

Centre Court

THERE WAS A NOTABLE absence at Wimbledon in 2008. Gone were the pigeons that used to nest in the Centre Court rafters and girders and then alight on the court, drawing spasms of laughter from the crowd, no matter how many times they had seen this spectacle before. All the nooks and crannies of the building made for deluxe accommodations; all that high-quality grass and seed on the court made for fine dining. Centre Court was a natural pigeon habitat, and the lead-colored birds had been as much a part of the tournament tableau as the Pimm's Cups and the all-white attire.

But the pigeons distracted the players, and as All England Club officials put it, in their delicate way, "Their detritus could be problematic." So the club enlisted Rufus, a Harris's hawk, natural predator of pigeons. Each morning, Rufus would soar menacingly above the grounds, and by the time the matches began, the pigeons would have vanished, been expelled from their homes. This bit of Darwinism was as good a metaphor as any for the tennis that would unfold on the courts. The theme of the tournament: the predator instincts of Rafael Nadal pitted against the territorial instincts of Roger Federer.

Asserting that Federer had won Wimbledon for five years running would, while true, have somehow understated the case. Federer *owned* Wimbledon during that time. No, check

that. He *was* Wimbledon. As he accumulated trophies and tied Bjorn Borg's record of five consecutive titles, all the while fitting in so flawlessly, Federer came to overtake the event. The grass underfoot accentuated his fluid movements and his singular—which is to say, multiple—abilities: all that graceful volleying, those brilliantly angled flicks, those imaginative pieces of shotmaking. And Federer's conservative, decorous behavior played pitch-perfectly at an event dripping with tradition. This wasn't one of those ornery sluggers with a baseball cap turned backward, a display of tattoos and jewelry, mispronouncing the tournament "Wim-bull-TIN." He was a kid the adults at Wimbledon—Wim-bull-DUN—could love. Here was a classicist nostalgic for an era that predated him. Here was a European stylist who embraced all the quirks and customs and formalities of the tournament. When he won, he was so filled with reverence and appreciation (and adrenaline) that he would cry when receiving the trophy. This transparent emotion endeared Federer to the fans even more than the preceding Wimbledon monarch, Pete Sampras, who while comparably successful was stiff and exacting, not brilliant and elegantly charismatic the way Federer is perceived to be.

If Wimbledon came to represent a veritable Federer jubilee, he was just as successful and popular at the other stops on the tennis caravan. Federer became the top-ranked player in the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) in 2004, ushering in the Federer Era, the most dominant regime in tennis history. In four years he won eleven of the sixteen Majors—or, to use the bastardized term, Slams—the sport's four bedrock events. He won on all continents, on all surfaces, against all opponents. Entire forests would have to be felled to reprint the gaudy statistics supporting the dominance of the Federer Era. To limit this exercise to one such example: from 2004 to 2007, his match record was 315–24.

More remarkable still, Federer won not with unanswerable, might-makes-right power, but with flourish and flair. His game relies on precision and nuance and opulent talent. For all the modern touches, his style is mostly a throwback, what with his one-handed backhand, his simple handshake grip, his fondness for net play. It is a rare sports marriage of style and substance. The descriptions of Federer's game are often pulled from art and light: it's poetry, ballet, a renaissance painting, a symphony. He's an artist, a calligrapher, a maestro, a virtuoso on a stringed instrument. He's luminescent, phosphorescent, incandescent. The lowbrow observer who termed Federer's style as viscerally enjoyable "tennis porn," well, he was onto something too.

Major titles are the measuring stick for tennis excellence, and Federer began 2008 with an even dozen for his career, putting him two away from the all-time record that poor Sampras had established a few years back and, it appeared, would be afforded precious little time to savor. Federer had never won the French Open—the one entry missing from his CV—but unlike Sampras, he was hardly allergic to clay. Put all the factors in the cement mixer and, in the eyes of many, myself included, Federer was at least on the precipice of taking the mythical title of tennis's Greatest of All Time, the GOAT, in message board shorthand.

Yet in 2008, the Federer Empire was, if not crumbling, showing some troubling signs of decay. A bout with mononucleosis had cost Federer twenty days of practice during tennis's winter off-season (inasmuch as you can call a six-week winter break an off-season). In his first tournament of 2008, Federer lost in the semifinals of the Australian Open to Novak Djokovic, a self-enchanted, bristle-haired Serb who, unlike many of his peers, is thoroughly unawed by Federer. After the match, Djokovic's mother, Dijana, crowed to reporters, "The king is

dead. Long live the king.” This bold pronouncement of regicide was (a) absurd, (b) tactless in the extreme, and (c) strikingly at odds with Federer’s grace. But as the 2008 season unfolded, more and more observers came to share, if not to fully articulate, her thoughts.

Still a step slow, Federer slogged through the next few months. In March, he played an exhibition against Sampras in New York’s venerable, dilapidated Madison Square Garden, a match, Federer confided to a friend, that was “a million-dollar stopover” between tournaments in Dubai (where Federer has a residence) and Palm Springs. The evening was great fun, a much-needed boost for a sport with a diminishing profile in the United States. New York’s tennis scene turned out in force, as did Donald Trump, Tiger Woods, Luke Wilson, and the rest of the canapé-eating celebrity set, to watch the two hegemonic male players of the Open Era, when amateurs and professionals played together. There was, however, this minor inconvenience: Federer required a third-set tiebreaker to subdue Sampras, then a thirty-six-year-old full-time father who hadn’t played a sanctioned tennis match since 2002. Though the match’s outcome didn’t appear to be fixed—as is sometimes the case with “exos”—neither did it appear that Federer was playing anywhere close to his customary level.

In the spring, Federer developed a hideous pimple on the right side of his face. In a mustache-on-the-*Mona-Lisa* kind of way, it was jarring to see a scrupulous and handsome athlete wearing the type of unseemly turbo-zit that ruins junior prom night. (A real “Yahoo! Answers” discussion topic: Does anybody know what that is on R. Federer’s face?) The blemish was symbolic of Federer’s season. His spring was pocked by losses to mortals (Mardy Fish? Radek Stepanek?), to creditable opponents (the Andys, Roddick and Murray), and to his nemesis (Nadal). Apart from the losses, there were other indi-

cations that Federer had misplaced his muse. Usually a model of poise and sportsmanship, he was so overcome with frustration in a tournament in Hamburg, Germany, that he smacked a ball out of the stadium. Playing against Djokovic in Monte Carlo, Federer became enraged by the vocal midmatch chattering of Djokovic's omnipresent parents, who were seated behind the baseline. After they objected vocally to a line call, Federer turned to them and snapped disdainfully, "Be quiet! Okay?" Of course, any other mega-athlete in a similar position of power would have yelled something more emphatic and profane. But still, it was out of character. For Federer, this was the equivalent of "Fuck you."

On sheer talent, Federer carved his way through the draw of the 2008 French Open. He was to face Nadal, the three-time champion, in the final. It was beautifully scripted. If Federer could summon his best tennis and defeat Nadal—invading his rival's kingdom, as it were—it would mark perhaps the most significant title of his career. He'd complete the so-called Career Slam—winning all four Major titles—and in doing so cement his legacy as the Greatest of All Time. Case closed, discussion over. This was precisely the kind of scenario that the Great Ones relish.

If Federer laid an egg in the final, it was of the ostrich variety. The same rational thinking and self-awareness that make him such a likable champion can serve him poorly on the court. Midway through the match, he became convinced it wasn't his day. And he could not or would not try to trick himself into thinking otherwise. Federer shook his head, furrowed his considerable eyebrows, and scowled as he lumbered to his chair on changeovers. Once he gave himself no chance to win, he figured he'd do the next best thing and get the hell offstage as soon as possible. Operating at an auctioneer's pace, he made only halfhearted efforts to retrieve balls. The third set

flew by in twenty-seven minutes, a soufflé-like collapse that ended 6–0. It was strictly a cover-your-eyes affair.

To his credit, Nadal gave Federer no chance to reconsider his thinking. Almost merciless in his accuracy, Nadal went entire games striking the ball perfectly. Nadal claimed that he barely noticed Federer's vacant effort. Not so the rest of his entourage. Before the match had ended, Toni Nadal, Rafael's numinous coach and uncle, nudged his neighbors in the stands and used the word "bizarre" to describe Federer's disposition. "I must read the papers tomorrow to find out what was going on in his head," Toni said after the match. "I never sensed any determination. He never put himself in that state. I was watching his face. Closed. He wasn't sending any messages to Rafa. He didn't have a winner's mentality. It wasn't the real Roger."

At some level, Federer had fallen victim to his own dizzyingly high standards. By any objective measure, he was having a very respectable year. But, be it on account of the mono, his advancing age (almost a doddering twenty-seven!), or simply the finite shelf life of excellence, it was all so . . . un-Federerian. When you win ninety-two percent of your matches and then suddenly reach the halfway point of a season with only one title (a rinky-dink one at that, the Estoril Open) to your credit, the contrast is conspicuous. In Federer's own words, he had created "a monster" with his unsurpassed success and the expectations it wrought.

Even the more sober analysts, not quite prepared to issue a coroner's report on Federer's career just yet, conceded that the 2008 Wimbledon was freighted with significance. If he won for the sixth straight time, well, all was right with the world. If he lost, maybe it was time to table that GOAT talk for a while. And if he lost to Nadal, for all intents relinquishing the No. 1 ranking in the process, it was this simple: after a glorious

four-year term, there would be a new administration in men's tennis.

Federer's grass court campaign began auspiciously enough. The week after his French Open debacle, he won the Wimbledon tune-up event in Halle, Germany, running his winning streak on sod to fifty-nine matches. But when he arrived in the village of Wimbledon and settled into his rental house a few miles from the All England Club—a mansion owned, coincidentally, by a family with the surname Borg, no relation—the dirges began anew. “Is Fed Dead?” asked one London tabloid. Djokovic, the brash *arriviste* who had been lacking from the ATP's cast, declared that Federer was “vulnerable.” Boris Becker, the three-time Wimbledon champion, tipped Nadal to win and gave Federer “only a small chance.” Bjorn Borg—whose record of five straight Wimbledon titles Federer was attempting to surpass—picked not only Nadal but Djokovic ahead of Federer. Borg also asserted that, no, it would not surprise him if Federer were to lose the title and disappear from tennis altogether.

Federer traversed the high road. During his conclaves with the media, he shrugged off intimations of his mortality. “I haven't been reading and I haven't been listening to what's been said about me,” he lied. Asked specifically about Borg's uncharitable remarks, Federer winced. “I mean, look, it's his opinion. I don't mind what he says. Obviously at the moment he has a microphone under his face and people ask him many, many things. Once he'll sound more critical, once he'll sound more positive.” Did he ever consider confronting Borg? “Oh, no,” he said a few months later, “I would never approach him with something like that. I don't want a problem with the King.”

But this Wimbledon deathwatch, tinged as it was with so much *schadenfreude*, infuriated Federer. He wins everything in

sight for four years, makes all the right moves, and brings all sorts of dignity and honor to the sport. Then this? *A couple of substandard months and all these slings and arrows? Is there no accrued goodwill?* “To be honest, I was surprised by how extreme it was. I was hearing, ‘He’s not going to win a thing anymore.’ You try to ignore it, not let it bother you, but . . .”

He was in an unwinnable position. If he defended himself from the critics, downplayed his slump, and pronounced himself, as he did, “the big favorite obviously for Wimbledon,” he risked coming off sounding arrogant or, worse yet, delusional. If he fought back and pointed out the hypocrisy—Borg? predicting someone else would walk away from the sport after a loss?—he’d be diminishing himself. Tellingly, it was Federer’s colleagues who took up his defense and offered voices of reason. Asked if he agreed with the premise that Federer was vulnerable, Nadal rolled his eyes. “Yes, a lot. He didn’t lose a set [last week]. And he’s won fifty-nine matches without a loss. Come on!”

Surrounded by a swelling entourage, Federer spent his downtime at the rental manor. He visited the London Zoo and went shopping and dined at a few trendy restaurants. But unlike past years, he spent as little time as possible at the All England Club. Early in the tournament, as Federer tried to make a hasty getaway from the players’ patio, a pair of hangers-on cornered him and asked him to pose for a photo. “I wish there were two of me,” he muttered. Federer being Federer, he dropped his bag, draped his arms over the man and his wife, mustered something approximating a smile, and waited for the flash.

Then there was Nadal. After winning his fourth straight French Open title, he didn’t linger in Paris. It was as if once

the coating of clay had been washed off his body in the locker room shower, the memories went with it. He and his camp shared a subdued celebratory dinner that Sunday night, then it was on to grass. Nadal's long-avowed ambition, despite his clay court provenance (and success), had always been to win on the lawns of Wimbledon. He'd come close in 2007. Now, playing the best tennis of his life and with Federer appearing a bit, well, vulnerable, Nadal figured, "Maybe it's my time." Though it was superfluous, he had an added motivation: if he could win, he'd be virtually assured of ascending from the No. 2 position he'd held for a record three straight years. No longer would he be the middle manager trapped under Federer's glass ceiling.

When Nadal defended his French Open title in 2006, he was scheduled to play the Queen's Club event in London, a grass court tune-up that begins the day after the Roland Garros final. Worried that Nadal might be so exhausted that he'd lavish himself with a week off, the Queen's Club tournament director offered to charter a helicopter to shuttle Nadal from Paris to London. Cool, thought Nadal, who'd never considered pulling out of Queen's anyway. Not cool, thought his uncle Toni. They had already booked their tickets on the Eurostar, the high-speed train that runs from Paris to London under the English Channel. "We're not wasting that money," Toni said flatly. They declined the private helicopter and took the train.

For Nadal and his camp, the Eurostar ride from Paris to London had hardened into ritual. So the day after winning his fourth French Open, Nadal trudged through the Gare du Nord alongside the other commuters and businessmen. He posed for a few photos and signed some autographs, but otherwise he was just another independent contractor heading off

on a Monday morning to do some business in London. After two hours aboard the train spent napping and playing cards, Nadal arrived at King's Cross St. Pancras station, having overcome his fear of traveling underwater.

By early afternoon, less than twenty-four hours after winning the most esteemed clay court title, Nadal clocked a two-hour practice on grass, altering his footwork, hitting his returns of serve earlier, flattening out his strokes, slicing his backhand, guiding the ball to stay low to the ground. Nadal's making such material adjustments to his game was another indication that his stated goal of winning Wimbledon was no talking point, no bit of agent-inspired misdirection. The next day, heralding this quick transition to grass, a breathless tabloid headline read: "Nadal: You Won't Like Me When I Turn Green."

The Queen's Club courts, players say, are even faster than Wimbledon's lawns, which made Nadal's seamless transition all the more impressive. In the course of five days at Queen's Club, he beat five opponents, including some of the most accomplished grass court practitioners. Against Ivo Karlovic, a six-foot-ten Croatian whose serves appear to travel as far on the vertical axis as they do on the horizontal, Nadal played better in the tiebreakers and won 6-7, 7-6, 7-6. Against Roddick, the thunderbolt-serving American, Nadal played opportunistically and won in straight sets. Betraying emotion that hadn't been offered into evidence earlier in the week, Nadal, clearly motivated, beat Djokovic in the final. It marked the twenty-eighth title of Nadal's career and his second in seven days. And he became the first Spaniard to win a grass court event in thirty-six years. It had been an ideal week. He got in his grass court prep work. He sustained his swollen confidence. He put the rest of the field on alert. An afterthought, perhaps, but he also pocketed nearly \$150,000 for the week. And then

he left England to fly home to Majorca for a few days, to fish for tuna in the Mediterranean with his dad.

In keeping with the tradition whereby the defending champion plays the first match on Centre Court, Federer christened Wimbledon 2008 at 1 P.M. on the first Monday afternoon. The court, the closest thing tennis has to the Elysian Fields, had a new look this year: a pair of seventy-ton trusses and a space-shuttle-looking fixture protruding from the top of the complex, part of Centre Court's retractable, translucent roof, scheduled for completion in 2009.

Federer sported a different look too. He debuted that cardigan as he walked onto the lawn with his racket bag slung over one shoulder and what can only be described as a white leather man-purse slung over the other.

The draw had disgorged Dominik Hrbaty, a veteran Slovak, as a first opponent, and this was precisely Federer's kind of matchup. Unlike most dominant athletes—see Woods, Tiger—who choose to operate at an imposing remove from the rest of the field, Federer is an enlightened monarch, a benevolent despot on the friendliest terms with his colleagues/subjects. Hrbaty was a longtime friend, occasional doubles partner, and unapologetic Federer-phile. Though he had beaten Federer in the past, Hrbaty took the court with no genuine expectation of winning.

Under ideal conditions, congenially warm with no wind or humidity, it took Federer less than an hour to win the first two sets. Trailing in the third set 5–2, Hrbaty walked past his chair and sat next to him. “I looked over and there he was,” Federer said. “He asked if he could sit next to me. I said sure, there's no problem, and there's an empty seat.” The two men, notionally opponents, spent the ninety-second changeover chatting in the sun, a scene that could easily have epitomized the Federer

Era. Friendship, camaraderie, and warmth had bleached out the competition. When the umpire called time, Federer rose, served out the match, carefully gathered his gear, and that was that. As days at the office go, this one could scarcely have been easier.

The following day, Nadal made his 2008 Wimbledon debut against Andreas Beck, a twenty-two-year-old German who'd successfully snaked his way through the qualifying draw only to have the misfortune of encountering the sport's hottest player in his initial main draw match. Beck is prodigiously skilled at tennis, among the top 125 or so players on the planet, putting him in the top .00000002 percentile. Unfortunately, Nadal is another few decimal places over. An hour or so after losing to Nadal, in straight sets but with honor, Beck was still trying to process his opponent's level of play. "It's just not a game, what he's playing," Beck said, shaking his head. "It's unbelievable. I was thinking all the time, what the hell is he doing?" Did Beck at least feel he had *some* hope while he was holding his serve in the first set? "No. I had all the time no chance against him."

There's a cautionary Wimbledon saying: "You can't win the tournament in the first week. You can only lose it." But neither Federer nor Nadal looked to be in danger of losing. Federer returned to Centre Court the following day for his second match. His box, his section of reserved seats just off the far baseline, was peopled by an eclectic mix of characters: his agent (Tony Godsick), his mother (Lynette Federer), and his longtime girlfriend (Mirka Vavrinec) sat alongside Anna Wintour, the profoundly pregnant pop star Gwen Stefani, and Stefani's husband, Gavin Rossdale, once the front man for the band Bush. In both configuration and makeup, this section resembled an odd *Hollywood Squares* board. *Good answer, Gavin, but I'm going to take Gilbert Gottfried for the block!*

Stefani and Rossdale, a tennis junkie, had become friendly with Federer and Mirka, and they were regulars at big matches. When Federer spent time in southern California in 2007 before the Indian Wells tournament, he stayed at Stefani and Rossdale's home. During that visit, Federer practiced with Pete Sampras in Los Angeles, which, apart from making for an easy story for the tennis press, solidified their friendship. For their first session, they practiced on the court of the Stefani-Rossdale estate. Sampras wasn't comfortable with the assortment of tennis voyeurs fringing the court. He was surprised when Federer, nice guy that he was, indulged Rossdale in a hitting session later that afternoon. Sampras requested that the second practice session take place on the backyard court of his house in Beverly Hills. "It'll be more private," Sampras explained. Federer arrived at the appointed time, accompanied by Rossdale, who stayed and watched the two best players of the Open Era bat balls. "We took the gloves off that day," says Sampras.

Wintour, of course, is the editor of *Vogue*, the eccentric fashionista forever associated with the ruthless boss depicted in the book and movie *The Devil Wears Prada*. She'd met Federer in New York several years before and had become a good friend and borderline obsessive fan of his. Federer has surely appeared in *Vogue* more times than any other athlete. Wintour has been known to send suits to Federer's hotel rooms, simply because she's seen them and thought they'd look good on him. Though there are no sexual echoes, they've dined together at New York restaurants and she's turned up for his matches all over the globe. When Federer played Sampras in the Manhattan exhibition in March, *Vogue* was a sponsor and Wintour, in her trademark pageboy haircut and wearing oversized sunglasses indoors, sat in the front row.

The Wimbledon "backstage" area, the ominous-sounding Millennium Building, resembles a cruise ship with multiple

decks—the interview room and press room on the bottom, a sunny patio above that, and an outdoor dining room on top. Before Federer's second match, Wintour was spotted on the patio level and asked by a reporter if she wouldn't mind answering a few quick questions about Federer. "On or off the record?" she replied warily. *Um, on, preferably.* "If you're going to ask me about Roger," she said, pausing dramatically, "Roger is brilliant." With that she turned and shuffled off. Some athletes attract young groupies of dubious virtue. Federer attracts fiftysomething magazine editors who send him fashionable sport coats.

Federer next faced Robin Soderling, a powerful but erratic Swede whose spiky hair and narrow, deeply set eyes give him the look of an angry drummer in a Scandinavian heavy-metal band. At Wimbledon in 2007, Soderling pushed Nadal to five sets, all the while poking fun at the Spaniard's rituals and leisurely pace. Nadal appeared genuinely wounded by this display, insinuating that Soderling was a bad person destined for hell. Asked about the Swede's mocking gestures, Nadal responded, "We will see what's happening in the end of the life, no?"

But if Soderling had been impertinent toward Nadal, he was thoroughly deferential toward Federer. Despite his fearsome, if irregular, bursts of power, Soderling was not in the same position as Federer on the food chain. And by the second set it was not a question of whether he would be defeated, but when and how. At one point, a journalist in the press section turned to Simon Barnes, a columnist for the London *Times*—for my deflated U.S. currency, as fine a sportswriter as there is today. Do you think, Barnes was asked, Federer ever got bored of playing tennis? Barnes responded: "Did van Gogh get bored when he painted at Arles?"

The draw gods continued to smile on Federer. For his

third match he played Marc Gicquel, a French veteran. When Federer made it from the seeded players' locker room to the lip of the court, Gicquel was already waiting. "*Ça va?*" Federer asked cheerily. French is one of four languages he speaks fluently. Sure, they were about to do battle on the court for a few hours, but to Federer it seemed only natural to pass a colleague and ask, "What's going on?"

Gicquel had neither the time nor the inclination to give a detailed answer. But it was going great for him. This third-round match represented the high-water mark of his career. A journeyman on the wrong side of thirty, Gicquel had never won a pro title—and likely never would—and recognized that playing a champion on Centre Court at Wimbledon was as good as it gets. The previous night, his wife had left their eighteen-month-old child at home in Paris and taken the Eurostar to London to be on hand.

Gicquel had been a late bloomer. He went to university and only launched his pro career at twenty-four, the age at which other players begin to contemplate retirement. He spent five years pinballing around the challenger circuit, the tennis equivalent of the minor leagues. The challengers express one of the great tragedies of sports. Fans see only the glory and riches accorded the stars. Federer, for instance, had recently crossed the \$40 million mark in career prize money and earns much, much more in endorsements, bonuses, and appearance fees. As for Nadal, between his endorsements (Nike most notably) and prize money, he earns in excess of \$20 million annually.

Underneath—and not far underneath—there dwells a sprawling underclass, lucky to live paycheck to paycheck, consigned to the "minors" or the "bush leagues," either term brutally uncharitable. These players dumpster-dive for ranking points that might afford them entry into the prequalifying draws of an ATP event, which might enable them to en-

ter qualifying draws, which might enable them to enter main draws.

In tennis, players outside the top 150 in the rankings “grind it” in challenger events, held everywhere from European hamlets to Paraguayan villages to American backwaters. The prize money is negligible and players economize by billeting with local families (or sleeping three to a room at the local low-budget hostelry), stringing their own rackets, and often swiping dinner from the tournament buffet. (Fruit, good. Soup, bad.) The irony, of course, is that one could hardly conceive of worse working conditions for ambitious athletes.

Gicquel “ground it” mostly in Europe, though as recently as 2006 he traveled as far as Kyoto for an event, where he lost in the first round for a payday of \$260. A compactly built, clean-cut baseliner, Gicquel has a pedestrian game that lacks both a glaring weakness and an obvious strength. Over the years, he made improvements where he could, upgrading his conditioning and consistency. Slowly he progressed, and by 2006 he’d escaped challenger purgatory, cracking the top 150, the threshold for making it financially. He bought an apartment in Paris near the Roland Garros complex, paid off various debts, and became a father. “Finally,” he says, “you feel like a real pro tennis player.”

Gicquel may have come to Wimbledon ranked a mere eighth among the French contingent, the Gauls able to mint top players in a way most other countries cannot. Yet he was hitting the ball soundly and was on the verge of piercing the top 50. In his first match, good fortune delivered: he advanced when his opponent, Kei Nishikori, a promising Japanese teenager, was forced to quit on account of a strained abdominal muscle. Gicquel then staved off a match point and survived a Serbian qualifier in five sets. Such is the randomness of the early rounds for tennis’s rank and file: a few lucky breaks and

a few shots separating a third-round advancement from a first-round defeat. While his thirty-one-year-old legs felt as if they had been filled with lead, Gicquel savored the thrill of playing Federer. He offered little resistance, but enjoyed the afternoon immensely. He winked at his wife as he left the court and pocketed \$55,000 for the week.

As for Federer, the day after he won his match over Gicquel, 6–3, 6–3, 6–1, in eighty-one minutes, the *Daily Mail*'s headline read: "Fed Express Hits the Buffers." The *Sunday Express* somehow drew a similar conclusion from the match: "Roger Is Not Mr. Invincible." Meanwhile, Pat Cash, an ageless Australian who looks no different from when he won the men's singles title in 1987, predicted that Federer—the quintuple champion, mind you—was ripe for defeat. Little wonder, Federer couldn't escape Tennis Nation fast enough, and he retreated to his rental house, a sensory deprivation chamber where he didn't have to hear about his inevitable demise.

If Federer was a cipher at Wimbledon, Nadal was everywhere. He lingered at the All England Club after his matches. He pushed a shopping cart at the Tesco grocery store in Wimbledon village. At restaurants he dined al fresco, taking in the street scene. Nadal's rental place, much more modest than Federer's, was on Newstead Way, maybe a hundred yards from the club, and he didn't exactly conceal his residence. If the Spanish flag that sometimes hung from the shingles didn't provide enough of a clue, the yelling from inside—especially when Spain was playing in the Euro 2008 soccer tournament—was a dead giveaway. Nadal watched *Rocky* and *Terminator* on DVD as well as a video of the best goals in soccer history. He sacrificed hours at the altar of PlayStation. He read *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, a novel about the young son of a Nazi commandant. A friend of Nadal's called the compound "Camp Rafa." As in past years, Nadal invited journal-

ists to stop by the house. It's no wonder that, though Federer is more popular among adults, the kids thrill to Nadal.

On most days, Nadal simply grabbed his bag and walked to the courts. More than a few ticket holders were surprised to walk down Somerset Road and see the tournament's second seed strolling alongside them. And those who missed seeing Nadal in person could still follow his daily doings. In exchange for a small donation to Nadal's philanthropic foundation, the London *Times* printed the player's daily blog. A sample post: "I went out to Wimbledon to do some grocery (?). Is that the word for shopping food? I guess so. I cooked . . . pasta with mushrooms, gambas, some onion at the beginning and these crab sticks. Not bad, believe me. Anyway I am going to bed now and finish the *Godfather*."

Another quaint Wimbledon tradition: there is no play on the middle Sunday. The other Grand Slams hope to mimic the Olympics and stretch play over three weekends in order to maximize television revenue and gain additional ticket-selling sessions. To its great financial detriment, Wimbledon takes the opposite approach. Citing history and "a respect for our neighbors," the All England Club mandates that no matches be scheduled on the middle Sunday. The black iron gates are locked to the public. The courts are swaddled with tarps. The loudest sound on the grounds is the pealing of bells from St. Mary's Church up the road. The absence of play on Sunday can be problematic when rain constipates the match schedule. "You waste a whole day with no matches and you ask for trouble," Nadal complained, not unreasonably, the previous year, when inclement weather forced him to play on six consecutive days. But it's a welcome intermission. And it's reassuring to know that in at least one sector of the Sports Industrial Complex, tradition can still trump commerce.

At two o'clock on the afternoon of the middle Sunday, under a dome of clouds, Federer arrived on-site. Even on the off day, he complied with the "whites only" policy, wearing his Sunday best: the cardigan, white sweatpants, and a silver Rolex that he's paid to endorse. He'd booked a session at the Aorangi Terrace practice court behind Court 1 with Yves Allegro, an old friend. A Swiss doubles specialist who was approaching thirty—and whose ranking was approaching far greater heights—Allegro was no longer in the tournament, but he was on hand acting as the equivalent of a confidant in the Federer administration.

This is common in sports. Top players, wary of forming close friendships with potential opponents, seek out alliances with lesser lights, who are able to hang with them on the practice court and serve as dinner partners without posing a threat. Michael Jordan's best friend was not a fellow all-star but a journeyman, Rod Higgins. Andre Agassi befriended a little-known Armenian player, Sargis Sargsian. Nadal often keeps the company of a Spanish player, Bartolome Salva-Vidal, whose career-high ranking peaked at No. 693. Federer has Allegro. In return for loyalty and friendship, the star is often exceedingly generous. Higgins is the general manager of the Charlotte Bobcats, the NBA franchise of which Jordan is part owner. Agassi was known to enter events only on the condition that Sargsian was provided with a wild card. In the case of Allegro, Federer sometimes enters doubles events with him, putting money in the guy's pocket and giving him some exposure. He lets Allegro share in the trappings of celebrity, inviting him aboard his private plane, a mode of transport unknown to players with a career-high doubles ranking topping out at No. 32. And there's this story: Allegro's father runs a tennis club in Grone, Switzerland, a quiet town in the Alpine foothills. Several years ago, the club fell on hard times. Federer made a deal: pick a

date and I'll show up to play an exhibition against Yves. Thousands of fans attended, and the club was back on a solid financial footing.

With Severin Lüthi, the Swiss Davis Cup captain, pinned against the back fence looking on, Federer and Allegro batted the ball back and forth on Practice Court 5. Because they used different rackets with different string tensions, each made a distinct sound, and the *thwick-thwock* resembled a metronome counting off musical beats. Watching Federer practice casually and lightly, one wouldn't guess that he was gunning for his sixth straight Wimbledon. But even fooling around—catching balls in midair on his strings, batting a forehand with the butt of his racket, hitting kick serves that landed in the corner of the service box, took a hard left, and bounded into the side fence—he offered a glimpse of his prodigious talent.

After an hour, his T-shirt saturated with sweat, Federer called it quits. He slapped five with Allegro and they both sat on their bags and chatted. As Federer rose to leave, he was approached by a player on the adjacent court, a lanky, mop-headed Brazilian, Andre Sa. Now thirty-one, Sa had been on the pro circuit since 1996. No slouch of a player, he had once reached the Wimbledon quarterfinals. Sheepishly, he asked if Federer would mind posing for a photo with him. Sa wanted a souvenir of the greatest player ever and didn't know how many more chances he'd get.

According to the tournament schedule, Nadal was slated to practice later in the afternoon. But at the appointed time, the court reserved for Nadal was vacant. Nadal, a club official explained to an annoying reporter, had come to the courts hours earlier with his agent, Carlos Costa. An avian-looking Spaniard, Costa was a former player once ranked as high as No. 10—though, typical for an Iberian player of his generation, Costa had never been beyond the second round of Wim-

bledon—and was a capable sparring partner for Nadal. The club official explained, “If you came to watch him, you didn’t miss much tennis. Lots of laughing. And they kicked the tennis ball, football style. Then they left, I suppose to get ready to watch Spain in Euro 2008.”

When the tournament began, Federer and Nadal were positioned on opposite poles of the draw, and like two magnets, they seemed destined to converge. By the fourth round, after 112 of the 128 competitors had been winnowed out, their showdown was almost a foregone conclusion. The most feared foe in Federer’s half of the draw, Novak Djokovic, looked “vulnerable,” to borrow a phrase, and was ousted by Marat Safin in the second round. In Nadal’s half, his stiffest potential foe, Andy Roddick, was knocked out in the second round too.

Federer played his fourth-round match against Lleyton Hewitt, the last man to win Wimbledon before Federer. Hewitt’s game was neither artistic (Federer) nor powerful (Roddick) nor violent (Nadal), but it hardly mattered. He was a fine athlete with quick feet, exquisite counterpunching skills, and above all, abundant heart/guts/spleen/backbone/balls—pick your anatomical metaphor.

If Federer prefers calm waters—fearful of dissonance and eager to befriend all—Hewitt’s MO is the opposite. To him, conflict is fuel, competition is battle. With his parents egging him on, Hewitt has picked fights with the press, the ATP tour staff, other players, officials, Tennis Australia, gravity, Earth, the other planets. Whatever. Hewitt was engaged to Kim Clijsters, a terminally congenial Belgian who was once the top-ranked player in the Women’s Tennis Association. But then the wedding was hastily called off. He burned through agents, managers, and coaches, seldom breaking up on amicable terms.

Eventually Hewitt exhausted his reserves of anger, and when he ran out of fights to pick (and lost a step of quickness because of a hip injury), his game went into steep decline. Now he played gamely against Federer, but at times he appeared to be less an opponent than a partner in the performance. Federer won 7–6, 6–2, 6–4, failing to drop a set yet again. As they approached the net to shake hands, Hewitt removed his baseball cap, a show of reverence for Federer.

Federer was asked whether he'd had any empathy for Hewitt during the match, this former top player and Wimbledon champ clearly at the caboose end of his career, a shard of his former self. "I mean, I feel bad for him that, you know, he's injured. That's where I feel bad for him for a split second. But at the same time he was still dangerous . . . I mean, I just feel bad, you know, that he has so many injury problems, that it's just not really working out for him. But by beating him, not in any way, no."

Nadal arrived for round four in a giddy state. The previous night, he'd put on a red jersey and watched the Spanish soccer team defeat Germany and win the European championships for the first time in forty-four years. He knew that it was around the same time that the last Spaniard, Manuel Santana, had won Wimbledon, and maybe fate had . . . never mind. Whenever that thought entered Nadal's head, he tried to banish it. When Spain won the soccer game, Nadal, deeply patriotic, celebrated like a kid, and Toni grew fearful that his nephew might be distracted. Instead, it had a galvanizing effect, and Nadal beat his next opponent, Mikhail Youzhny of Russia, handily.

To the fans watching Nadal position himself smack atop the baseline and zing his lefty lasers, it seemed inconceivable that he could be beaten. At least until Federer took the court.

Then, as the crowd watched the Swiss stylist serve brilliantly and play such authoritative tennis, it seemed inconceivable that *he* could be beaten. Until Nadal next played.

In the quarterfinals, Federer met Mario Ancic, a Croatian with the wingspan of a Cessna and the last man to have beaten Federer at Wimbledon, way back in 2002. As the hip-hop impresario Jay-Z—hilariously referred to as “Jay-Zed” by a BBC commentator—watched from behind the far baseline, Federer was scarcely tested, winning in straight sets. With the victory, he had reached his seventeenth straight Grand Slam semifinal. (Consider: Tiger Woods’s equivalent streak of consecutive top-four finishes at major golf championships? Four.) As Federer put the finishing touches on another masterpiece, a fan yelled, “Get on with it. Bring on Andy.” Unable to pretend he hadn’t heard, Federer bit his lip trying to suppress a smile.

“Andy” was Andy Murray, the Scot saddled with the expectation of being the Great British Hope. In his previous match, Murray had rallied from two sets down to beat Richard Gasquet, a Frenchman as long on talent as he is short on mettle. It was great theater, watched by more than ten million Brits, and it inspired an intense, if short-lived, moment of irrational exuberance. Andy-monium, as someone called it.

Inasmuch as the Nadal-Murray quarterfinal had the feel of a Major Sporting Event, Nadal quickly drained any drama from the match. Had this been boxing, the referee would have called an early stoppage. As it was, they played until the end, Nadal thrashing Murray, the No. 12 player in the world at the time, on his home court in straight sets, surrendering just ten points in fourteen service games. As the *Daily Star*’s headline writer put it, Murray had been “Kicked in the Nads.” (Oh, behave!) In the aftermath, Murray was commendably realistic, sounding less like a crestfallen loser than a gushing movie

reviewer offering breathless bites of praise for the performance he'd just witnessed:

“He hits the heaviest shot in tennis.” — Andy Murray

“The ball jumps at a tough angle, something that I think Federer sometimes struggles with against him.” — Andy Murray

“His forehand is just ridiculous.” — Andy Murray

Most gratifying to Nadal, all of his adjustments to grass had been paying off. “Standing on top of the baseline and not two meters behind it,” he was able to dictate play. Unlike past years, he was playing aggressively and proactively from the first ball in the rally. He was serving crisply. “It’s been a good tournament so far,” Nadal admitted with an indifferent shrug. But then he quickly added: “I have won nothing yet.”

After the Murray match, Carlos Costa began nagging his client to shave. Costa explained that on Saturday Nadal was supposed to tape a video message for the Spanish bank Banesto, one of his sponsors. Nadal couldn’t address his benefactors looking like a scraggly Ibiza beach bum. A creature of habit (and superstition), Nadal demurred.

With the field pared to four players, Federer and Nadal were one round removed from meeting in the Wimbledon final for a third straight year. In the semifinals Federer faced a player who’d been blessed with similarly generous amounts of raw talent: Marat Safin of Russia. Unlike Federer, however, Safin had been profligate with his gifts. Pete Sampras once described Safin’s game as “the tennis of the future,” and to his credit, Safin did win two Majors and attain the No. 1 ranking. He has also proven singularly adept at blazing self-destruction, an ability to go for months without winning a match. By his mid-twenties, he was tennis’s lovably eccentric cast member, still capable of some scene-stealing roles — he won his second Major, the 2005 Australian Open, beating Federer along the

way—but equally capable of disappearing for entire seasons. He entered Wimbledon ranked No. 75, yet he played top-tier tennis for six matches. At age twenty-eight, he'd grown resigned to his fate. "I'm pleased with the way things are going. But if I'm honest, I'd prefer to have the career of Federer," he explained with a sigh. "I'm tired of making comebacks."

Two hours after eating a plate of tagliatelle pasta and a banana for lunch, Federer snapped on his gloves and turned in a surgical performance. He broke Safin at the first opportunity, won the opening set in twenty-four minutes, and generally cruised from there. Federer had a few lapses, going "off the boil," as the Brits say, and overcooking a few shots. But he conjured up his best tennis, including a silken running backhand flick up the line, and prevailed in straight sets to reach yet another final. Afterward he betrayed some of his sensitivity to having his supremacy questioned. Asked if it might help him to challenge for his sixth straight Wimbledon as something other than the overwhelming favorite, Federer said sharply, "Look . . . I'm on an incredible winning streak on grass. First somebody has to be able to break that, you know, before we start talking differently."

As Federer finished off Safin, Nadal prepared for his match against Germany's Rainer Schuettler by warming up with John McEnroe. It made for a great photo op and video clip, and if hitting with a forty-nine-year-old lefty wasn't necessarily the ideal way to regroove your strokes before facing a thirty-two-year-old righty, it hardly mattered. Schuettler is one of those tennis players who would probably have been a formidable talent a generation ago, a solidly built speed demon with excellent returns of serve. But in A.D. 2008, a player who does everything capably but lacks a real weapon is consigned to journeyman status. Though he once briefly inhab-

ited the top 5, Schuettler entered the tournament barely in the top 100; but he won five matches, registering one of the better results of his career. To his credit, he did not capitulate in the semifinals and did not turn in one of those happy-to-have-gotten-this-far-now-where-do-I-pick-up-my-check? performances. He needed to be beaten. Nadal obliged.

So it was that Federer-Nadal XVIII—the “Dream Wimbledon Final,” as the BBC billed it—was set. All but two players had been sifted out of the draw. Illustrative of most big tournaments during the Federer-Nadal axis, the pretenders were left to keep pretending; the dark horses stayed dark; the also-rans also ran; the Cinderellas wore tattered clothes and missed the grand ball.

Both players tried to relax as much as possible the day before the match. They both had massages and played cards and watched television at their respective houses. At his marble-topped dining room table, Nadal wolfed down the same meal of pasta with shrimp sauce and mushrooms he’d been eating throughout the tournament. (Habit, remember, not superstition.)

On the day of reckoning, Sunday, July 6, Federer arrived at the club first, at around 10:30, and Nadal came half an hour or so later for a cursory hitting session. Federer had recruited Bradley Klahn, a junior player from California who was headed to Stanford in the fall and, most important, a lefty able to mimic Nadal’s style. To keep the Centre Court grass pristine for the final, players are forbidden to warm up on the court before the match, so Federer was dispatched to Court 17.

Nadal chose to practice with Costa, his agent, on Court 19. As Nadal, nervous, struggled to keep the ball in the court, Costa noticed that he had finally performed some grounds-keeping on his face, taking a razor to his stubble for the first

time in the tournament. Costa was thrilled that Nadal would look presentable when he taped that message for the Spanish bank. Oh, no, said Nadal, his decision to shave wasn't based on that. Flatly and without boasting, he explained, "When you win Wimbledon, you want to look your best."