

Roger Federer, the master of reinvention

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For a man widely assumed to have achieved all that he did because of his otherworldly talent, Roger Federer was also the master of reinvention.

Federer, it's true, is one of the most gifted players to have ever picked up a racket. But after he announced [his plan to retire from the sport](#) at the age of 41, it's striking when reflecting on his 1,500-plus career matches, which span 24 years and include 20 grand-slam titles, to think of how many different iterations of him we saw while he remained fundamentally the same. How else could he have stayed at the top for so long?

Starting at the very beginning, it now feels inconceivable to think, given his ice-cool exterior on the court, that the young Federer was something of a hothead. As a junior and when starting out on the professional tour, he would get emotional in matches, throw rackets and tantrums, and find a way to lose against far less talented opponents. He realised he had to change this, and resolved to be more Bjorn Borg and less John McEnroe on the court.

Federer initially worried he had gone too far the other way and effectively neutered himself during the tricky period between his breakout win over Pete Sampras at Wimbledon in 2001 and winning the title there two years later. But during that fortnight at Wimbledon in 2003, he found his equilibrium and that first major title eventually became a [record-shattering 20](#) at the Australian Open 15 years later.

Part of the transformation in his attitude was down to the passing of Federer's beloved first coach Peter Carter, who died in a car crash on his honeymoon in South Africa in 2002. Federer was devastated but resolved to become the player Carter had always said he could be.

The other accusation levelled at the young Federer as he struggled to make good on the hype was that he was lacking in application. "He was lazy," his coach at the time, Peter Lundgren, later said. "He had concentration issues and physically he wasn't on point."

Federer resolved to rectify this after seeing Mirka Vavrinec, now his wife but then his team-mate for Switzerland at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, training with such phenomenal dedication. Federer is said to have watched her transfixed during the Games as she would go through her drills for five or six hours on end.

At the end of that year, he also hired fitness coach Pierre Paganini. The pair continued working together for the rest of Federer's career — more than two decades — and he is cited as one of the most important members of his team.

What Paganini noticed when starting to work with Federer was that throughout the juniors, his incredible talent had allowed him to get away with not being in the best physical shape. Paganini has since said that he set a timeframe of three years to get Federer to an elite level of fitness after seeing that his "athleticism was poor".

Within that time, Federer had become a grand-slam champion, and reinvented his attitude on the court and his approach to training and fitness.

Federer's fitness was always one of the most underrated parts of his game, partly because his balletic movement made everything seem so effortless. But it was absolutely fundamental and underpinned another often overlooked part of his game: the world-class defence that allowed him to stay in points and often finish them with what looked like miraculous shots.

But more tweaks and reinventions would have to be made first. Tennis was in flux, with slower courts and heavier balls altering how the sport was played.

When Federer beat Sampras in that changing-of-the-guard match at Wimbledon in 2001, serve-and-volley was still *de rigueur*. At the turn of the century, the courts in south-west London were much faster than today's ryegrass surface, and this was reflected by that year's semi-finalists. Even with Sampras out, three out of the four serve-volleyed on pretty much every first and second serve: Goran Ivanisevic, Pat Rafter and Tim Henman.

This suited Federer just fine, with his incredible reflexes and hand skills at the net making him well-suited to this kind of staccato tennis.

But Wimbledon, and other tournaments, wanted to move tennis away from being a sport where rallies were scarce and so made modifications — most notably with the grass at SW19 — to encourage longer points. In 2002, only one of the Wimbledon semi-finalists, Henman, was a serve-volleyer and even he had taken to regularly staying back after his second serve.

Federer, naturally, took the changes to the sport in his stride — he simply made modifications to his game and accepted that he would now have to beat his opponents from the back of the court. This was something that his world-class forehand, often set up by arguably the best serve men's tennis has ever seen, allowed him to do with ease.

Federer backed up his first Wimbledon title in 2003 by winning three of the four majors (all but the French Open, won by Argentina's Gaston Gaudio) in 2004. He was in a league of his own, handing out thrashings to players who were supposed to be his rivals. In the US Open final that year, he beat Lleyton Hewitt — his predecessor as the dominant male player — 6-0, 7-6, 6-0. Hewitt won just five points in the first set.

With no genuine competition, Federer's need for reinvention appeared to be over, and he was free to explore the outer reaches of his phenomenal talent. But 2005 saw the arrival of his greatest rival, the man who elevated him to heights even he didn't think were possible: Rafael Nadal.

Nadal won that year's French Open having just turned 19 and beat Federer in the semi-finals. He did so partly by mercilessly targeting Federer's backhand with heavily-spun crosscourt forehands that kicked up and forced his opponent to play the stroke single-handed from almost shoulder height. Suddenly Federer's backhand, fêted as a thing of beauty, was exposed as a weakness.

Those wanting a competitive sport were delighted with Nadal's arrival. Federer, though, was not — he wanted to continue to rule the tennis kingdom with complete autonomy. "I didn't want to have a rival," Federer said in the 2018 documentary *Strokes of Genius*. "I just wanted to be the best and there was the rest, basically. That's how I saw it... and then when Rafa came onto the scene, I guess at first I had to also appreciate the rival, that he's going to be around." But Federer added: "And maybe I had to adjust my game towards him. So, you had to accept that."

Federer knew he had to improve his backhand if he wanted to live with Nadal. And he did — sufficiently to fend him off at Wimbledon where he won the 2006 and 2007 finals against the Spaniard. It was also almost enough to rescue the epic 2008 final — the backhand pass (below) Federer hit to save championship point in the fourth set of that match is arguably the best shot of his career — before he eventually succumbed in five sets.

The backhand was never sufficiently strong to defeat Nadal at Roland Garros, though, and Federer lost six out of six times to him there, but he did finally win the French Open title in 2009 to complete the career Grand Slam of winning all four majors. A few weeks later, he surpassed Sampras' record of 14 grand-slam titles by beating Andy Roddick in the Wimbledon final.

It may have been the same court he had beaten Sampras on eight years earlier but, even with two massive servers, there were far more baseline rallies than in Sampras' day. And the variety in Federer's game was even greater than it had been in 2001.

Physically, Federer had also reinvented himself. Gone was the teenage ponytail from the Sampras match. Federer, presented as the epitome of European sophistication, strode onto Centre Court in a white blazer and white trousers. In the previous year's final against Nadal, he had entered wearing a monogrammed cardigan.

Federer was soon faced with another rival, Novak Djokovic, who dominated tennis from 2011 to 2016. To try to stem the tide, Federer, now into his thirties and struggling with back issues, went retro. He hired the legendary serve-and-volleyer Stefan Edberg at the end of his worst season for more than a decade in 2013 and returned to more of the net-rushing style of his youth. He even began emulating the classic “chip and charge” tactic of Edberg's era, renamed the SABR (sneak attack by Roger) — hitting an approach shot when returning and rushing to the net to hit a volley.

The purists purred at Federer evoking a type of tennis that had seemingly been lost, and his results improved massively. The dark days of 2013 gave way to three major finals in the next two years — even if Djokovic was an immovable obstacle in all three. Federer also won his only Davis Cup in 2014.

Federer made another major tweak to his game in 2014, finally agreeing to use a larger racket head to give him a bit more margin for error with his shots, especially with his less reliable backhand. Federer had always resisted making the switch to the more modern racket but was glad that he did, framing far fewer backhands after replacing the 90-inch racket with a 97- inch one.

More reinvention was required at the start of 2016 when a freak accident running a bath for his daughters saw Federer injure his knee and require the [first surgery of his career](#). He missed most of the season, which he cut short after losing when clearly hurt in the Wimbledon semi-final.

At this point, Federer was written off by many (including this writer) and he knew that if he was to win a first grand slam since Wimbledon 2012 he really would have to make some changes.

The time off — Federer's first sustained period away from the game — allowed him to make some fundamental tweaks. Most notable was on the backhand where, under the guidance of Ivan Ljubicic, who had replaced Edberg, and head coach Severin Luthi, Federer worked on shortening the swing and taking the shot earlier so that he could get more returns into play. This would make him less susceptible to the sort of battering he routinely took from Nadal by leaving the ball to bounce so high that he was hitting it at shoulder height, an approach helped by the larger racket head.

Federer, now 35, instantly showed the world how much he had improved his backhand when he beat his great rival Nadal in the 2017 Australian Open final, his first tournament after six months out with injury. Federer hit 14 backhand winners to Nadal's nine on the day, including a crucial cross-court beauty to help him break back in the final set. For once against the Spaniard, he was able to use the shot to neutralise his vicious topspin crosscourt forehand.

Federer's beefed-up backhand completely changed the dynamic of his rivalry with Nadal, helping him win six of their final seven meetings. After comfortably beating Nadal at Indian Wells that year in 2017, during which he almost dismissively produced a backhand return winner when up match point, Federer explained the importance of changing his racket and the other tweaks to what had been such a troublesome stroke.

"I am just able to step into the court much easier than I ever have," Federer said after that 6-2, 6-3 win. "I think by coming over my backhand on the return from the get-go in the point, I can then dominate points from the start." He added : "The backhand has gotten better because I have been able to put in so many hours onto the racket now."

Federer 3.0 went on to win that year's Wimbledon and then the Australian Open in January 2018, taking him to 20 grand-slam titles at the age of 36. He then held two championship points against Djokovic at the 2019 Wimbledon final but faltered and eventually suffered an agonising loss.

That was one weakness Federer was never able to fully shake — losing matches from match point up. This happens to all players at one point or another, but it was far more frequent for Federer than Nadal or Djokovic. It happened to Federer against Djokovic in three grand-slam matches. The Swiss did it 24 times, whereas Nadal has only lost from match point up eight times and Djokovic on only three occasions.

After that 2019 defeat by Djokovic, a combination of injuries and the COVID- 19 pandemic restricted Federer to just 12 more tournaments. Even Federer, who turned 41 last month, was not capable of one last reinvention, and he confirmed on Thursday that this month's Laver Cup will be his last event.

To appreciate Federer's true genius, we must not only appreciate his talent but also marvel at the way he remained brilliantly effective and thrilling to watch while transforming so many elements of his game: his attitude, fitness, style, racket, backhand... even his hair and clothes.

For all his incredible skill and self-belief, his continuing adaptations show he never thought he was above evolving his game.

In so doing, he also completely transformed the sport.