s also one of the reasons I would like to play for longer, because these things are not going to come back around when you retire.”

As the Federer faithful say: *Allez Roger*.

**Michael Cavanaugh**, creator of The Post’s Comic Riffs column, is a former sportswriter and sports artist. His competitive junior serve sadly topped out at 118 mph.

## **THE MASTER: The Long Run and Beautiful Game of Roger Federer**

By Christopher Clarey

Twelve/Hachette. 421 pp. \$30