

Brand Federer: The Art Of Winning by Losing

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This Is 34: Roger Federer Will Not Go Away, Thankfully

Life is not short. It becomes short. It begins as an open expanse of possibility and expression. You set goals, learn skills, fail, succeed, fail, succeed. Somewhere along the way, time accelerates. The days blend into each other; seasons blur. This is often in direct conflict with our human tendency to slow down. Our identities form and our path seems set before us. Our energies are assaulted. Hangovers last longer. We lose flexibility. The years become a battle between the sense of settling and the exponential speed of life's changes. What we make, or don't make, of our increasing limitations is another way of describing the confusing continuation of becoming what we are.

One of the singular gifts of Roger **Federer** is the way he plays with time — the way he cuts it off at the pass. This is how he plays now: efficiently but patiently, finding the shortest way from point a to point b, from serve to ending. In a game often characterized by long baseline rallies, he rarely plays points that last more than nine shots. While epic matches are increasingly the norm, he quickly moves off the court. In five rounds, he has spent a little over eight hours on court — or less than twice the time it took **Kevin Anderson** to defeat **Andy Murray** in one match, and three hours less than he'd spent on court through five rounds at the U.S. Open last year. Last night, in his quarterfinal against **Richard Gasquet** — a player who used to evoke comparisons to him for his fluid one-handed backhand — **Federer** won 6-3, 6-3, 6-1, in an astonishingly crisp 87 minutes. He hit 50 winners. **Gasquet** hit eight.

This might have been boring, recalling the serve-and-one-and-done style of the big servers that he supplanted and surpassed. But yesterday, his game only seemed to become more beautiful as he went. He cut off sharp angles and created angles of his own; flung controlled backhand passing shots on the occasions that the Frenchman approached. He pushed **Gasquet** back as he pressed forward; on any court besides Ashe, **Gasquet** would have hit some of his shots from the stands. And of course **Federer** saw his advantage and pressed it, drawing short balls that he could put away, or coolly nicking a devastating drop shot. He is taking control by taking risks, finding freedom in economy. And at the age of 34, playing some of the best tennis of his life.

By the end of the 2013 season, it appeared **Federer** was following a relatively familiar course for an aging superstar athlete. The spaces between victories grew. The wins evoked more

nostalgia than promise; they made people look back, not forward. **Federer** remained optimistic but lost regularly in big matches to his younger rivals. He was visibly tired at the end of those matches. A nagging back began to inhibit his movement, restricting the flow that defined his game for a decade. Almost imperceptible changes in his strength and his speed wreaked havoc with his timing. He stubbornly refused to change the size of his racket, long after it was clear that the small, stiff frame he used was too unresponsive. He mishit backhands, whacked balls off the frame and into the stands. He briefly switched to a larger racket and quickly switched back; he seemed to be flailing. He'd lost his confidence. He'd start to think, [as he put it last month](#) in Cincinnati, "Ah, love-15. This could be a break already." He played passively instead of aggressively; he looked at percentages instead of chasing luck. More and more, people were asking him about retirement. To most observers, his game was in terminal decline.

But a funny thing happened on the way out to pasture. While many were pointing to all the things **Federer** could no longer do, while many criticized his stubborn inability to accept the end, he was stubborn in his insistence that he could change: He could win again. His tone somehow calmed as he went through the worst of it, content in his obvious love for the game. This was seen by many as a sign that **Federer** really was just happy to be there, to live a good and charmed life as a goofy dad with legions of fans and a NetJet on speed dial. It was, instead, an unshakable belief in his legendary work ethic, his creativity and analytical skills, and his otherworldly, if understated, competitiveness.

"Experience can be a very good thing," **Federer** [said](#) to *Sports Illustrated's* Jon Wertheim last year, "but sometimes it can also be a hindrance. You're not playing as freely, you're playing the percentages too much. It becomes too calculated. I like to play free-flowing tennis."

He meant something more specific than having fun — though there was fun in it. He meant taking the moment. "I know I can hit great shots," he explained. "But it's something that goes against logic. One-in-10 [chance] back in the day, one was enough. But today one out of 10 is not enough."

"I have to remind myself to play like a junior sometimes," he told Wertheim. He had to rethink risk. New limitations might allow new forms. But rethinking risk also means rethinking loss.

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Roger **Federer** has now been mostly losing big matches for longer than he was mostly winning them. He has not just enjoyed the greatest successes in the history of the sport; he has a career worth of all-time losses. This is the wonderful complexity that longevity has afforded his legacy: he is both the GOAT and the GLOAT, the Greatest of All Time and the Greatest Loser of All Time. He has *lost* more Grand Slam finals than all but seven other players have *won*.

How much does winning mean when you've already won everything? Some of **Federer's** losses are as compelling as some of his most dominant wins. He is playing in a stronger era now than when he won all the time, facing players whose games were influenced by his advances. He is outlasting the players who were supposed to supplant him. He is still here because he has been able to lose so well.



Nadal and an emotional Federer pose with their trophies after the men's final match of the 2009 Australian Open.

LUCAS DAWSON/GETTY IMAGES

This does not reflect his inconsistency. It is instead his domination of one era and his stubborn relevance in the next. He has been part of more great matches than any other tennis player ever. More amazingly, he has routinely recovered from defeat. Only 10 weeks after the shock of losing the 2008 Wimbledon title to **Rafa Nadal** in the Greatest Match Ever Played, he won the **U.S. Open** — dropping only three sets on the way to the title. After being reduced to tears in another five-set defeat to **Nadal** at the Australian Open in 2009, which left some questioning whether he could beat Pete Sampras's mark, he seized the rarest of opportunities — a **Rafa Nadal** loss at the French — to win his only title at Roland Garros. A month later he was **Wimbledon** champion.

Between his last two major titles, he lost a final and five semis — and had a handful of match points. He also hammered **Nadal** at the 2010 **ATP World Finals** and ended **Novak Djokovic's** undefeated start to 2011 with an upset at the French. The streaks ended, of course: first the unprecedented 23 consecutive major semifinals. Then, after 178 straight Grand Slam wins in matches that he led two sets to love, the loss to **Jo-Wilfried Tsonga** at Wimbledon in 2011. By 2013, when it seemed that his career was spiraling toward its end, a loss in the second round at Wimbledon ended his run of 36 straight major quarterfinals. By the time he lost to **Tommy**

Robredo at the **U.S. Open** that year, some of his fans watched him with one eye shut.

Stubbornness has its place in tennis, a devilishly difficult sport — a repetitious grind of mental fortitude and muscle memory. And he had good reason to hold on to what he had done for so long. In 2012, after all, he had reclaimed no. 1. Already, though, he was thinking about what to change and how. “You can be stubborn and successful or you can give it up a bit and change things around,” [he told reporters](#) last week. “For me it’s important to have a bit of both ... You need that stubbornness to succeed. Also, I think the idea of change is really important, otherwise it can become a bit boring to some extent ... But I’ve always been very open and relaxed about all these things. Maybe now we see it more than previously. But clearly the back issue in ’13 gave me the opportunity to look at things from a broader scale rather than just think I need to get my back straight and then I’ll be fine again and we’ll go back to the status quo.” Starting in 2014, with new coach Stefan Edberg, **Federer** began to redefine his game. He started using a new racket, tinkered with it, made it his own. The number of shanks on his backhand went down; the pace went up.

He started coming to net, shortening points, undermining the tyranny of topspin. He started to come into net, even — like the throwback caricature he so often adopts — to serve and volley. He changed the limits of the court — shortening it, playing with angles, exploiting that preternatural sixth sense he has, the sense of where you are. As the time left in his career contracted, he decided to do more with less.

He is the second-best player in the world now and sometimes looks like the first. He narrowly lost the **Wimbledon** final to Djokovic, his play a letdown after the sublime heights he’d reached in beating **Murray** in the semis. His serve had been nearly perfect, his returns were punishing, and his game glided from there. The balance, the constructions, the movement forward: It would be easy to call it a flashback to his prime, but it was something else. It was **Federer** as he is, an evolutionary advance, a riff on his old self.

Where once **Federer** was fighting against time, now he is dancing with it. Where once it seemed that he was rushing out of necessity, now he looks like he is doing so out of a kind of joyful efficiency. The pace of his service game is at once frenetic and serene, like a movie in fast-forward that’s just a wide-lens shot of a peaceful lake. He barely bothers to bounce the ball between serves, doesn’t mind when it skips away, just tosses and wheels. His serve has been phenomenal; never the fastest, it is still among the most accurate and devastating. He recently had a streak of 116 unbroken games. He uses his serve as an aggressive way to set up points — but even the serve itself is a kill shot. In the fourth round, John Isner, one of the best servers of all time, had 17 aces; **Federer** had 15.

The shot that everyone is talking about though, of course, is his half-volley return. Healthier than in previous years, his body is once again catching up with his mind. Older or not, **Federer** still has perhaps the best anticipation and reflexes in the game; he is still the best fast-court player in the world. So he made the fast courts even faster. In Cincinnati, while practicing with the mercurial Frenchman Benoit Paire, **Federer** was tired. He wanted to cut practice short. “That’s when I started to run in and hit returns,” [he later told reporters](#). “I hit a couple for a winner. They were, like, ridiculous. He laughed, I laughed, [coach] Severin [Luthi] laughed. Then I did it again

in the next practice, just to see if it actually would still work again. Then I tried it the next practice and it still worked. That's when Severin said, 'Well, what about using it in a match?' I was like, 'Really?'"

He did it once, and it worked. He did it again. A reporter suggested that he couldn't get away with it against a top player, a player like **Djokovic** or **Murray**. **Federer** laughed. "Why not?"

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He has changed the game and the culture around it, largely in his image. Walk through the grounds at **Flushing Meadows** and everywhere you'll see his face and his initials, his logo. It is the same, it seems, as it has always been. He is the favorite everywhere; every court is his home court.

This hold he has on the sport is both an example of egregiously successful branding and also of his endurance. The endurance means we can pause; we can stop rushing toward the end.

Throughout these shifts, his game remains recognizably his own. It has retained its artistic and aesthetic qualities — which were always, anyway, byproducts of the efficacy of his strokes. What stands out is his economy of movement, not as extravagant but no less audacious. **Federer** has seamlessly fused two brands of tennis, one that was his own and the other that was largely lost to the ubiquity of baseline play. His fluidity remains, but in service of something more explosive. He takes time away, but also stands almost outside of it. Watching him live, it's easy to lose track of the score, even of the game or point. It's hard not to watch him exist simply from shot to shot. Think of the swiping running-back-no-look-over-the-shoulder get he made against Isner. Who will remember that Isner blocked the ball back and won the point?

It's a cliché to think of **Federer** as a religious experience. Still, when we watch him — still there, still now — we feel a kind of reverence. If *How did he do that?* was the cry of **Federer-as-a-religious-experience**, now the awe is grounded in assurance. *Of course he did that.*

This is something like the transformation of ecstasy into faith. He is still here. And there is, and always will be, more to his game than we can imagine, we can see.

Hitting that new return in Cincinnati has made him think. Perhaps, [he told reporters](#), there are "so many things I actually can do that maybe I didn't always know I could do or didn't dare to do because I thought it was too crazy or too — let's say, the percentages weren't — I wouldn't think they would be in my favor. After this week I might look at that a little bit different." It sounds like arrogance. Perhaps it's something simpler. Perhaps it's something we can share, something like belief.