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Why Roger Federer Is the Greatest of All Time

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Roger Federer, who I wrote about in the magazine's U.S. Open issue, was the big story coming into the Open; the state of his game dominated the conversation for most of the tournament. But the big story coming out of the Open is his longtime nemesis, Rafael Nadal, who won the men's title last night with an enthralling four-set victory over the world No. 1, Novak Djokovic. The win gives the 27-year-old Spaniard his 13th grand-slam singles title at exactly the same age that Federer won his 13th, which leaves the whole GOAT debate even more unsettled. GOAT? That's short for greatest of all time and is an acronym that has been tossed around promiscuously during the Federer years. With a record 17 majors highlighting his numerous career achievements, Federer has staked a strong claim to GOAT status. But he has a losing record against Nadal, and a lopsided one at that. The two have played 31 times since 2004, and Nadal has won 21 of those matches. Federer's record against Nadal is a large blot on an otherwise remarkable résumé. How can you be considered the greatest player ever if you were arguably not even the best player of your own era? When I spoke with Federer at Wimbledon, he didn't object when I noted that some feel that Nadal ought to be regarded as the finest male player of all time. "I believe we'll never quite know," Federer told me.

For the moment, I'm not so equivocal: I think Federer has earned the GOAT label. Yes, he has a lousy record against Nadal. However, none of the other players who figure prominently in the GOAT discussion — Rod Laver, Pete Sampras, Don Budge — had to contend with a foe like Nadal, who is now third behind Federer and Sampras among men's all-time grand-slam winners. Fifteen of Nadal's 31 matches against Federer were on clay, Nadal's best surface, and the Nadal won 13 of those. The usual tactic, at this point in any

GOAT discussion, is to take clay out of the equation. But let's not. Let's instead acknowledge Nadal for the clay-court colossus that he is. Let's also acknowledge what Federer has achieved on clay, even though it is his weakest surface. He has reached the final of the French Open five times, winning it once, has won 10 clay-court tournaments in total, has lost to Nadal in the finals of 11 others (including four times at the French) and has established himself as not only the second-best clay-court player of his generation but as one of the best of the modern era. If Nadal didn't exist, it is possible we would be talking about Federer as the greatest clay courter of all time.

Meanwhile, despite his struggles with Nadal, Federer claimed 17 majors, spent over 300 weeks as the No. 1 ranked player, won six year-end championships and reached the semifinals of 23 straight grand-slam events and the quarterfinals 36 consecutive times — a display of consistency and durability the likes of which the sport has perhaps never seen. Federer has done all this at a time when the competition is deeper than it has ever been, and he has played tennis as beautifully as it has ever been played. Do yourself a favor: go to YouTube, type in “Federer greatest shots” and enjoy the show; just be sure to have a soft place for your jaw to land.

I recognize that aesthetic pleasure might seem like a weak argument to offer on Federer's behalf, but for most of its history, tennis was a sport that showcased things like elegance and finesse, and many of us fustots still prize those qualities. At Wimbledon in June, I watched Federer crush a player named Victor Hanesu in a first-round match on Center Court that barely lasted an hour. Federer's creative flair and improvisational genius was on full display, and in that hour, I derived so much more enjoyment than I get from watching, say, Djokovic and Andy Murray push each other around the baseline for four hours. The fact that Federer, in addition to all the winning, has been able to conjure such ethereal tennis while matching the firepower of his rivals and at a time when so many things — the rackets, the strings, the courts, the size, strength and speed of the players — conspire against the expression of

beauty in tennis, is testament to his greatness.

But just as he had the last word at this year's Open, Nadal may yet have the last word in the GOAT debate. If he can stay healthy (a big if: he has struggled with injuries for much of his career), he is certainly capable of equaling or even surpassing Federer's record. Were that to happen, the combination of major titles plus the winning record against Federer would make it tough even for the most stalwart Federer partisans to deny Nadal the GOAT label. Beauty matters in tennis, but ultimately, numbers matter more.

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