

Roger Federer: A teenage hothead who found inner calm and became a unique talent

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The unsettling feeling first came watching Roger Federer's meek defeat by Tommy Robredo at the Open in 2013.

Then the realisation – the Swiss looked a little ordinary.

Federer, who is calling time on his career at the age of 41, was never supposed to look ordinary.

Ordinary was for mere mortals, players who sweated and toiled, for whom a racket was the tool of trade not an extension of themselves.

At his best, Federer's feet never seemed to touch the court, manoeuvring him effortlessly into play and swat away an impossible winner with the merest flick of his wrist.

The Swiss hangs up his racket as not just one of the best but one of the most loved athletes of a sporting god inspiring devotion in millions worldwide.

Although Federer has defied the passing of time more successfully than most, that will not lessen the feeling of sadness that finally the end has arrived.

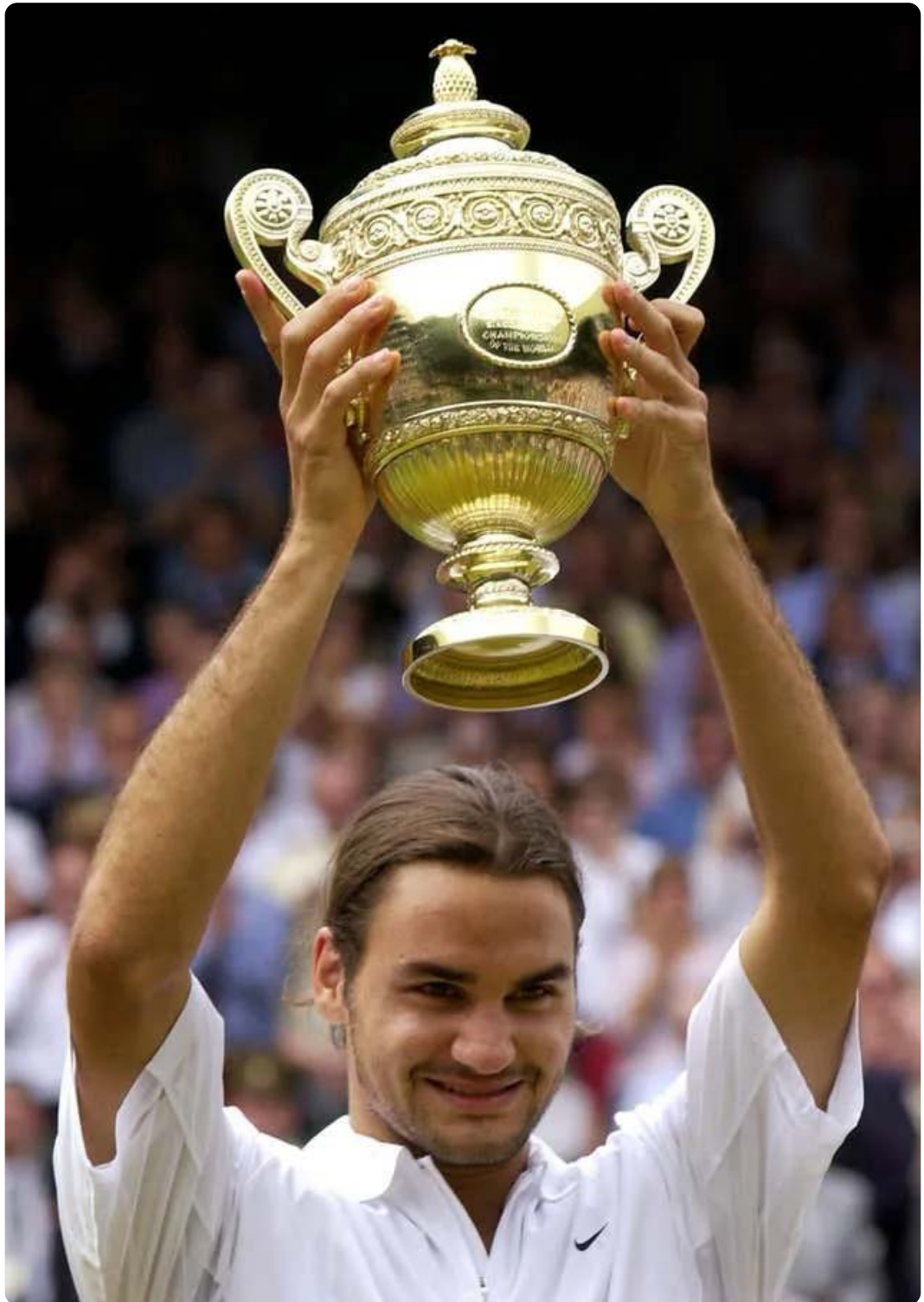
There will be sadness in the locker room, too, where he was known as friendly and approachable. His stature, while his peers are all too aware how much they owe Federer for the benefits generated by tennis' increased popularity.

The way things have played out would no doubt be a shock to the boy from the Swiss border city who was a prodigious talent but also a hot-head prone to teenage tantrums and racket smashes.

It was not until he saw a psychologist and learned, Bjorn Borg-style, how to find his inner calm that he began to live up to his potential.

Federer's first big moment in the limelight came at Wimbledon in 2001 when, as a 19-year-old, he defeated grass-court king Pete Sampras in the fourth round.

He had already made his first ATP Tour final, in Marseille the previous year, losing to fellow Swiss Andre Agassi.



Roger Federer lifted his first grand slam title at Wimbledon in 2001 (Rebecca Naden/PA)

Federer was distraught, overcome by the feeling his chance of silverware might have gone. Rossé him he need have no such worries.

It was a measure of Federer's talent that, when he won his first grand slam title at Wimbledon in aged 21, there was a sense of 'at last'.

And once he had the taste for it, he did not stop.

Between the start of 2004 and the end of 2007, Federer won 11 grand slam titles, losing an average of six matches a year.

Yet there was no real agonising over whether one man's dominance was killing the sport.

Every time Federer won, his interpretation of tennis as art seemed to sprinkle a little more stardom on the game.

He was twice denied a calendar Grand Slam, something achieved in the men's game by only Rod Laver twice – and Don Budge, after losing to Rafael Nadal in the final of the French Open.

And it is his rivalry with Nadal, of course, that will in many ways define Federer's career.

Nadal has faced Novak Djokovic more times, but the Serbian has never been allowed to forget that he inserted himself into the era of the suave Swiss and swashbuckling Spaniard.

As well as the sensational matches Federer and Nadal played against each other, none better than the five-set marathon won by Nadal in the gloaming at Wimbledon in 2008, it was the complete confrontation between the pair that captured the public's imagination.



Roger Federer lost arguably the greatest match of all time to Rafael Nadal in the 2008 Wimbledon final (Lewis Whyld/POOL Wire)

Federer's game was about beauty and grace, his supreme athleticism barely noticed, while Nadal was of an in-your-face brutality and the Spaniard was happy to grind out victories through the sl of his incredible mental strength.

Federer possessed great mental fortitude, too – his achievements are not possible without it – b sense was always that for him it was not just about winning or losing but about how you played 1

Although he enjoys a good relationship with Nadal that has strengthened throughout the years, was never able quite to hide his belief that his game, built on attack and risk, was superior to his more pragmatic approach.

It frustrated Federer that defensive capabilities began to get on top, and perhaps one of his great achievements is that he managed to stay so successful while keeping his commitment to attacki

But Federer would never again dominate the sport the way he did for those four years.

One of his finest moments came in the summer of 2009 when, taking advantage of Nadal's shock loss at Roland Garros, he finally lifted the French Open trophy in his fourth final before going on to reclaim the Wimbledon crown.

Three years later, with many questioning whether his grand slam-winning days were over, Federer lost to Andy Murray to claim a seventh Wimbledon title.

There are those who see the Swiss as arrogant, and the role of gracious loser did not come easily to him. He began to taste defeat more often.



Roger Federer's four children at Wimbledon in 2017 (Adam Davy/PA)

But gradually Federer adjusted to his new reality, no doubt helped by becoming a father to twin then, remarkably, twin boys – even his reproductive powers were superhuman.

When back problems contributed to a slump in form in 2013, and the end of his astonishing run of straight grand slam quarter-finals, Federer allowed himself to reveal his doubts.

Heading towards his mid-30s, the odds were stacked against him, but Federer refused to allow a stand in his way.

He recruited childhood hero Stefan Edberg as a coach and volleyed his way back to the Wimbledon 2014.

Nadal was increasingly affected by injury but now Federer found his path to more slam titles blocked by Djokovic, who beat him to the Wimbledon crown in successive years before winning another final at the US Open.

Then, just when it seemed Federer's body had started to give out on him, he wrote the most remarkable chapter of all.

After six months out following knee surgery, 35-year-old Federer battled through to the 2017 Australian Open final where, fittingly, it was his old rival Nadal across the net.

Federer had not beaten Nadal at a grand slam in nearly a decade and it appeared the Spaniard had again worn down his rival when he took a 3-1 lead in the fifth set.

But this time the story would not have the same ending. Federer attacked relentlessly and got a reward – his 18th, and most unexpected, grand slam title.

He was not finished, winning a record eighth Wimbledon title the same year and then retaining his Melbourne crown in 2018.

Nadal and Djokovic closed in relentlessly, though, and Federer's otherworldly records suddenly looked eminently catchable.

He reached one more slam final, agonisingly losing to Djokovic at Wimbledon in 2019 after holding match points, before knee problems finally spelled the end.

The debate about who is the greatest of all time will rumble on, but tennis knows all too well there will never be another Roger Federer.