

Simon Cambers  
& Simon Graf

Rivals, Friends, Fans  
and How The Maestro  
Changed Their Lives

The  
**ROGER  
FEDERER**  
*Effect*



SPORTS BOOK  
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# Contents

Introduction	7
Roger, the friend	9
Roger, the student	47
Roger, the rival	74
Roger, the inspiration	97
Roger, the peer	135
Roger, the hero	177
Roger, the game changer	207
Roger, the professional	239
A word from the authors	275
Index	284
The authors	288

## ROGER, THE FRIEND

AT THE origin of every great sports career is play. Those who love to play as children will also want to express themselves creatively later on, in very different ways. Playing is invaluable. You may do it even as an adult.

Young Roger loved playing anything that involved a ball. When his head was barely higher than the table, he played table tennis, then tennis, football, squash, basketball. His favourite playmate became Marco Chiudinelli, whom he met during tennis training and shared with him the joy of playing, the urge to move and the desire to compete. They kept on playing when everyone else had already gone home. They also played for hours on the PlayStation or PC.

Federer dreamed of Wimbledon at a young age, even though he found a nemesis in Danny Schnyder early on. His first rival prepared him for the later challenges of Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic. Schnyder never turned pro, but he achieved what Nadal and Djokovic never managed to do.

As a teenager, Federer was introduced to the tough professional world by Marc Rosset and Wayne Ferreira, among others. Rosset was happy to welcome another Swiss to the ATP Tour. Ferreira, as a South African – Federer's second home – felt like a mentor to him. The two were

also there for him in his darkest hours when he was first confronted with death.

Wrestler Urs Bürgler gave a helping hand at the Sydney 2000 Olympics when the shy Roger didn't know whether to make the first move on Mirka. That's what friends are for.

### **Marco Chiudinelli, childhood friend**

*And the winner said: "Sure, let's play again!"*

As childhood friends, Marco Chiudinelli and Roger Federer were at times inseparable. Their friendship lasts to this day, and Chiudinelli can still remember a lot from their carefree youth. They were eight or nine when they first met. The 'Association of Tennis Clubs of Basel and Surroundings' organised a weekly training session for the most talented juniors. 'We were a mixed bunch, ten or 12 kids. But I only remember Roger,' Chiudinelli said. 'We clicked right away.'

The training sessions took place at the Van der Merwe Center in Allschwil, a centre for racquet sports, fitness and health. After the practices, when the three tennis courts were occupied again, Marco and Roger continued to let off steam on the squash court. 'At first, we played with our racquets and tennis balls,' Chiudinelli recalled with a smile. 'They were spiking wildly like in a pinball machine. At some point, we got a squash ball from the reception and played with it. But it wasn't perfect either. We kept hitting the wall with the big tennis racquets. At Christmas, we got squash racquets from our parents, and then it went better.'

The urge to move and play and their sporting ambition united the two, who otherwise would hardly have met. At least, not so early. Although their birthdays are only 33 days apart (Roger is older), they did not go to school together. At that time, the Chiudinellis lived in the centre of Basel

near the zoo, the Federers in Münchenstein. Not a round-the-world trip, but still a few kilometres away.

Marco and Roger showed so much talent that their joint training sessions soon became more. In a now more exclusive group, they were allowed to train three times a week: Marco, Roger and Frank Frey, the son of the president of the association. ‘Those training sessions brought Roger and me closer together. Thanks to tennis, we now met three times a week. Our parents were happy that we had fun together and were out and about in the neighbourhood as a team of two. That calmed them down.’

At that time, they also played their first official match against each other at the Bambino Bären Cup in Arlesheim. ‘It was played to nine games and I won 9-7,’ Chiudinelli said, remembering very clearly. In the beginning, he was down 5-2 and was comforted by his friend, then he took the lead and had to build Roger up mentally. But that didn’t help anymore. That victory against Federer was to remain the only one for Chiudinelli in an official match. It was the semi-final, and in the final he lost to Enzo Aresta, Chiudinelli recounts, adding jokingly: ‘That defeat still torments me today.’

Their joint training was suspended at some point and Chiudinelli can no longer say why. Their parents had become friends in the meantime and the Federers encouraged the Chiudinellis to send their son to the TC Old Boys as well. A good decision. ‘There was a completely different atmosphere than at the Basel Lawn Tennis Club, where I had been before,’ Chiudinelli recalled. ‘We had a lot of kids at a similar level at the Old Boys, and you always found someone to play with.’

As chance would have it, the Chiudinelli family moved very close to the Federers in Münchenstein at the time. So the

two sons went to training together by bike. On the way back, they stocked up on all kinds of treats at the kiosk with their pocket money: sour tongues, snakes, and Coke florets. ‘We got back on the bikes, rode on and stuffed our mouths full of the sweets. That’s how we filled up our sugar reservoirs again,’ Chiudinelli said. The bags of sweets were empty before they got home, so their parents didn’t notice. They invested two francs each in their sweets. In those days, you got so much sweet and sour for that money that your tongue burned.

They were coached at the TC Old Boys by the Australian Peter Carter, who later moved to Swiss Tennis to continue personally coaching Federer. ‘At that time, we were of a similar level, the same age and both ambitious,’ Chiudinelli said. ‘We had this competitive spirit. We always wanted to play games and sets. Others had less of this intrinsic motivation. The loser always wanted a rematch, and the winner said: “Sure, let’s play again!” At the Old Boys, we had a big group of juniors; Roger and I always stayed the longest and kept challenging each other in a good way. We could play with each other for hours on end.’

Besides that, they still played football intensively: Chiudinelli at FC Basel, Federer at Concordia Basel. And the two rival clubs played against each other again and again. ‘We always had trouble with Concordia,’ Chiudinelli recalled. ‘We were very structured at FCB; they were not at all. They had only dribblers, but individually they were very skilled and unpredictable. They were all street footballers, most of them sons of immigrants. And they had good cohesion. Roger was the strategist in his team, probably the only one. He had a strong right foot but no left.’ Chiudinelli smiled: ‘He only needed the left one to keep from falling over. But he had a powerful shot with

his right foot and was dangerous with headers; he had good timing.’ Chiudinelli was a sweeper for many years and later a full-back and Federer was always a striker. He lived out his attacking spirit in football as well.

What Chiudinelli remembers most from football are the duels at the indoor tournaments in the region, in which FCB and Concordia always took part. ‘In the hall, it was challenging to cover Roger. There you score goals from the halfway line. They had another one with a monster shot, Roberto Canosso, he shot with his left. When those two were on the field simultaneously, it became difficult for us. Nobody wanted to be hit by a shot from them.’

At the prestigious indoor tournament in Möhlin, a 30-minute drive from Basel, FCB and Concordia Basel duelled twice in the final. ‘The first time, it was 0-0 or 1-1 and we won in a penalty shoot-out, but Roger sunk his. The second time we lost 2-0, we had no chance. After that, Roger stopped playing football and concentrated on tennis. I continued to play for two more years. Roger played football for five or six years; I played eight.’

Soon they went their separate ways. Federer moved out to the National Training Centre in Ecublens in 1995 when he was 14. ‘For me, it was not an option,’ said Chiudinelli. ‘After all, I didn’t even qualify for the Swiss Junior Championships every year. Roger always played for the title. But I missed him at Old Boys. I was certainly better than those who only played regionally but not good enough to dream of earning a living with tennis one day. I wrote “computer scientist” in the friendship books as my dream job. That’s what my parents did. In tennis, my goal was to achieve an N ranking [to be among the top 150 active players in the country] one day.’



Chiudinelli feared that their friendship might break up when Federer moved to Lake Geneva. But the opposite was the case. When he came home at weekends, they always spent time together. The Friday or Saturday evening they spent together looked like this: with 20 or 30 francs in their pockets, they took the 10 tram to Steinenvorstadt in Basel, where there was always a lot going on, strolled through the alleys, ate at McDonald's, gambled away the rest of the money in the amusement arcade or watched others play games. The big boxes with the video games, quite simple by today's standards, exerted a great fascination on the two boys. Chiudinelli remembers a game where you had to circle a dragon and be careful not to get hit by the fire it was breathing. To find the right strategy for the different levels, they would hang around the box for hours and watch how others did it.

When the amusement arcade closed at 1am, there were no more trams, so they walked the four kilometres home and talked about everything during that hour. Then they continued to entertain themselves on Chiudinelli's PC at home until three or four in the morning. 'We mostly played NBA and FIFA. In basketball, he was the Phoenix Suns; I was the Chicago Bulls when we played each other.' Because Chiudinelli had a basketball hoop in his childhood room, they also duelled with a real ball. Not at night, though; that would have been too loud, but when they met during the day. 'It was an intense, beautiful time,' he said, reminiscing. They were not yet very interested in parties, alcohol or girls. They, the two pronounced gamblers, only wanted to play: on the court with racquet and ball, on the PlayStation, on the PC or in the amusement arcade.

Chiudinelli did not ask his friend much about Ecublens. At least, not about tennis. 'It didn't even occur to me that

I could go there one day, and that's why I wasn't very interested in what was going on there tennis-wise.' That was until he received a letter from Swiss Tennis at age 15 in early 1997, telling him he could show his skills at the National Tennis Centre. Probably Peter Carter had put in a good word for him.

'I travelled to Ecublens in awe. Ecublens was the holy grail of Swiss Tennis at the time, even though the hall was old and almost collapsed. That day I played big, and everything worked out. I only failed in the 12-minute run at the end. They told me I was nominated for Biel.' That year, Swiss Tennis moved from Ecublens to Biel in the ultra-modern new National Tennis Centre, and from then on, Chiudinelli also pursued a tennis career. 'If Swiss Tennis hadn't nominated me for the national squad, it would never have occurred to me to train more,' he said, shrugging his shoulders. Sometimes luck finds you.

In Biel, however, Chiudinelli and Federer didn't see each other that often. They were in different training groups and hardly ever played together. And Federer, 16 by now, was often travelling to tournaments. On 22 September 1997, after his first victories in a series of satellite tournaments in Bossonnens, Fribourg, he appeared in the ATP world rankings for the first time, as No 803, five spots ahead of a certain Lleyton Hewitt. 'When he was 15, 16, it was clear to me that Roger would become a professional tennis player and succeed,' said Chiudinelli. 'But I didn't think at that time that he would win Grand Slams.'

Gaming didn't leave the two of them entirely in Biel either. Federer had moved into a flat with Yves Allegro, and he and Chiudinelli once played all night on the PlayStation. Again and again *Tekken*, which was a fighting game Federer

mastered like no other. 'We played maybe 200 times, he won 198 times, but I kept trying,' Chiudinelli recounted. Despite the long gaming night, Federer got up in the morning and went to practice on time. He let his friend sleep a little longer, which caused him a lot of trouble. When he woke up around noon, everyone was in an uproar, at school, at Swiss Tennis, at his host family, because he hadn't shown up. Chiudinelli's mother smoothed things over but demanded that her son tell his father the truth about the night they had spent together gaming.

While Federer won the junior tournament at Wimbledon in 1998 and made his debut on the ATP Tour in Gstaad at 17, Chiudinelli was still far off. But he, too, was now focusing on tennis. He turned professional in August 1999 at 18, soon won a satellite tournament and climbed straight into the top 500 in the first few months. Nevertheless, they were travelling in different worlds; Federer had already played his way into the top 100 by then. Chiudinelli can still remember where he was when Federer beat his idol Pete Sampras in Wimbledon on 3 July 2001: in Montauban in southern France. 'It went badly, I was playing in qualifying for a Challenger tournament and I couldn't hit a ball.'

While Federer celebrated his moment of glory and was cheered on Wimbledon's Centre Court, Chiudinelli was outclassed by the Argentine Walter Larrea, a local club player: 'I lost the first set 6-1, went into the dressing room, smashed a racquet and said to myself, "That's Walter Larrea, he might have earned one ATP point in his life. Now you go out and fight!" I went out and fought like crazy and lost the second set 6-0.'

Of course, he was happy for Federer, 'but I was mostly preoccupied with myself at the time. I was in Montauban,

thinking about flying to Tbilisi [Georgia] and playing two Futures tournaments because I didn't know how to win a match anymore. I was completely down, had no more support from Swiss Tennis, and he beat Sampras at Wimbledon.'

Was Chiudinelli never jealous of his childhood friend and his career? He smiled: 'I often hear that question. No, I have no trace of envy. Because I never saw myself on the same level as Roger, not even in my junior days. He usually won the national championships; I often got stuck in the regional eliminations. As well as I know Roger, I never compared myself to him. That question never came up for me. You have other people in all professions who are more successful than you. But that doesn't mean you constantly compare yourself with them. Otherwise, almost everyone would have to be unhappy in their job.'

So Chiudinelli tried to gain a foothold on the professional Tour while Federer rushed from success to success. Chiudinelli can't remember Federer's first Wimbledon victory on 6 July 2003 in the final against Mark Philippoussis. Or, more precisely: he slept through it. He was also at Wimbledon initially that year, qualified in the doubles with the Croatian Lovro Zovko, but lost in round one.

In those days, he had problems with his left wrist and could only play the backhand with a slice, i.e. one-handed. While surfing the internet, he discovered that two of his favourite bands would be performing in Montreal at the same concert, one after the other: the progressive rock bands Dream Theater and Queensrÿche. He had signed up for the Challenger Tournament in Granby, near Montreal, but was supposed to cancel because of his wrist. But then

he decided to fly there anyway and attend the concert beforehand to combine fun with his job and get his mind off things. On the plane to Montreal, he met Maximilian Abel from Germany, who was also competing in Granby. They joined forces, attended the concert in Montreal on Saturday, 5 July, and wandered around until early in the morning. When Chiudinelli woke up around noon, Federer had become Wimbledon champion 5,000 kilometres and five time zones away.

The fact that they both became tennis pros helped keep their friendship alive, even though they played in different spheres. 'If I had a question about an opponent, I knew I could always call Roger. We saw each other at several ATP tournaments and the four Grand Slams. There he always arrived early, and I was there for the qualifying. We met there four times a year. In Basel, too, we always trained together before the tournament.' And when it happened, they would go out to dinner together.

Wasn't it always hectic around Federer? Chiudinelli shakes his head. 'He was able to shield himself well. When we went out to eat, he usually had his corner, so we still had our privacy and could talk without everyone listening.' He says Federer hasn't changed due to the hype surrounding him anyway. 'I have no comparison. I don't know anyone else since childhood who became a superstar afterwards. But I'd say he's a role model in how he's dealt with it all.'

How does Chiudinelli explain Federer's durability and professionalism? Thinking for a moment, he says: 'He had a good situation with his parents, who knew a bit about the sport and supported him but still held back. And he had a golden hand in choosing the people who surrounded him. First and foremost with Mirka, who manages his life and

the whole trappings. Other partners and women on Tour bring more chaos than calm. She is enormously valuable to him. Pierre [Paganini, the fitness trainer] was essential to him from the beginning, also in terms of mindset: setting goals and sticking to them. He also found a constant in Seve [Lüthi, his coach]. And with Tony [Godsick, his manager]. Roger understood how to build people around him who protected and encouraged him and brought their input so that he got better and better. Many people don't know what it takes in terms of teamwork in tennis to perform as an individual athlete on the court. You need a good group of people so that you can deliver 100 per cent on the court and not get stuck at 93 per cent. He lived this teamwork very distinctly and proved to be a good judge of character when he chose his people.'

Chiudinelli, on the other hand, often travelled the globe alone and was repeatedly set back by injuries. But he kept at it, and at 27, after an 18-month break following complicated knee surgery, he made a remarkable comeback that even earned him the ATP's Comeback Player of the Year award. In October 2009, he broke into the top 100 for the first time, and at the beginning of November, he played big at the Swiss Indoors, challenging Federer in the semi-finals. For the first time, they, who had experienced so much together in their younger years, played against each other in the pros. And their encounter delivered what it promised. Chiudinelli played boldly, missed three break points to lead 5-3, led 4-1 in the tiebreak and had a set point at 7-6, which Federer fended off with a brilliant backhand passing shot. The favourite then went on to win 7-6, 6-3.

'It was a beautiful and bitter moment for me,' said Chiudinelli. 'I had my chances, so it was disappointing.'

But it was beautiful for me to walk onto the court, a full stadium, and the sympathies were similarly distributed. Half for Roger, half for me. That hardly ever happened in Basel. It was extraordinary to share that with him.' He would have preferred to leave the court immediately after the defeat; he was so disappointed. But he had to stay for the joint on-court interview. 'That was good because I regained my composure more quickly.'

It was not a game like any other for either of them, 20 years after they first hit balls together. Chiudinelli told his friend before the match that he likes to take his time between points. He knows that Federer wants to play fast. But that was not to provoke him, he said. 'And against anyone else, after losing the first set, I would have gone out to the toilet for a moment to process that. Against Roger, I didn't do that. Because of my respect for him. I promptly conceded the only break of the match in the first game of the second set. That annoyed me. But after the on-court interview, everything was okay again.'

Together they celebrated the Davis Cup title in Lille in November 2014 with a 3-1 win over France. Federer and Stan Wawrinka got the necessary three points, and long-time Davis Cup players Chiudinelli and Michael Lammer were also on the team. 'It was an extremely nice moment for me,' said Chiudinelli. 'When we talked after the win, Roger made me feel that he had played for us too. He knew: this was the only chance for Michi [Lammer] and me to win something of this magnitude. We couldn't have done it alone. We are eternally grateful to him and Stan for that. This is one of the top three highlights of my career.' He sensed that a huge weight had fallen off Federer because he had given the Swiss fans and Swiss Tennis this title after

all those years in which he had also occasionally declined to play in the Davis Cup. 'He could now tick all that off.'

While Federer launched his magnificent comeback in 2017 and went on to win three more Grand Slam titles, Chiudinelli's career ended that year. His body no longer played along; knee and Achilles tendon problems constantly plagued him. He went on his farewell tour, played one more time at the places where he had particularly enjoyed it, and then retired in October at the Swiss Indoors in Basel.

Two weeks earlier, when they had dinner on the sidelines of the tournament in Shanghai, Chiudinelli had told Federer of his retirement plans. 'We had a good conversation, later went to his room and discussed it further. He had advised me to inform the most important Swiss journalists beforehand and give them interviews. Maybe one of these articles would open a door for me for life after my career if someone read it. So that's what I did.'

On a Monday evening at the end of October 2017, Chiudinelli gave his farewell at the Swiss Indoors with a defeat to Robin Haase. Federer was in the front row, shedding tears during his lap of honour and hugging his friend. 'I'm a fan of yours,' he breathed in his ear. 'Roger being there meant a lot to me,' Chiudinelli said. 'He was present at the beginning and until my last match.'

Their bond will always remain, even if they don't have as much contact at times. And tennis doesn't let go of Chiudinelli either. He now organises camps for ambitious recreational players on courts in Switzerland, Spain and Germany; even on the grass in Halle, where his childhood friend triumphed ten times. And every now and again, a participant asks him a question or two about a certain Roger Federer.



## **Danny Schnyder, first rival**

*He did what Nadal and Djokovic couldn't*

Nobody beats Roger Federer eight times in a row. Not even Rafael Nadal or Novak Djokovic. No one? Well, one man has done it: Danny Schnyder.

Young Roger despaired of his tennis colleague from the Basel area. The two were the best players in Switzerland, born in 1981, clashed regularly at junior tournaments between eight and 14, and became friends. Danny, the younger brother of Patty Schnyder, who would later become a professional herself, grew up in Bottmingen; Roger, in the neighbouring village of Münchenstein. Sometimes they went to a Football Club Basel match together or watched a movie at home and on free weekends they often met on the tennis court and got up to all kinds of mischief. But in official matches, they were dead serious. 'That's when we no longer knew of friendship,' Schnyder said. 'We were both very ambitious, and that showed. It always became very emotional.' In the first few matches, it was mainly Federer who got loud and sometimes had a racquet slip out of his hand.

Schnyder, who was just over six months older, was initially just as unpleasant an opponent for Federer as Novak Djokovic was later to become for him. He committed hardly any errors, had a stable double-handed backhand and exploited Federer's vulnerable one-handed backhand. 'I was very solid from the baseline, made few mistakes,' Schnyder said. 'He was always the more risky player, even tried to play serve-and-volley, which didn't pay off at such a young age. With his forehand, he tried to force. But he made too many mistakes and his backhand was a huge weakness. That's where I nailed him.'

The first five or six times, it wasn't even close, Schnyder remembers. 'Rogi was frustrated; he hated to lose.' Schnyder won the first eight times but once Federer broke the spell, he only lost to his teenage rival once more. 'The balance was narrowly positive for Rogi at the end,' Schnyder said. He remembers how they consoled each other when the other wasn't doing so well. More and more often, Federer was victorious. Like in 1993 in the final of the Junior Swiss Championships in Bellinzona. Together they won the doubles. In a photograph, they are both beaming as they hold their two medals each to the camera, three gold and one silver.

'When I see Rogi's successes over all these years, it seems like a dream that I was once able to keep up with him for six years,' Schnyder mused. Their times together as ambitious juniors have kept them linked to this day, even though they hardly see each other anymore. In March 2015, Schnyder, living in San Diego, visited his childhood friend at the tournament in Indian Wells. 'I thought he might have 15 minutes with his packed schedule. But we sat together in the Players' Garden for more than an hour, chatting about old times, our current lives and our families. Of course, I'm proud of him for having such a great career. But even more than all the titles, I'm pleased that he's remained the same easy-going guy he was 20, 25 years ago.'

They refreshed memories like the one when they went to a junior tournament together in Annecy, France, and just goofed around. 'We'd shoot balls around and the one who hit the other would get a lollipop. We laughed so hard when we remembered that. What I find insane is that Rogi can still remember every detail of our matches, and he even knew some of the scores.' Then Federer drove his childhood friend to the hotel by car.

But why did Federer become a tennis superstar and his first nemesis didn't? 'I'm often asked that,' said Schnyder, who pursued an academic career instead of one in sports. 'I think even if I had gone full tennis, I wouldn't have gotten further than the top 600, 700 in the world. I didn't have the body and the talent to get any better. And more importantly, I lacked the absolute passion that you need. I didn't want to devote more than six, seven hours a week to tennis. The touch was there, but you can't make up for the huge lack of passion.' It was a passion Schnyder sensed in Federer. 'He wanted to compete and win. He loved the game and he loved to win even more. His will to win was huge.'

Schnyder saw from his sister Patty, who is a good two years older and was to advance to No 7 on the WTA Tour and win 11 professional titles, how much you have to invest in a professional career. 'When I was 15, 16, I preferred to do things with my friends. And I was a big fan of FC Basel and attended all the games. Then when I was 17, 18, I was going out more often, and tennis took a back seat.' He made it to 67th in the national rankings in the end.

What amazes him most about Federer is the straightforwardness with which he drove his career onwards. 'We were similar as youngsters, not very diligent in training and had a lot of fluff in our heads. We didn't warm up for long when we played together, but we soon played for points. Playing balls longline or cross-court for hours on end wasn't our thing. I think it's incredible how Rogi changed in that respect, how he managed to achieve this discipline and coolness. I would never have thought that. I always knew he had talent. But I was surprised that he would put in this gruelling work every day. And that he would become such a

model athlete and the dream of all mothers-in-law. I rather thought he would become a character like Gaël Monfils. Playful and not always so disciplined. A charismatic artist who plays with the audience and occasionally smashes a racquet. Roger had a mind of his own and was a rascal in a good way.'

The two parted ways when Federer moved to the National Tennis Centre in Ecublens in the autumn of 1995. 'Rogi developed rapidly there. After just six months, I noticed a big change. He didn't let himself get rattled so quickly on the court anymore,' Schnyder said. 'He no longer looked at what people were doing around him. The decision for Ecublens was groundbreaking for his career. He now had much more time for tennis. And he probably also felt more pressure. If he took this risk and didn't go the normal school route, he would now have to succeed in tennis. I had the feeling he was much more focused on everything he did from then on. And I soon had no chance against him anymore.'

Schnyder studied Spanish as a major and political science and communication as minors in Basel. In 2003, he emigrated to Mexico, where he studied international affairs with a focus on business at the college in Monterrey. After receiving his master's degree, he soon relocated to Houston for professional reasons and later to San Diego. In 2018, Swiss building materials producer Holcim poached him, and he returned to the greater Houston area as its Head of Sales. He is satisfied with how his life has turned out. Now the father of a daughter and a son, he is very rarely in Switzerland. From his 20s to 30s, he rarely picked up a racquet but now he plays tennis regularly again in the USA, even competitively, and at a reasonable level.

Schnyder admits that he now prefers to watch baseball rather than tennis. But he has always tuned in during Federer's big finals. 'I'm a big sports fan, but not a tennis fan. I only watch tennis when Rogi is playing,' he said. 'Everything looks so fluid and natural with him. That's what I like most about him – that ease. When I watch Nadal, I feel like he's always suffering. With Rogi, everything is so smooth. It's beautiful to watch.'

Does he still occasionally mention that he once beat the great Roger Federer eight times in a row? Schnyder grins. 'It's not like I come up with it on my own,' he said. 'But when I mention I'm from Switzerland, I'm often told, "Ah, like Roger Federer!" And then I say I know him and even played against him in the past and beat him.'

Of course, many wouldn't believe him immediately, so when he met Federer in Indian Wells in 2015, he recorded a short video in which the 20-time Grand Slam champion confirmed it. The atmosphere is relaxed as Schnyder says, 'We are here now, with Roger.' Federer interjects, 'In Indian Wells.' Then he says with a mischievous smile, 'and it's a nostalgic time. And we realised that the only player who beat me more often, as often as Nadal and Djokovic, is Danny Schnyder. There he is!' The camera swings to Schnyder, who makes a Victory sign. And Federer concludes, 'Cheers to that!'

'This video has earned me a lot of free beers,' Schnyder said with a smirk. 'It's won me a lot of bets in bars.' And he doesn't hide that his relationship with Federer has also worked to his advantage in business. 'With certain CEOs who are tennis fans, I immediately had a good foundation for conversation. You're already starting on a different level.'

Danny Schnyder did not become a tennis pro. But his years as a successful junior and Roger Federer's first rival still mark his life today.

### **Marc Rosset, Swiss mentor**

*'And Roger? He was as relaxed as one can be'*

Marc Rosset has to smile when he talks about his first encounter with Roger Federer: 'He was 14 or 15 when he came to Geneva to practise with me. I was told he was very talented, and I was curious to meet him. When I was a teenager and got to hit balls with the great Henri Leconte for the first time, I was totally tense. I wanted to present myself at my best, gave everything, to the brink of exhaustion. And Roger? Not a trace of nervousness! He was as relaxed as one can be. He didn't move much on the court; his balls flew in all directions. I had to laugh; he was so different from me, once with Leconte.'

But didn't it annoy Rosset that this teenager was not in awe of him, the Olympic champion? 'Oh, on the contrary. I immediately took Roger to my heart.' He noticed that Federer was gifted. 'But that wasn't so important for me. At that age, you can't tell if someone will become a great player or not. That is impossible. What impressed me was his easy-going nature. I just liked this boy. I always liked those who are a bit different. That's why I became friends with the likes of Marat Safin or Goran Ivanisevic.'

When their paths crossed for the second time in mid-July 1998, Federer had just become junior Wimbledon champion and had made his professional debut in Gstaad. Davis Cup captain Stéphane Oberer took the youngster to the quarter-final against Spain

in La Coruña as the Swiss team's sparring partner, as a reward for his success.

'I asked if Roger could have the room next to me in the hotel,' Rosset recounted. 'It was important that he felt welcome as part of the team. We then even got rooms with a connecting door. I first opened it and asked him if he wanted to come over and play PlayStation with me.' Federer didn't have to be asked twice. And so they repeatedly had heated duels with the game *Formula 1* in those days. 'Roger felt so comfortable that he was often already sitting in my room playing PlayStation when I came back from training,' Rosset recalled. 'A couple of times, I had to say, "Sorry, I've just practised for two hours, and I need to rest for a minute." But that was easy for him. He then just kept playing. It was completely relaxed with him.'

Rosset slipped into the role of big brother for Federer and helped him establish himself with the pros. Despite an age difference of more than ten years, they hit it off immediately. 'We had the same sense of humour; we always made little jokes. I didn't see him as a rival; on the contrary. I wanted to support him. It's not easy when you come on Tour at 17, 18. You travel a lot; sometimes, you're alone. I was happy that a young Swiss came up.'

Rosset was not only Federer's companion but also a trailblazer for him. With his Olympic victory in 1992, the sensitive giant achieved the greatest success for Swiss tennis up to that time. It should be noted that the world's elite competed in Barcelona, from Jim Courier to Stefan Edberg and Pete Sampras to Boris Becker. It was the second Olympic tournament since tennis had been reintroduced into the Olympic programme in 1988. A few months after his Olympic victory, Rosset also played in the 1992

Davis Cup final with Jakob Hlasek against an American dream team with Courier, Sampras, Andre Agassi and John McEnroe. Although the Geneva native stunned everyone by beating Courier in the second singles in Fort Worth, Texas, the Swiss lost 3-1. When Federer and Stan Wawrinka won the Davis Cup title in Lille in 2014, it was a late satisfaction for the 2.01-metre (6ft 7in) man. ‘Swiss tennis deserved that,’ he said.

Rosset was the first Grand Slam semi-finalist from the small Alpine country, in 1996 at Roland-Garros. Björn Borg and McEnroe, in their stylish outfits, had once inspired him to take the path of professional tennis. His most fateful decision, however, had only marginally to do with tennis: after his first-round exit at the 1998 US Open, he booked a ticket on Swissair flight 111 from New York to Geneva on 2 September. At the last minute, he changed his reservation on a whim and thus escaped the plane crash off the coast of Halifax [Nova Scotia], in which all 229 passengers and crew members died. Rosset says that the memory of this tragedy, which he had skidded a hair’s breadth past, did not haunt his dreams in the aftermath. ‘For people who have survived a plane crash, it is certainly different. But life didn’t want me to get on that plane.’

Fortunately, Rosset’s journey continued and Federer’s career gradually picked up speed in 1999. They competed more often in the same tournaments and played doubles together a few times. Their friendship soon extended beyond the daily tournament routine. After returning from the Australian Open in 2000, Rosset asked Federer if he would come up to Crans-Montana for a few days of skiing. Federer spontaneously agreed. In the Valais mountains, he initially struggled with the effects of jet lag. During a



dinner in a Chinese restaurant Federer even fell asleep at the table, Rosset recalls with amusement. But on the slopes, he did not hold back. 'You know it,' he recounted. 'On the first run, you still have respect and ride a bit more cautiously. On the second run, you're more confident. By the third, your inhibitions are gone.'

Especially if you are a daredevil like the 18-year-old Federer was back then. They chose the slope of the women's downhill race, where two hills follow each other. 'All of a sudden, Roger roared past me as if he were Peter Müller,' Rosset recalled. But Federer was unfortunately not as steady on his skis as the former Swiss downhill world champion. 'Roger went full speed towards the jump, made a huge jump, lost his balance in the air and fell backwards. At first, I shook my head, then I got scared. What if he broke his leg now? I felt responsible. I drove down to him, saw him lying in the snow, and asked, "Roger, are you okay?" When he nodded, I was very relieved. Today we laugh about it but I was terrified at that moment.' Federer took that fall as a lesson and confined himself to après-ski for the rest of his tennis career.

A few weeks later, the two friends met again on the court – in the final of the Marseille indoor tournament. The up-and-coming Federer was in his first final on the ATP Tour on 13 February 2000, but experience prevailed: Rosset won by the razor-thin margin of 2-6, 6-3, 7-6. The youthful loser initially held it together after the match but he could no longer hold back the tears of disappointment during the award ceremony. 'I was relieved to win because I felt like I had a bit more pressure as the older one,' said Rosset, for whom it was the second to last of his 15 professional titles. 'But I couldn't be euphoric because I saw Roger's sadness.'

I felt for him. He probably thought at that moment that he had missed perhaps his only chance to win a professional tournament. During my victory speech, I tried to cheer him up: “Roger, it’s not the end of the world. Don’t worry; you’re going to be a great player and you’re going to win many more tournaments. No question about it.” At the time, Rosset could not have known that the loser on that day would go on to win 20 Grand Slam titles and more than 100 tournaments.

Rosset believes that a tragic stroke of fate was groundbreaking for Federer’s successful career: the death of his ex-coach Peter Carter on 1 August 2002 in a traffic accident on his honeymoon in South Africa. ‘Sometimes you need painful experiences in life to mature,’ said Rosset. ‘I was also there at the funeral in Basel. It was terrible. I had known Peter Carter too, but never as well as Roger. Carter had been a fantastic person. Seeing Roger at his funeral so sad, so destroyed, hurt me. I wanted to hold and comfort him, but I knew that wasn’t enough. Everyone deals with such tragic events differently. With Roger, I had the feeling that it made him grow.’ When Federer met Carter’s parents in person for the first time in September 2003 on the sidelines of the Davis Cup semi-final in Melbourne, Rosset accompanied him. It was a challenging walk for him, the Geneva native sensed. ‘I had the feeling that it helped him that I came along. I was just there in case Roger needed me.’

Eleven months after Carter’s tragic death, Federer celebrated his first Grand Slam title at Wimbledon in 2003. Rosset’s career was gradually drawing to a close at the time. He watched the historic Wimbledon final against Mark Philippoussis on television in Geneva, having lost in the first round at the All England Club. Rosset remembers how

he and Federer had practised in Wimbledon in 2001 before the tournament. They put their 30 minutes together to be allowed to practise for an hour on a match court. 'Roger played unbelievably; I didn't see a ball,' said Rosset. That year, the young tennis virtuoso with the ponytail beat his idol, Pete Sampras, in the round of 16, in their only duel on the professional Tour. Two years later, Federer made his big breakthrough at Church Road.

Did Rosset sense that the first Wimbledon title was the prelude to Federer's winning streak? 'Yes and no. Of course, you want to win more Grand Slams once you've done it. But then, Roger was not yet the complete player he later became. In 2003, for example, his backhand was not very mature. He still had many things to improve on. And he did. It's one thing to win a Grand Slam. And quite another to dominate the sport. He developed extremely well in all areas and how he channelled his emotions. When you win a big tournament like Wimbledon, it brings enormous pressure. Roger was able to handle it; he became a winning machine.'

But how does this development fit with the 14-year-old who was so relaxed, so easy-going at the time? 'Yes, Roger is a very easy-going guy and he has an inimitable ease on the court,' Rosset admitted. 'But there is a lot of work behind it. And he was lucky enough to meet many good people along the way. Like Pierre Paganini, for me the world's best fitness trainer for a tennis player, or his coach Severin Lüthi. But the most important meeting was with Mirka, his wife. I always say: he owes 50 per cent of his success to her. Without her, his career would not have been possible. She always had his back. Even when their family grew and the covetousness around him. When you have

four children, nannies, and your team, that's a lot of people. You have to organise many things when travelling around with such an entourage. Still, he could always concentrate on tennis because Mirka took care of everything for him. You can't have that kind of career if your wife isn't fully behind you.'

How important was it that Federer's wife had been a tennis pro herself? 'It's certainly helpful because she knows what it takes in this sport. But it's not the decisive factor. Jelena Djokovic, Novak's wife, hadn't played on the Tour. The most important thing is that you have a stable woman who always supports you and sometimes puts her interests aside for yours. If you have a girlfriend who always wants to party, that can mess you up.' You can't separate Roger Federer, the tennis pro, from Roger Federer, the private person, he said. 'He is a pronounced family man, never wanting to travel around without his wife and children for any length of time. Mirka made it possible for the family to come along.'

Rosset sees the work-life balance in such an extraordinary job as the secret to Federer retaining the joy of the sport for so long. 'It was important for him to be able to return to the hotel at the tournaments and see his children. That way, he could clear his head and think about something else. He took his time for tennis but also for his family. Time and again, he took himself completely out of the sport. You can't think about tennis 24 hours a day. Of course, he did that before the big finals. But otherwise, he lived a more or less normal life on the Tour and did other things that were good for him.'

For years Federer beat his fellow players over and over again, yet they repeatedly voted him the most popular tennis

player on Tour. How does Rosset explain this apparent contradiction? ‘Because Roger is a likeable person. I don’t find anything negative about him. It didn’t get into his head; he never forgot where he came from and all who helped him along the way.’ And no matter with whom, Federer always made time for a chat on Tour, rarely appearing stressed. ‘He has an incredible memory, remembering everyone he played with on the junior tour. And the stories from back in the day. Do you know anyone who doesn’t like Roger? Maybe one says: “I prefer Nadal.” But I don’t know anyone who doesn’t like him. He’s friendly to everybody. Not because he has to be. It’s just the way he is. Because he loves people. With his empathy, he reminded me of Andre Agassi.’

After his retirement in 2005, Rosset followed Federer’s career as an expert co-commentator for French-speaking Swiss television and a trenchant newspaper columnist. What fascinated him most was Federer’s rivalry with Rafael Nadal – and how he dealt with it: ‘In the beginning, Roger perceived Rafa as an adversary who kept him from winning everything. That annoyed him. But then he accepted the fight, and a great rivalry developed. At some point, Roger realised that they were very similar. When someone asks me the difference between Roger and Rafa, I say none. Of course, their tennis is completely different. But the way they love and live tennis, the way they respect this sport, in this regard they are like two brothers to me.’

One match, in particular, stands out for Rosset: their 2017 Australian Open final, a classic that Federer won in five sets. ‘The way Roger played there, the way he attacked and took risks, also with his backhand, was pure joy for me.’ Federer also played courageously at Wimbledon 2019 but missed out on the title against Novak Djokovic despite

two match points. Rosset wrote in a column in the French-speaking Swiss newspaper *Le Temps* at the time: 'It reminded me of the films I watched as a child in which the hero died at the end. Alain Delon was a specialist in this genre, and I hated it; it made me sick. I felt the same sense of injustice then.' But Rosset found a conciliatory conclusion: 'If Roger had won, we would have been delighted that he had won a 21st Grand Slam title. But would we have liked him more? Our admiration is now joined by empathy for heroes and the defeated. We want to comfort him, hug him, tell him we love him.'

These are words from someone who has known Federer for a long time, since the latter strolled onto the court as a teenager to hit a few balls with him for the first time. What role does Rosset see himself as having played for Federer? As his mentor, his big brother or simply his friend? 'Oh, I don't know. It's not so important what you call it either. I know my feelings for him, and I know his feelings for me. I admire the way he played tennis. But what interests me more is that he is happy, smiling and loves life.'

### **Urs Bürgler, wrestler and matchmaker**

*'Now, Roger, this is your chance!'*

Urs Bürgler tells with a smirk how he met Roger Federer for the first time at the beginning of the Olympic Games in Sydney in 2000. 'We opened the door to our house in the athletes' village and Rogi sat at the table and had a puzzle with 3,000 pieces in front of him. Mountains, lakes and a bird in the middle. He sat there in peace, all alone and absorbed in his task. You have to have patience and nerve to solve such a huge puzzle. Especially a nature puzzle where almost every piece looks the same.'