

Why Federer is still the Greatest



by Miles Mathis

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I am not much of a sports fanboy, but I have watched a little tennis over the years. I played in junior high and high school, winning a few trophies, but never was that good. My legs weren't (aren't) that great and I didn't like running. Golf was my first game.† So I know enough to have an opinion, and care just enough to write it down, though in this case I am not sure why. Slow day, I guess, after three papers yesterday. I also have a pretty good ability to analyze and weigh facts and numbers, so here goes.

I think a lot of people, like me, have a basic instinct that Federer is the greatest, but with Djokovic now going three up on him in the majors tally, they have become very quiet. I just did a search and almost no one is still claiming Federer is the greatest. For the lazy, the argument for Djokovic is pretty strong at a glance, resting mainly on that majors tally and the head-to-head match-up, which Djokovic also leads 27-23. But I will show that neither is definitive. In calculating something like this, you don't just stop at two statistics, strong though they may seem.

But before I get into it, I will tell you why I don't include Nadal in this argument. I write him off immediately. You may think it is because 14 of his titles came from the French Open, but it isn't. It is because I believe he was heavily into PEDs. I have always thought he should have been bounced from tennis, and I still think it. I could tell the first time I looked at him that he was juiced. His biceps are too large for a tennis player, and his muscles have that veiny, plumped look you get from drugs. The thinning hair is another clue, though it isn't definitive. Sampras had the same problem and I don't think he was juicing. If he was, it was with lower doses. These guys should at least do us the favor of hiding it well, and Nadal didn't hide it at all. Because of his privileged background, I guess he thought he didn't have to.

Tennis is famously lax in drug testing. Just remember Agassi, who later admitted in his book he was addicted to meth while playing and lied about it, but they only caught him once and did nothing, because he claimed it was from a sports drink. You have to laugh. More recently the coke-head Gasquet tested positive, but he claimed it was from kissing a girl at a nightclub. No, seriously. And the authorities bought it, just slapping him on the wrist. Cilic also got caught but was let off with a

short ban. They were only slightly harder on the ladies, see Hingis and Sharapova.

Now to Djokovic. Is he also juiced? If so, he hides it pretty well. He hasn't allowed himself to bulk up like Nadal and he uses only for stamina. But he does have a different look to him than Federer. Federer looks more like the old-school player, with a skinny opposite arm and no ripped quality. You will say the arm is explained by the fact he is a one-hander on the backhand, while the other two use both arms. And that is true to a certain extent. But there are other tell-tales. Like Murray, Djokovic is very meaty above the knee, to an unnatural extent. You don't get that from playing tennis all day, or even from squats. Compare to Connors. Connors was extraordinarily fit and fast, but he didn't have that meat above his knee. You get it from PEDs. And the thing is, Djokovic didn't have that in the early years, when he was super-skinny. Again indicating it isn't genetic.

A large part of Federer's greatness was his mobility, and he got that from his muscular legs. He has large knees and calves, but they don't look juiced. He had them even as a teen. He was just lucky that way. Born with it, no drugs needed. Sampras was the same way, though slightly less so. Sampras had the muscle, but his conformation wasn't quite as perfect as Federer. Federer was always more catlike. Sampras had a better serve, but Federer was better at almost everything else.

Was Federer also juiced for stamina? No way to know, since the authorities let everyone slide. All I can say is that if so, he hid it better than the other two. His entire demeanor on the court also points to lower dosages. He was far calmer than his competitors, rarely going beyond a little fist clench while everyone else was in constant hysterics. That's why we like him, and that is one big reason our guts are telling us he is still the greatest while the internet is telling us he isn't. We are weighing things that are hard to get to with statistics. But here's a statistic for it: Federer won the ATP Fan Favorite award 19 straight years. Nadal finally won it in 2022, only because Federer wasn't there. Djokovic has never won it.

Now let's look at that head-to-head match-up. That would seem fatal to Federer, but it isn't. Why? **Because he isn't the same age as Djokovic.** Federer is six years older, which is considerable. He is not from the same era as Djokovic, he is from an *overlapping* era. Sampras is ten years older than Federer, and no one compares them head-to-head. It would be like comparing Laver to Connors, who was 14 years younger. You can compare people head-to-head in tennis only when they are the same age. Tennis isn't like golf. In golf, which isn't as athletic, players commonly peak in their 30s. That isn't true in tennis, where age matters. So the fact that Federer could manage 23 wins against the much younger Djokovic is actually a huge statistic *in his favor*. His head-to-head number is amazingly good. It is so good that when we weight for age, Federer actually comes out on top of Djokovic in that statistic. Weighting for age, and assuming they are equally strong, you would expect Federer to win only about 1/3rd of those matchups, but he won 46% of them! You would expect him to have won most when he was youngest, at his peak, and none when he was older. But that isn't what we find. What we find is that Federer had the longest, strongest peak of any player ever, winning majors even when Djokovic was at his peak. Those three late majors in 2017-18 in his late 30s against a strong field are unheard of in tennis.* Federer went 18-1 in 2017, at age 35-36, which is astounding. He had a 92% win percentage that year, as good as Djokovic's best year, but Djokovic was only 28 in his best year. Also remember that Federer came within a mole's whisker of beating Djokovic at Wimbledon in the final in 2019. Federer was almost 38. So even with a loss, Federer played way beyond expectation for someone six years older. That still counts very strongly for, not against him, and Djokovic has nothing similar on his card. As a comparison, Sampras was finished at the majors at age 30. So was Connors. Borg and McEnroe were done by 26.

We find the same thing with major wins. No one would weight the four majors equally. The prestige of Wimbledon and the USOpen are far greater than the French or Australian. Most players would give three or four Australians for one Wimbledon. Same for the French, which is a specialist's tournament. If the French and Australian Opens weren't majors, a lot of players would skip them. The Australian is an off-season jet-lag, and the French is . . . in France, where you have to deal with the French. Nuff said. Because the bulk of Djokovic's wins are in Australia, he actually loses to Federer if we limit majors to real majors like Wimbledon and the USOpen, 13-10. Or say we weight the big four like this: Wimbledon 4, USOpen 3, Australian 1, French 1. In that case Federer is still ahead, 54-50.

Speaking of the USOpen, we see Federer being 3-3 against Djokovic there, which, again, shouldn't be happening. As the far older player, you would expect the head-to-head to be something like 2-4, or worse. Federer is 1-3 against Djokovic on his favorite court, Wimbledon, which is what you would expect from someone six years older. So Federer's record at the USOpen is all the more amazing.

And here is something no one else is talking about: we also have to weight wins against the field. What we find is a big three whose records are far beyond anyone else's, so we have to take that into account. By some kind of statistical fluke, the three winningest players all came up in the same twenty year period, playing head-to-head. But because he was the youngest of those three, Djokovic has benefitted most from the field weakness at the end of that period. Nadal and Djokovic took wins from Federer, and Djokovic took wins from Nadal, but no one of equal caliber is taking wins from Djokovic. Now that Nadal is all but gone, Djokovic is even collecting French Opens! Federer could never do that, since he never faced such a weak French Open field. Medvedev took one major from Djokovic, but that is his only major. Same thing for Alcaraz. Beyond them, the current top-ten rankings are a bunch of nobodies. You will say Federer benefitted from a similar weakness before Nadal and Djokovic arrived, but that isn't true. He not only played against Sampras and Agassi, he played against Andy Roddick—who pushed Federer far more than anyone is now pushing Djokovic. Also Hewitt and Safin. But it is true the general field has been weak in this period, except for the big three, which is precisely why they won everything. And that is why we have to study the finer points of their timeline, weighing all statistics against eachother.**

Here's a big stat still on Federer's side: total tournaments won. 103-94. Federer has been to far more finals, 157-133. Of course by those stats, the greatest would be Connors, who is still ahead of Federer in both. And Djokovic may catch Federer. Most people actually in the game would say these two stats are as important as majors, and probably more important. They are like games won for a quarterback, instead of Super Bowls won. If Connors had won just a few more majors, he would be a serious contender here, so he probably wishes he hadn't thrown big tournaments like he did. ‡ Even so, we have to remember that he was banned from the French Open for very lame reasons, and most pros didn't bother to travel to Australia in the 1970s, for the reason I gave above. So we can really only compare Connors to the big three at the USOpen and Wimbledon. He won seven, which puts him ahead of Nadal. Sampras also didn't care much for the French or Australian, but won 12 at Wimbledon and the US Open, putting him ahead of Djokovic. McEnroe didn't play in Australia until 1983 and never even made a finals. Borg also hated Australia, going there only once. So the current idea of majors is very new.

Federer has more hardcourt titles *and* more grass titles than Djokovic. Most people don't know Federer also won 10 Halle Opens, the big German grass court title.

Federer also has the longest winning streak on the Tour, at 24.

Another thing we could use to settle this is to look at the fifth major, the ATP Finals. Federer and Djokovic have both won it six times, so we have to dig deeper. Federer has made it to 10 finals to Djokovic's eight. In matches won, Federer again leads 59-46. That helps a bit, since this is indeed an important stat.

We can do the same thing for majors, but we again get a tie: both Federer and Djokovic have been second 11 times. So let's look at matches won in majors. Federer leads with 369. I could not find a number for Djokovic.

But here's the biggie. If we take Federer's 16 best years, we find a win percentage of 86.5. In his best four years, we find a win percentage of 92.75. His best two years were 95 and 95. The same math for Djokovic finds 84.9, 90.75, 93 and 92. So no matter how we focus this, this very important statistic reads for Federer. He hit higher highs than Djokovic, both short term and long term.

So even if Djokovic passes Federer on a lot of these big stats, it won't change my mind. Federer got his stats playing against two super-strong younger players, almost his equal. Djokovic didn't. Djokovic has never had to play a younger player that was nearly his equal, and though he had to play against the greatest, he always had a six-year advantage in age on him. That fact is crucial, and it has to be factored into all stats, you see.

Last but not least, Federer is just beautiful to watch. You will say that is beside the point, but it isn't. It is very much to the point, since tennis is a spectator sport. Without the huge stadium and TV crowds, nobody would be talking about any of these guys. They wouldn't be rich or famous. A large part of the draw of professional tennis since 2000 has been due to one guy: Roger Federer. We know this because since he retired, audience and advertising numbers have fallen dramatically. I will be told part of that is Covid, which is true, but I believe a large part is Federer. People showed up to watch him, win or lose, and that is because of the way he looks and moves. It was the same with Borg. Even without what you would call a movie star face, Federer has a grace and a style that is just flat out fun to watch. He makes it look easy. Plus, with his squash shots, through-the-leg shots, and other trick shots, he brought a flare to the game we hadn't seen before from the top player. Try to imagine Lendl doing any of that. Federer also brought the drop shot back into tennis big time. You can't just say that doesn't count here. Everything counts here, and showmanship and audience approval count a lot. So it is foolish to limit the argument to a couple of limited statistics. Calling some tournaments and not others majors is mostly a marketing ploy, dreamed up by advertisers, since the court and players are the same. So basing the greatest on an arbitrary four is silly. If you are going to compare them statistically, at least use overall stats and weight them properly. Otherwise you are going to get what we now see: a finessed argument that contradicts what our gut is telling us: Roger is the one, and he will be the one until someone with greater style, panache, and win-percentage comes along. That won't be Djokovic, no matter what he does in the next few years.

Is Djokovic even number 2? Well, if he did no more PEDs than Federer, probably. But it would take a lot more research to figure it out, and I am not up to it. Most people forget that Ken Rosewall also won 23 majors in two decades from 1953 to 1972. Rod Laver won 19 in the same period. You will say Djokovic would beat them like a drum, but give him a wooden racket, crap shoes, and take away his supplements, and it is no longer so certain. Personally, I have my doubts. But one thing is for sure: we will never know. Remember, I like Djokovic for refusing the vaccine. I am not prejudiced against him. He is a fearsome player, and not even Federer would deny that.

Or maybe it was all rigged and all of this is meaningless.**

†For future biographers, if any: at age 13 I won the junior club championship in golf and got second in tennis in the same year. I remember having to play four matches in tennis on the same morning—two of them 3-sets—and complaining about it. I told them even the pros didn't play 10 sets in a row, without even a break for lunch. They just answered that we only had the courts until noon, at which time the old ladies would totter out with their mimosas. I even remember the guy I lost to in the finals, Peter Brown. Though the same age as me, he was a year behind me in school. At that time he was much more popular than me, since I was at a nadir. I had stopped growing and was scrawny and small for my age (after being tall in grade school). I wore glasses. And it was about to get worse, because at 14 I would go through puberty and my hair would go kinky curly. I hit full-on Napoleon Dynamite. Anyway, for some reason that has never been clear to me, Pete was ranked number one and snagged a first-round bye, so coming into the finals he had played four sets to my eight. I was dead. But I got him back once school started, since we were on the same team. I challenged him immediately and beat him, proving I could beat him fresh. I was ranked ahead of him when I got kicked off the team a few months later for telling the asshole coach to take a leap. But that is another story. The next year, ninth grade, I was technically still in junior high but played with the high school golf team second semester. Since I was ranked number 5 as an “off-campus freshman”, I would have lettered in both tennis and golf in the same year, but it wasn't allowed. I didn't letter in tennis, either, since you had to be on the team the whole year. I won the junior club championship in golf five years in a row, in my age group. We also dominated the father-son tournaments. This was Lubbock CC.

*Yes, it looks like Djokovic will do a similar thing, but he is not competing against a strong field now. Federer's field included Nadal and Djokovic. Djokovic's current field does not include Federer or Nadal.

**We should also figure out who was more sinned against by Andy Murray being gifted two Wimbledons and a USOpen in an obvious stand down. I have previously suggested those outcomes were finessed [if you don't believe me, [just watch this closely](#)], so they should have gone either to Djokovic or Federer. I would say Djokovic threw the 2013 Wimbledon, and Federer and Raonic threw the 2016. Djokovic also threw the 2012 USOpen to Murray. But Federer also bowed out suspiciously early in those tournaments, especially the 2013 Wimbledon, where he was out in the second round despite being the defending champion. It looks to me like he didn't wish to be the one throwing the final to Murray in straight sets. So that skews this whole majors question mightily.

‡For the record, I believe Connors was paid to throw Wimbledon to Arthur Ashe. See [here](#) for how staged it all was. Or you can watch highlights [here](#), where I think it is blindingly obvious. Remember, Ashe was nine years older and had only been playing 3-set matches since 1973. So it is convenient he beat Connors 6-1, 6-1 in the first two sets at Wimbledon, in ludicrously short points. Watching that film will show you Connors didn't disguise it very well. He is grinning like a naughty child the whole time. At several points, you can see that Connors is throwing it so clumsily, Ashe gets mad and hits the ball out on purpose himself. It is the sloppiest professional match of all time, and Connors has an ugly unforced error on almost every point. Looking back, it is difficult to believe the crowd didn't riot or boo them off the court. Even the announcers are stunned into silence. How do you comment on someone throwing a Wimbledon final in such outlandish fashion? I have to believe someone pulled Connors to the side after the first two sets and ordered him to quit hitting every ball out. They said, “C'mon, man, we are paying you to make this look real. This is just pathetic!” The misdirection on this match is awful to this day, with many people hired to misdirect, saying Connors choked, Ashe played him for a fool, etc. Some criminally miscount unforced errors. [One guy](#) claims Connors had 13 unforced errors in the match. You have to laugh. He had more unforced errors than that in the first three games. You can see more unforced errors than that in the brief highlights reel I linked to above at Youtube. As you study that highlights reel, I encourage you to also study the crowd. It just proves once again that people are zombies. They sit there quietly clapping on cue as this transparent crime against reality unfolds in front of them.

Speaking of which, the Tour de France is currently running as well, and I can't watch it due to the pathetic “fans” waving flags in front of the riders, running along, and generally making asses of themselves on TV. It is a sad testament of humanity. I keep wishing they would run a motorcycle with a wide cowcatcher on the front, like old trains had, throwing all those miserable creatures clear and out into the weeds. Every year some brainless fan collides with a cyclist, causing injury, or brings down the whole peloton, but I guess they can't outlaw it in a country of 65 million assholes, not including the dregs of humanity who fly in internationally to act like ninnies.

☒ And of course Alcaraz is doping. He makes Nadal look like Barney Fife.