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GREATEST ATHLETE?

# ROGER FEDERER LOOKS THE PART

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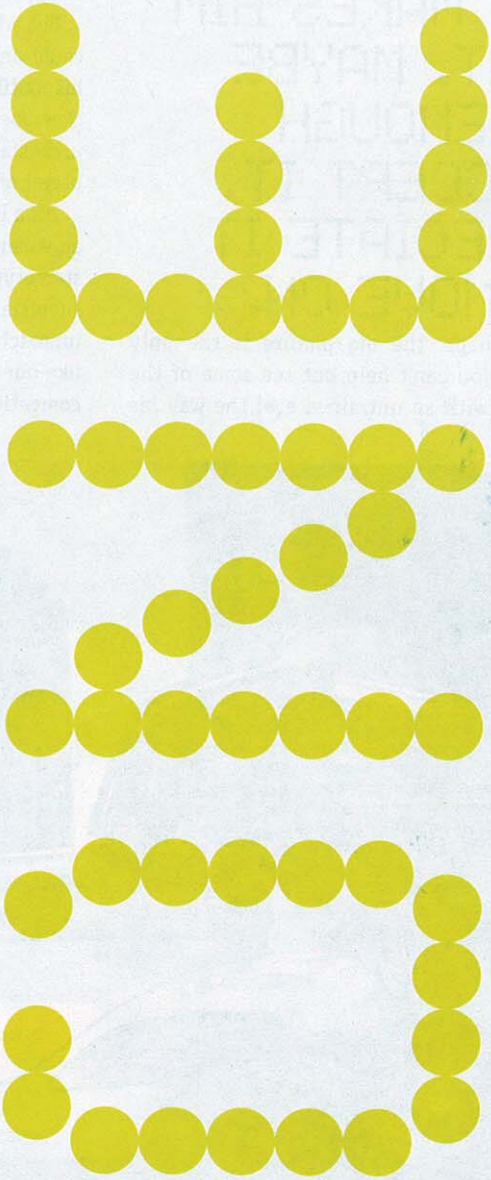


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NEW SHOW



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OF THE WORLD'S TOP JOCKS, ROGER FEDERER MAY BE THE TOUGHEST ACT TO FOLLOW.

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BY TIM KEOWN

MAYBE YOU DON'T  
NEED TO KNOW  
WHAT MAKES HIM  
GREAT. MAYBE  
IT'S ENOUGH  
TO ACCEPT IT,  
APPRECIATE IT  
AND MOVE ON.

For you, perhaps, the big picture is the only picture. But you can't help but see some of the details, even with an untrained eye: the way his

feet move precisely from one return to the next; the way he always seems to be playing half as hard and accomplishing twice as much as his opponent; the way he takes the allotted quarter-second of reaction time and turns it into premeditated art.

Maybe closer inspection defeats the purpose. Who knows? Smile, shake your head in admiration and move on—nothing wrong with that. Roger Federer does what he does, year after year, and the overall effect is conducive to distant admiration. Maybe you don't need to examine the brush strokes to appreciate the painting.

But what if you could delve deeper? What if you could answer that one question you ask whenever his routinely ridiculous talent draws your attention: *How does he do that?* What if you took a stab at understanding what makes him the greatest tennis player of our time and the greatest athlete, period?

It's a lot to ask, but first examine the man. From an American viewpoint, there is something almost stereotypically northern European about the Swiss superstar: the composure, the calm reserve, the unmatched grace and refinement. We Americans like our athletes pugnacious and tempestuous, the competitive rage oozing from their pores. But here

is a dilemma in human form: a dominant champion who looks as if he could play with a racket in one hand and a snifter of brandy in the other.

He has cultivated this perception through the natural force of his personality. He is among the most famous men in the world, winner of a record 16 Grand Slams—including three of the past four—yet he introduces himself by saying, “Hi, I’m Roger,” as if you didn’t know. He keeps appointments without a coterie of handlers. He is unique, an icon who asks perceptive questions and seems genuinely interested in the answers.

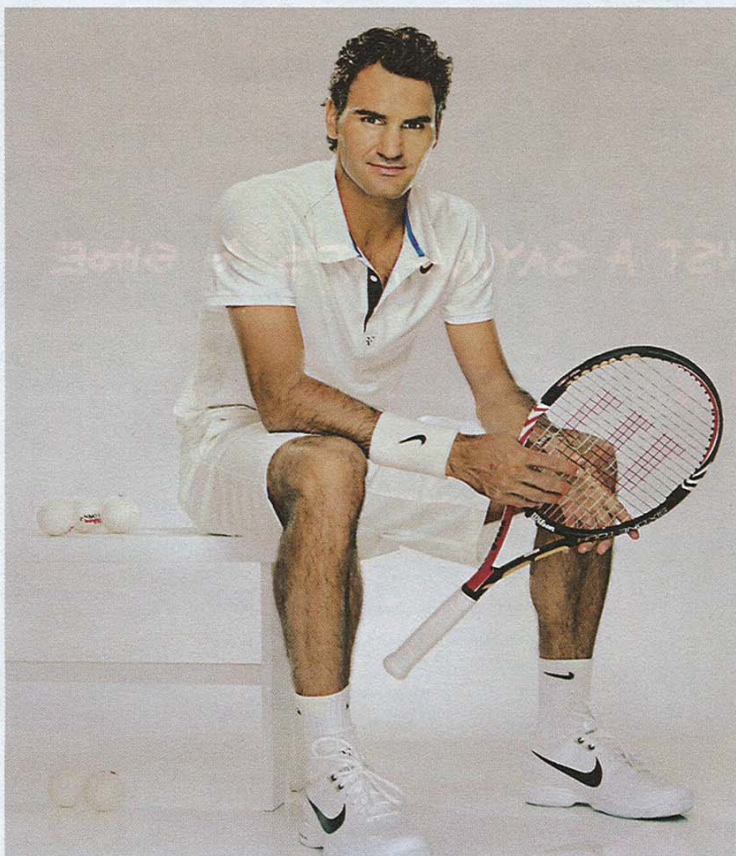
Few athletes reach the location in life where Federer now resides: at the top of his profession, old enough and mature enough to see his world with distance and perspective. He gives the impression of being slightly off to the side, assessing himself as a neutral observer. It’s a rare gift.

A pair of examples:

1. During a four-month stretch in early 2009, the tennis world was busy preparing the requiem for his reign. Rafael Nadal had defeated Federer in three of the previous four Slam finals. Nadal’s militaristic court occupation seemed destined to complete a *coup de force* of the game. Federer famously cried



A chauffeur-driven life has no appeal to Federer, who'd rather “just take the steering wheel.”



## FEDERER FACTS

### SPOTLIGHT HOG

- He's been No. 1 for 279 of the past 325 weeks. He could break Pete Sampras' record for total weeks at the top (286) on June 14.

### GOLDEN YEARS

- He won double-digit singles titles in 2004 (11), 2005 (11) and 2006 (12). His winning percentage for that stretch: 94.3.

### SLAM STREAK

- Through this year's Australian Open, he has reached the semis in 23 straight Slams and has played in the final 20 times.

### FIRE STARTER

- When he wins the first set at a major tournament, Federer is 172-5. When he wins the first two sets: 156-0.

### FAVORITISM

- Since Wimbledon 2004, he's 130-1 in Slam play vs. players outside the Top 5. That one loss? To No. 6 Juan Martin del Potro at the 2009 U.S. Open.

### IN CONTROL

- His racket head measures 90 square inches, smallest among Top 10 players. It produces less power but yields greater control.

### FEDERAL RESERVE

- He has endorsement deals with Wilson, Rolex and Nike, among others. His 2009 take, including prize winnings: \$36 million.

during the trophy ceremony after losing the 2009 Australian, putting Nadal in the slightly goofy position of having to apologize for winning. That spring in Miami, after an unforced error against Novak Djokovic in the semis, Federer smashed his racket, a shocking display of emotion.

"It was strange," he says. "I left Australia feeling really good about my game, but people said, 'He must be devastated. He cried on the podium.' But Rafa was playing great tennis; I have no problems acknowledging that. Just because a guy beats me a couple of times—he'd done that before. I thought, No problem, just one of those days.

"Then I went on vacation. When I came back people were asking, 'Are you okay?' I said, 'Sure, why wouldn't I be?' From there, it became a crisis: 'How are you going to get out of this?' I didn't see it that way, but there was nothing I could do. It was a hidden compliment, I guess, but also a bit annoying. Then, when I broke the racket, it was 'Uh-oh.' It built their case for crisis even more."

It's now a year later, but the look on Federer's angular face is freshly stunned. He's relaxing on a couch in the players' lounge at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden in March. He appears thinner than in previous years, a perception possibly attributable to his recent bout with a lung infection. To this day, he's mystified by the alarm that accompanied last year's losses.

The concern wasn't limited to the uninitiated. Says Pete Sampras: "He felt he lost his throne. It hit him like a ton of bricks—'Hey, I'm not the best player in the world anymore.' He felt he was playing someone he couldn't beat, and it was worse because Rafa was out-toughing him."

Since that perceived crisis, Federer has surpassed Sampras with his historic 15th Slam victory at Wimbledon, moved back to the No. 1 spot and won the 2010 Australian. He's clearly over the little-publicized back problems and mono that slowed his game a year earlier. And while it's true that Nadal's knee problems played a role in Federer's return to form, perhaps the biggest boost to his psyche was the knowledge that his wife, Mirka, was pregnant with twin girls. "I played incredibly well during Mirka's pregnancy," he says. "It must have created something in me to see that she was feeling great. She had that glow, and it helped me play great tennis."

Federer guards his training and preparation routines, but insiders say Nadal's challenge also forced changes. "Roger went back to work," says Rod Laver, the last man to accomplish the single-season Grand Slam, in 1969. "He developed a slice backhand to counter Nadal's heavy-topspin backhand. One thing about Roger: He remembers. If someone does something once, it's logged in his brain."

(Of his rivalry with Nadal, one of the most fascinating and respectful contrasts in history, Federer says, "I think it's a pity he gave up his pirate pants and the sleeveless. I thought our styles were colliding even more then. I kind of miss it.")

2. Facing Andy Murray in the Aussie final this year, Federer drew criticism for directing the following comment at the young Scotsman:

"He's in his second Grand Slam final now and I think the first one's always a bit tougher than the second one. Now that he didn't win the first one, I think it doesn't help for the second one around. Plus, he's playing, you know, me, who's won many Grand Slams ... I think he really needs it more than

I do, so the pressure's bigger on him."

It seemed like Federer was messing with Murray's mind. It also seemed to convey more than a small dose of arrogance, especially the "Plus, he's playing, you know, me" part. But this direct honesty is part of the Federer way. Several years ago he came to a conclusion: His dominance mandated a halt to false humility. He was too good to pretend, which could serve as a definition of greatness. "I always thought



Federer's cheering section: Mirka (left) and mom Lynette.

I should let the racket do the talking," he says. "You can do a great job on court 25, but nobody cares. But when I got to No. 1, I realized being only humble and always pretending everybody else is the favorite sounds odd, you know? When I am No. 1 in the world and I say, 'It's a miracle' if I win, who is going to accept that?"

Not many. And in Murray's case, Federer was right. It was over in three sets.

FEDERER IS remarkably comfortable in his own skin. His upbringing in Basel was surprisingly normal for a tennis prodigy, so surprising that he, not his

simulates Slam conditions. (His primary residence is near Zurich, Switzerland.) He is 28, an age we consider advanced in a precocious world dominated by helicopter parents and overstressed kids. The twins, Myla Rose and Charlene Riva, are 9 months old, traveling the Tour with their mom and dad. It is Mirka's dream to have Roger play long enough and well enough for their children to see him at the top of his game. Roger says he plans on playing 'til he's 35.

"I am lucky to live where I can see both worlds," Federer says. "I give everything on the court, and then I leave and I am relaxed. When I am with the kids and Mirka, I'm in a different world. I love the diversity of my life—all tennis all the time would drive me crazy."

How does this square with our belief in athletes as monotheistic worshippers of their sports? How can someone whose literal worth is released as a weekly ranking skip Tour events and say, "Vacation is crucial to us. I am one of the few who believe in vacations, to shut the body down and get away."

At press conferences he answers questions in four languages: Swiss-German, German, English and French. He grew up speaking Swiss-German but learned English from his South African mother. He was immersed in French during a two-year stint at a tennis academy in the French-speaking area of western Switzerland. (Which means he answered variations of "What's wrong?" four times a pop last year. The combinations seemed endless.) He answers for print reporters and TV reporters and radio reporters. Wait ... radio? Is this 1950? Is he that attention-starved? No and no. He does radio because it's important in Europe, and if

● "PEOPLE WERE ASKING, 'ARE YOU OKAY?' I SAID, 'SURE, WHY WOULDN'T I BE?' THEN, WHEN I BROKE THE RACKET, IT WAS, 'UH-OH.' IT BUILT THEIR CASE FOR CRISIS EVEN MORE."

parents or a coach, chose to pursue tennis exclusively at 12. Like Nadal, Federer was an accomplished youth soccer player. Like Nadal, and unlike many tennis stars, Federer doesn't seem scarred by events related to his childhood.

Dressed in a black warmup suit after a two-hour practice at Indian Wells, Federer spends 90 minutes answering and asking questions. The lounge is empty except for two boys who arrive about halfway through the interview and play history's quietest, most deferential game of pool. Federer apologizes for the illness (lung infection) that caused him to cancel a previous appointment in Dubai, where he lives part of the year because the warm weather

radio reporters travel the world to interview him, he will oblige.

He is so fastidious about his image that he went without an agent for several years. In fact, for the first six Slams he won, beginning with Wimbledon 2003, Mirka was his de facto agent/publicist. He met Mirka Vavrinec, a former tennis pro, at the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, where both represented Switzerland. She retired from the Tour in 2002, the same year she began traveling with him and organizing his practice, media and corporate schedules. Their relationship was both romantic and clerical. "She has always been the most important person in my career," he says. Federer had signed

with the IMG agency in 1997 but ended the relationship in 2003 because he did not want to be perceived as a hologram. "I never thought I should be made to be someone," he says. "I always wanted to become someone first. It's windy at the top, with many temptations—chasing the money, chasing titles. People always think you're driven by someone else, that you're some sort of robot. I never believed in that. My team was Mirka and my parents when I first got to the top. I'm proud of that."

Imagine that: Image *isn't* everything. He returned to IMG in 2005, on his terms. According

## THE POWER OF SMOOTH

In Roger Federer's world, tennis is a game of maximum efficiency. From the moment he sets his size-12 feet on the court, the world's greatest player puts himself in position to optimize energy better than anyone else in the game. Example: Every pro has a fast first step, but Federer has an exceptionally fast stop. His ability to decelerate instantly gives him an extra millisecond to position his feet, hips, chest and head into the vertical alignment necessary to generate force. Bulging biceps? He doesn't need them; added upper body weight would only slow the 6'1", 187-pound Swiss champ. He carries the bulk of his muscle mass in his lower body—glutes, quads, hamstrings, hips—which channels energy through his core and shoulders, fueling short, potent strokes. "He's got a great kinetic energy chain," says Jeff Chandler, an exercise physiologist and editor of the National Strength and Conditioning Association journal. Even Federer's behavior between points—no arguing, fidgeting or fist pumps—works to his advantage. Why? Nearly 75% of a match is downtime, and by staying calm he gives his muscles the opportunity to recover and generate ATP, the molecule that stores energy in the cells. Federer also plays a modest schedule (15 events vs. a Top 10 average of 20); the rest helps him stay fresh late into matches and avoid injuries, despite the game's explosiveness. Federer has appeared in every Slam since 2000 and has played 855 career matches without once retiring. And his career is far from over. Pete Sampras collected 14 Slams in 13 years. Federer has notched 16 in eight years. Yet thanks to his style of play, he could pile up Slams until mid-decade, or beyond. "Roger may turn out to be one of a kind," says Chandler. Correction: He already is.

—SHAUN ASSAEL



NICOLAS LUTTIAU/PRESSE SPORTS/USPRESSWIRE

to people in the Federer camp, he has turned down \$60 million in endorsement deals in the past 18 months alone. It seems believable. "He doesn't need money, and he's never chased the money," says Tony Godsick, Federer's agent. "Everything he does must be authentic."

So here we are, at another impasse. How can Federer be so utterly without airs? Could the world's best athlete also be the most normal?

"He's such a humble champion," Sampras says. "And he's always done it the right way."

LET'S GET back to Federer being the world's greatest athlete, which is bound to rankle the sports talk-radio set. Consider: He holds the most cherished record in his sport, and remains No. 1 at a time when he is nearly five years older than his nearest competitors. Get past the predisposition toward breathtaking dunks and open-field runs: Federer is quantitatively and stylistically the most dominant athlete of our time. You might hesitate to anoint a tennis player. The sport has issues. There's also the elitism, which limits participation and creates a talent pool of kids with access to courts and the means to acquire high-level instruction. Athletically, though, tennis presents an endless series of variables. Fast. Slow. Frantic. Deliberate. A match can last 54 minutes or five hours. It's a kaleidoscope of human movement, and it's intensely solitary: no coach to confide in, no teammates to huddle with, no substitutes to rely on.

Would physiologists, who assess Federer with a combination of science and wonder, diminish the visceral impact of his greatness? Would an intrusion of empirical data—the attempt to digitize magic—sever your relationship with tennis? Is it easier to bypass science and propagate the Mystery of Greatness, which demands that we simply shake our heads in amazement?

There are scientists who study tennis players, frame-by-frame, in super slo-mo stop-action. They sit around the USTA laboratories in Boca Raton, Fla., alchemizing wonder into science. They write papers with titles such as "Efficient Deceleration: The Forgotten Factor in Tennis-Specific Training." They attempt to quantify the lyrical words of tennis historian and writer Bud Collins, who says, "Every time I see Roger play I'm reminded of the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. The way he glides is breathtaking. We've never seen anything like it."

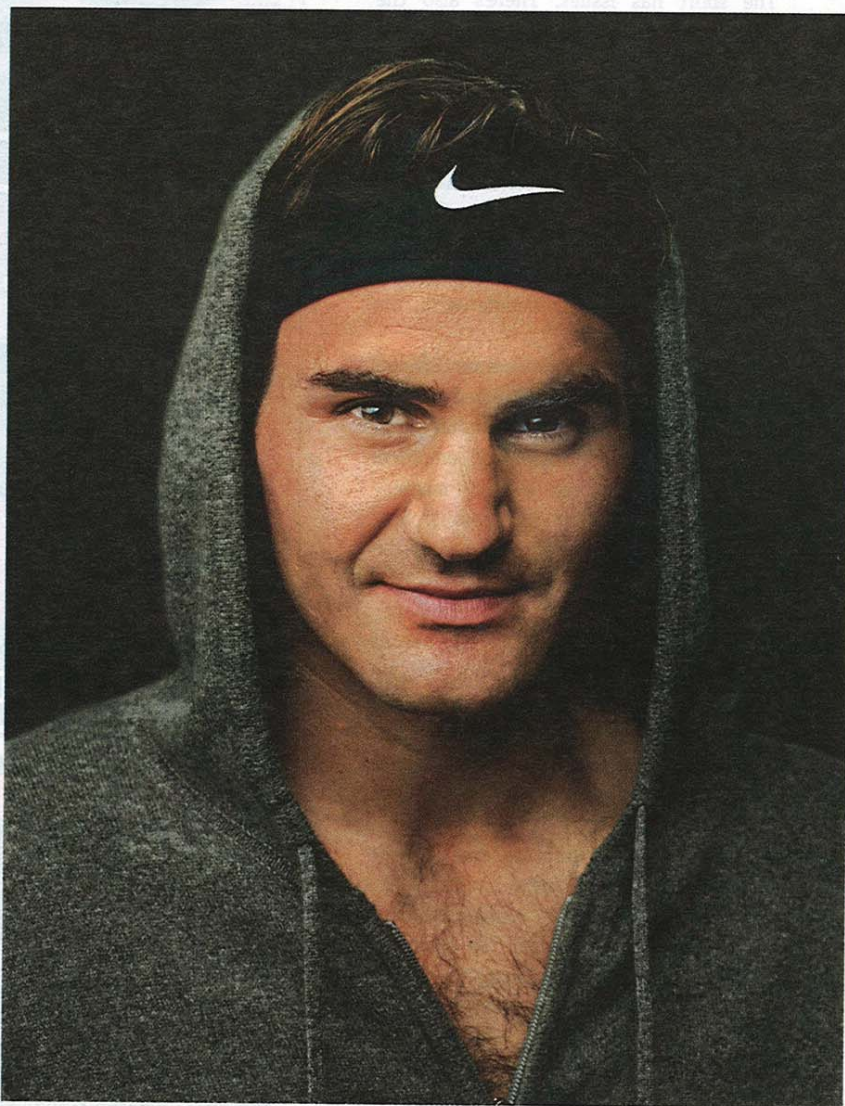
The physiologists know this: For many quantifiable measures of the game,

Federer is an anomaly. His anticipation, his balance, his power—they all defy convention. “I don’t think there is any one test that would show he is better than anyone else in the Top 100,” says Mark Kovacs, a renowned USTA exercise physiologist. “If you put him in the 40-yard dash, he wouldn’t be the fastest. If you put him in the weight room, he wouldn’t be the strongest. But the overall composition takes him off the charts.”

Federer’s efficiency is epic. He expends far less energy than Nadal in achieving the same result. His remarkable balance allows him to optimize his contact point even when lunging or leaping. Physiologists call this dynamic balance—the ball can be high or low, yet he retains an uncanny ability to maximize force and control. And his unparalleled ability to decelerate, to go from full speed to a full stop, allows him to change direction faster and in fewer steps. It’s no illusion that he covers more court with less strain. “Deceleration is every bit as important as



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acceleration,” Kovacs says, “maybe more so.” (See previous page.)

It is here that Kovacs attempts to merge science and wonder. He says that Federer’s nearly metaphysical ability to anticipate a shot is what makes him the world’s greatest. “He’s one or two shots ahead,” Kovacs says. Federer hits shots that dictate his opponent’s response—essentially, he’s playing both sides of the net. The other guy’s game is reduced to this: reacting to Federer. His opponent is a secretary, taking dictation. “What Roger has is not something you can teach, and not something he could explain,” Laver says. “He has tremendous anticipation—an inborn talent. He has a phenomenal ability to understand where shots are going to end up. It’s memory, it’s instinct—it’s why he’s rarely out of position.”

As Andre Agassi wrote in his autobiography, “It’s real simple. Most people have weaknesses, Federer has none.”

WOULD IT surprise you to learn he used to be a hothead? That Federer describes the pre-2001 version of himself, in typically dispassionate directness, as “a bit of a brat”? That he used to cry after losses and throw his racket as a matter of course and dye his hair blond and wear bright colors and experience life through only two emotions, ecstasy and despair?

When he won the world junior title at 17 he placed a sign on his hotel room door in Miami: Best Tennis Player in the World. “I was so proud,” he says. “It felt like standing on a mountain and looking down.”

He laughs now, the debonair superstar whom Agassi described as “looking like Cary Grant” when he enters the court. It’s good to know he wasn’t born like this, that he didn’t sprout whole as the man in the off-white sport coat taking Centre Court at Wimbledon like a refined monarch.

Before he played and beat Sampras in the fourth round of Wimbledon in 2001, he made peace with himself. “I decided I would remain calm,” he says. “I told myself, Let’s not make it miserable by having to win every single point, every single match. Let’s not make it a disaster every time you lose or throw a party every time you win.

“I knew it was going to be an incredible journey, so let’s enjoy it.”

Along the way, he transformed the sport, rescuing it from the square-jawed clench of the power-serve generation while infusing it with variety, class and longevity. Even if you don’t want to be bothered by the details of his greatness, you need to understand this: The man who astounds science with his ability to stop would prefer you don’t suggest he’s slowing down. ☹

Is Federer the world’s greatest athlete? If not, who is? E-mail the writer at [tim.keown@espnthemag.com](mailto:tim.keown@espnthemag.com).