

MATTHEW SYED

Federer's resolve makes him peerless

[Matthew Syed](#)

January 30 2017, 12:01am, The Times



Before yesterday, Federer had not won a slam for almost five yearsSAEED KHAN/GETTY IMAGES

Share

Roger Federer is a player of great beauty. Of grace. Of humanity, and poetry, and poise and elegance. He is a player who delights the senses and whose ability to turn the brutality of high-end tennis into something resembling advanced choreography is beyond peer.

But I would like to write about his will. About the resolve and self-belief that, yesterday, in the rarefied environs of the Rod Laver Arena, in a match the memory of which many observers will take to the grave, was the difference in a contest of contrasts and myriad changes in circumstance.

Federer's win articulates a message about hope and audacity. He is unique

Federer has been written off many times. Columnists have offered (unsolicited) advice that he should hang up his racket. That by continuing to play, and to fail to make the final step at grand-slam events, he was somehow undermining his legacy. That he would do better to retreat into the safer and perhaps more comfortable territory of coaching or perhaps even punditry.

THE TIMES

The Swiss continued for one reason only. Not for the love of the game, great though that is. Not because he lacks imagination and isn't sure what else he might do with his time. No, he continued because he continued to believe, believe to his innermost core, that he could triumph once again. Yesterday, he was finally proved right.

To sustain his belief in the teeth of bitter experience represents a seminal lesson in the art of perseverance. Before yesterday's final, Federer had not won a slam for almost five years. He had lost in his previous three finals. He had come close, not least against Novak Djokovic at Wimbledon in 2014, before falling short. He has even started to struggle with injuries, a body seemingly protected from wear and tear through divine sanction finally succumbing to mortal travails.

And his opponent was Rafael Nadal. The man who had won 15 of their previous 20 contests, who he had not defeated in a grand-slam final for more than a decade; the man against whom he had broken down in tears in 2009 on this very court, offering the unforgettable words "god, it's killing me" after another chastening defeat over five sets. Nadal, the man whose game seemed precision-engineered to discomfort the Swiss.

Federer had already attempted to adapt his game to meet the challenge. As long ago as 2008 he was already experimenting with hitting the backhand on the up, leaning into the ball, to nullify the leaping bounce from the forehand of the Spaniard. He had also worked on running around more often, playing the forehand from a necessarily cramped position, often inside out, thus keeping his opponent guessing.

All to no avail. With every new stratagem and tactic, Nadal found new answers, often playing hard and early to the forehand to prevent Federer from stepping around, varying the pace and height of the ball, and occasionally stepping forward towards the baseline to give the Swiss less time. Over an eight-year period, we witnessed the beauty of natural selection, as each adapted to the challenge of the other, an upward spiral of virtuosity that caressed the imagination.

The emergence of Djokovic, on his day the equal of anyone in the history of the game, meant that their rivalry was no longer the dominant theme in tennis, but still they continued to work on how to meet the challenge of the other. When Stefan Edberg became Federer's coach in 2013, the Swiss was emphatic. "We need to work on my backhand," he reportedly said. "That is my only chance if I am going to beat Rafa."

And so to yesterday's showdown, a match few saw coming, not least because of the injuries each has suffered over recent months, but which was hailed as the most anticipated final in the sport's history.

It was clear as early as the opening set that the modifications to the Federer backhand were paying off, the action flatter, the racket taken back horizontally, the better to get the head through the ball.

For long sections of the first and third sets the Swiss did the seemingly impossible, striking the ball so hard and true that Nadal didn't have time to prepare his own forehand, retreating ever further back behind the baseline, his rushed shot lacking power, as Federer grew in

THE TIMES

confidence. In one exchange in the final set, Nadal was so short on time that he was forced to block the ball on successive shots.

Many will focus, in some ways understandably, on the poise with which Federer played the fifth set, breaking back after losing his service, and finding a rare equilibrium to close it out as the tumult, both in the stadium and around the world, built towards a crescendo. Yet the true belief, the more impressive belief, was that which sustained him during the down times, the hard times, the moments when he was out of the spotlight and so many doubted him.

This is the resolve that truly encapsulates why Federer is a peerless champion. It is the resolve that told him that he could yet return to the pinnacle of the game; the resolve to adjust his technique, with all the accompanying rigmarole and agitation, in the noble cause of finding a fresh edge; the resolve to arrive at the Rod Laver Arena, at the age of 35, older than any grand-slam men's singles champion since Ken Rosewall, and find a new way to win.

Jack Nicklaus triumphed in the Masters at the age of 46 (which, like Federer yesterday, took him to an 18th major title). Muhammad Ali floored George Foreman in a jungle clearing in Zaire when almost nobody gave him a chance. What Federer achieved yesterday was of similar significance, a historic day that showcased a special player who combines mystical talent with implacable self-belief.

Nadal we should mention, too. The Spaniard is a competitor of astonishing, if contrasting, brilliance, and one hopes that the form he displayed here will be repeated in the coming months and years. It is also worth reflecting on the joyous fact that the match was played, as so often, in a spirit of mutual respect, Federer at one point applauding an audacious slice by his opponent in the fourth set, perhaps the shot of the match. The way they paid tribute to each other during the trophy presentation spoke volumes about their class and courtesy.

But yesterday was ultimately about Federer: his achievement, his historic victory. The Swiss is the most elegant of athletes, but that would mean precious little without an unyielding belief in his own destiny. He has been tested and tormented by Nadal over the years, discovering humility through adversity, but learning ever more about himself in the trying. By winning yet again he has articulated a message about hope, audacity, and what you can discover when you look deep within.

It was a contest for the ages from a unique champion.

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/federers-resolve-makes-him-peerless-v28r7hw7v>