

# Federer's Best Shot

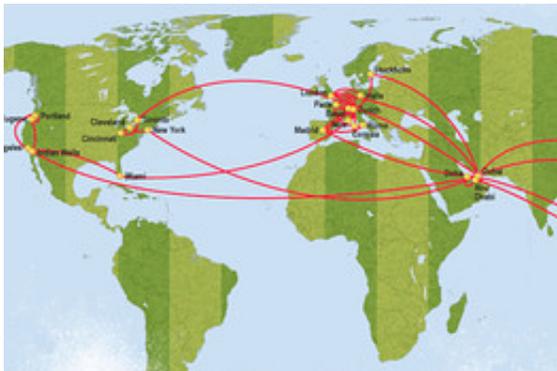
By **TOM PERROTTA**

Roger Federer shouldn't look this good.

He has played 959 professional matches in his career, appeared in 46 consecutive Grand Slam tournaments and spent more than a decade criss-crossing time zones while collecting a record 16 major singles titles and more than \$60 million in prize money. Married and the father of twin 22-month-old girls, Mr. Federer brings his family—jet lag, runny noses and all—on the road with him from Melbourne to Paris to London to New York, and many places in between.

## Where in the World is Roger Federer?

Between June 2010 and June 2011, Roger Federer flew over 73,000 miles. Click on the map to track his travels from city to city.



All of this for a man who in August will turn 30, the beginning of the twilight years in modern competitive tennis.

Yet as the 125th edition of Wimbledon is set to begin next week, Mr. Federer is fresh, fit, confident and, remarkably, on the upswing after a stellar performance at the French Open, where he ended 24-year-old Novak Djokovic's 43-match winning streak and pushed Rafael Nadal, age 25 and perhaps the best clay court player in history, to four sets in the final.

"I'm in a very good place mentally and physically," he said. "I still feel very young."

As Mr. Djokovic piled up victories this season, beating Messrs. Federer and Nadal a total of seven times, it was tempting to leave Mr. Federer out of the Grand Slam conversation. His last major title came at the 2010 Australian Open and Mr. Nadal dominated the rest of the season, winning at Roland Garros, Wimbledon and the U.S. Open. But in Paris earlier this month against Mr. Djokovic, Mr. Federer either turned back the clock, or showed that in Federer years, the seconds tick away much more slowly than anyone had anticipated.

At Wimbledon, he'll engage in what promises to be a remarkable power struggle. Mr. Nadal hasn't lost at Wimbledon since the 2007 final. Mr. Djokovic badly wants to

rebound from his first defeat of the year. Behind them lurks Andy Murray, 24, who won a grass-court event in London this week and is always a threat. As for Mr. Federer, no surface rewards his attacking style as richly as the lawns of Wimbledon, where he has won six titles, one fewer than Pete Sampras. He called Wimbledon the "holy grail" of the sport and his primary goal each year.



*European Pressphoto Agency*

How Federer Can Beat Nadal: Serve, serve, serve -- 65% or better on the first serve ought to do it. Be sneaky: Nadal likes to be in rhythm, so change the pace of rallies and finish points at the net to keep him off balance.



*Reuters*

To Beat Djokovic: Get ahead: Djokovic isn't as confident against Federer as Nadal. Wide slice serves, which worked in Paris, could be even better on grass. Mind games: Djokovic has never won a semi at Wimbledon.

Mr. Federer, whose first major title came at Wimbledon in 2003, said his favorite childhood tennis memories were watching Stefan

Edberg and Boris Becker contest three straight Wimbledon finals from 1988 to 1990.

"Just practicing at Wimbledon, being a member, putting all the whites on with the ivy on the walls, the purple and green, it's something that really touches me," he said. "It's such a sacred place in tennis."

Everyone knows about Mr. Federer's titles, his graceful technique and his boundless skills: a precise serve, a lightning forehand, deft touch and impeccable footwork. The most remarkable part of the Federer story, though, has been his uncanny ability to fend off physical and emotional fatigue and remain motivated.

Tennis history is littered with great players who succumbed to injuries or burnout. Björn Borg played his last Grand Slam tournament at age 25. John McEnroe didn't win a major title after age 25. In Paris this year, Mr. Nadal celebrated his 25th birthday—and remarked, as he struggled in early rounds, that he felt like he had been "playing for 100 years" on the pro tour. In the Open era, which began in 1968, late-career success has been rare. Only 10 men age 30 or older have won major titles, the last being Andre Agassi at the 2003 Australian Open when he was 32.

On paper, Mr. Federer has had a punishing career. Yet in all his years, he has had few significant setbacks: an ankle injury in 2005, mononucleosis in 2008 and more recently, lower back pain. He has retired from a match exactly once in his life, when he was a 16-year-old playing a junior tournament in Belgium. His immunity from injury is unparalleled.

#### What's Old, In Tennis Years

*The ages of five legends when they won their last Grand Slam tournaments*

**Pete Sampras, 31**

Won U.S. Open in 2002

**Rod Laver, age 31**

Won U.S. Open in 1969

**Björn Borg, 25**

Won French Open in 1981

**Jimmy Connors, 31**

Won U.S. Open in 1983

**John McEnroe, 25**

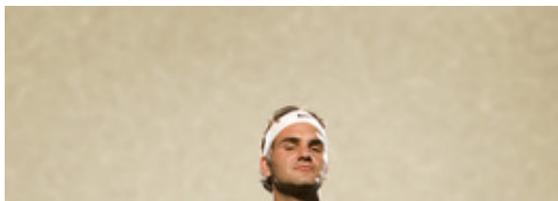
Won U.S. Open in 1984

inclined to soak up the local culture: When he went to Shanghai last year, he took Mandarin lessons and spent a day at the World Expo.

"The tour is not supposed to be brutal and annoying," he said.

He said his twin daughters, Charlene and Myla, who will turn two late next month, haven't lessened his desire to win or train. He and the family travel by private jet and his parents and babysitters help with the kids.

Another asset when traveling with family: Unlike many professional athletes, Mr. Federer is not superstitious. "It doesn't need to be the same every day, doesn't need to be the same shower I use, the same restaurant I go to, the same hour I go to sleep," he said. "I've always been very flexible. I don't care if I practice at nine in the morning or 10 p.m."



"If I didn't know better, I would say I don't believe it," said Mr. Agassi, who climbed back to the top of the sport in his 30s, but did it after a rejuvenating break from the game. "But I've seen him do it for too long now. You can't bluff your way through it."

Mr. Federer attributes some of his resilience to a love for travel, something that his wife, Mirka, also shares. Many tennis players come to see globetrotting as soul-crushing and do little more than shuttle back and forth between their hotel rooms and the tennis courts. Mr. Federer is more

Mr. Federer has been planning his attack on time—to not just be great, but to do it for longer than anyone else has done it—since he first became No. 1 in 2004. He recalled a conversation he had



ATP Tour

Roger Federer

### **How to Be Like Roger**

*He hardly ever gets hurt. He's almost never tired or grumpy. What's the secret?*

#### **Think long-term, don't overplay:**

"I tried to look at the long-term. I didn't want to chase everything possible in the short term."

#### **No sports superstitions:**

"I don't care if I practice at 9 in the morning or 10 p.m."

#### **Pay attention to your body:**

"He's able to say, it doesn't hurt me today, but it could hurt me tomorrow."

#### **Travel can be fun—enjoy it:**

"The tour is not supposed to be brutal and annoying."

#### **Take two- to four-week training periods for:**

- 1) Rest and recovery
- 2) Strength and endurance (not tennis-related)
- 3) Tennis exercise like court footwork (but with medicine balls, not rackets and balls)
- 4) Tennis practice

the quarterfinals).

"After doing it for over one and a half, two years now, it's paying off," he said. "If the back is going to stay this way for the rest of my career, I'll be very happy."

with his long-time physical trainer, Pierre Paganini, as he closed in on the top of the game.

"I was at a crossroads to decide, 'Am I happy with winning two Slams, one World Tour final, world No. 1? Will that suffice for me, or do I want to achieve more?' " he said. "I remember a very strong conversation with Pierre, we always said, 'If I do hit world No. 1, I won't overplay,' because I tried to look at the long term. I didn't want to just chase everything possible in the short term."

Each year, Messrs. Federer and Paganini block out at least three two- to four-week training periods (usually one each in December, February and July, and sometimes another in the fall). Mr. Paganini said there are four components to each session: rest and recovery, meaning, take time off and start training slowly; strength and endurance exercises not specific to tennis; tennis-centered exercises, such as footwork patterns on a court, but while using medicine balls, not rackets and tennis balls; and tennis practice. Many of these sessions have taken place in the Dubai heat, though Mr. Federer trains there less often since he became a father. He also stretches several times a day.

In the last two years, Mr. Federer has put extra emphasis on his abdominal muscles in response to back pain that lingered long enough, he said, to cost him several training sessions (he cited the injury at Wimbledon last year, when he lost in

Mr. Paganini, a chiseled 53-year-old, looks like he works out as often as an average person drinks water. He has known Mr. Federer since Mr. Federer was a 14-year-old prize talent in the Swiss Tennis Federation, where Mr. Paganini worked as a trainer in the junior program. He has been Mr. Federer's personal trainer since 2000. He described Mr. Federer as a rare combination of creative and disciplined.

"Usually, when you're an artist, you have not so much structure," Mr. Paganini said. "And when you're a hard worker who is maybe less of an artist, then you're very organized. He is able to do both. Roger is a champ because he's the boss of his talent."

Mr. Paganini says there are two essential elements of Mr. Federer's longevity. First, he still trains with the enthusiasm of a junior. "Sometimes I think, 'Damn it, he's doing these exercises now 2,756 times, but he does it as if it was the first time,'" Mr. Paganini said.

#### **Grand Slam Lit**

*Tennis may not be baseball, boxing or golf when it comes to flights of poetry and prose, but great writing has still been served up over the years. Some favorites:*

#### **'Levels of the Game'**

John McPhee

Mr. McPhee masterfully uses the 1968 U.S. Open semifinal match between Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner to explore the intricacies of human character and culture.

\* \* \*

#### **'The Inner Game of Tennis'**

W. Timothy Gallwey

The classic that gave tennis players—and many others—belief that they could train their minds, in a Zen-like way, for success.

\* \* \*

#### **'Open'**

Andre Agassi

The man who hated tennis and later learned to love it tells all, from the ball machine that shaped his childhood (he called it "the dragon") to drugs to winning every major title in the game.

\* \* \*

#### **'Winning Ugly'**

Mr. Federer also has an uncanny feel for his own health. "He's able to say, it doesn't hurt me today, but it could hurt me tomorrow," Mr. Paganini said. "And he doesn't say this just to have less work to do. He knows that the most important thing is health, and the most important thing for health is communication."

Mr. Paganini cited Mr. Federer's withdrawal from the grass court event in Germany last week as an example. Mr. Federer said he was disappointed to have to skip it. "I had all little niggling injuries," he said. "It would have been a huge, massive risk for me to go play there and then go and play Wimbledon."

Mr. Paganini is just one member of Team Federer. One of Mr. Federer's closest friends, Swiss Davis Cup captain Severin Luthi, has served as a coach for several years now. Stephane Vivier, a former physiotherapist for the men's tour, has been Mr. Federer's private therapist

Brad Gilbert

How ugly was Brad Gilbert's game? "You are the worst," John McEnroe once told him during a match. And yes, Mr. Gilbert won. A primer in court strategy.

\* \* \*

**'You Cannot Be Serious'**

John McEnroe and James Kaplan

One of the most distinctive players in the history of the game looks back on his career and a sometimes-turbulent off-court life.

\* \* \*

**'The Tennis Partner'**

Abraham Verghese

(Author of 'Cutting for Stone')

A compelling novel that received far-reaching praise, from tennis fans to literary critics to the *Journal of American Medicine*.

He wasn't given much chance to win on clay, and on hard courts he had many capable rivals. Since Mr. Federer won his first Wimbledon in 2003, he has been expected to win nearly every match he has played on every surface. His record since January 2004, the year he became No. 1: 541 wins and 72 losses, a winning percentage of 88.3%.

"Pete was very emotionally tired—he wasn't physically tired, he was emotionally tired at the end of his career," Mr. Annacone said. "Roger still has the energy of a 23-year-old. He's relentlessly optimistic."

since the fall of 2009, and handles Mr. Federer's aches and pains. Paul Annacone, the former coach of Pete Sampras, is the most recent addition to the group. He began coaching Mr. Federer last summer and has been instrumental in helping Mr. Federer modify his tactics and begin to volley with more frequency, as he did in his earlier years.

Mr. Annacone knows much about the weight of expectations for a champion in an individual sport like tennis. Victories become coronations, proof of one's greatness; losses are taken as signs of an imminent, and probably gruesome, demise. Though Mr. Sampras won 14 major singles titles, he didn't play with the pressure of Mr. Federer.