**What we learn from Djokovic vs Federer in grand slam finals**

The Federer fans love their man Roger. And who can blame them? The man is a clean cut 17 time grand slam champion who, much like a fine wine, keeps improving with age, and he recently earned his way into another grand slam final. Many hoped he would knock off the current world number one, Novak Djokovic, and notch number 18. Unfortunately, most of the Federer fans were praying for a win against all tennis logic. I am not saying Roger had no chance. Players at all levels know that when it comes time to play their biggest matches, they need to rise to the occasion and embrace the opportunity fully. And a grand slam final is a lot more meaningful to Novak Djokovic than a Cincinnati masters final he lost to Federer two weeks before. Sure, Roger introduced the SABR (Sneak Attack By Roger) in that Cincinnati final, but come the US Open final, Novak had some answers for that and more.

Players at all levels also know that there are some players they just don’t match up well against, and Novak doesn’t seem to be a good match-up for Roger unless Novak is off his game. On the other hand, Djokovic doesn’t seem to be a good match-up for anyone these days.

Djokovic returns better, and generally successfully neutralizes Federer’s biggest weapons. On top of that, at this stage of their careers, he seems to play the bigger points better, extends the rallies making Roger play many more balls, and most importantly, he believes he can beat Roger in grand slam finals. And history suggests, he may be on to something.

But on this day at least, Federer looked and played as though he believed he could not beat Djokovic, which. may explain the many blown opportunities and the reason why Noles played the big points so much better. On this day, Djokovic hit his forehand equally as well as Roger throughout the final and served better when it mattered most. Let's look at some key factors from Federer versus Djokovic and see what we can learn.

Stick to Your Game Plan

As the late, great Yogi Berra once said, "Baseball is ninety percent mental. The other half is physical." Amusing to be sure but anyone who has ever played the game, or any sport for that matter will understand the meaning.

I can't over state the importance of the mental aspect of the game.But having a clear game plan and committing to executing it would be number two on the scale. Sure it’s important to have efficient technique, but at the end of the day, I would much rather win than look good with pretty strokes and come off second best. And I am well aware that we mere mortals, those of us who are not on the ATP or WTA Tour, have to work on bettering our strokes, but we cannot lose sight of what the objective of a match is. And that is to win by matching our strengths against our opponent’s weaknesses. Pros, including Djokovic and Federer, are human. They miss balls wide, long and into the net just like the rest of us (although, not nearly as often). They serve double faults. And they often lose for the same reason club players do. And that is simply because they fail to commit to and stick to a sound game plan.

Federer’s style of play in recent times has basically been controlled aggression with absolute commitment to his shots. He is serving better, and he is always looking for forehands to dominate the point, winning it with an out right winner or moving forward and ending the point at the net. Leading up to the US Open final, Federer served 65% first serves and won 82% of the points on his first serve. And against the rest of the field, this all out controlled aggression proved to be a winning formula. But sadly enough, we did not find out if this all out controlled aggression would work against Djokovic, because Federer seems uncharacteristically passive when playing him in recent times, at least in Grand Slam finals.

In the US Open final, Federer had more forehand winners from the back of the court than Djokovic, 18 to 15, but Federer also committed 56 errors compared to Djokovic's 37. Djokovic successfully achieved his number one tactic of extending the rallies from the back of the court and winning a majority. The Serb won 27 rallies where there were more than 9 shots. Djokovic was able to keep the ball deep and work over the Federer backhand, forcing 41 errors off that side.

To me, Djokovic made Federer perform worse from the baseline, and he won 52% of these points. A similar trend occurred when the two stars met in this year’s Wimbledon final. Here, Federer played more baseline points (126) than in any of his other matches, and he averaged 32 baseline points per set. This is six more per set than against Murray in the semifinals. Who knows what would've happened had Roger have chosen to play more aggressively throughout the finals?

For me, it's frustrating to see arguably the greatest ever, and a man who has done so much for the sport, play so poorly, particularly towards the business end of sets. Why would Roger not play as aggressively in a grand slam final as he did in that Cincinnati final? All I can think of is that Novak raises his level of play in a slam final, and as recent history tells us, Roger believes he cannot beat him over five sets on the worlds grandest stage. The unusually high number of unforced errors from the Federer racquet suggests this.

The simple lesson to learn here is that we must focus on our strengths when formulating a game plan and then execute it with total conviction. Tennis is a sport of constant adjustments. If we fail to make the necessary adjustments, and if we do not solve problems that arise, our chances of winning greatly decline. We must also find ways to bring out the worst in our opponents. If we are playing a pusher, it makes sense to open the court and look to attack the space created. It may also make sense to play some higher heavy balls with the goal of eliciting a weak reply.

My advice is to play three or four practice matches per week against different playing styles. You must finish the practice matches. Formulate a pre match game plan and then videotape the match. Watch the match with your coach, or someone with a lot of tennis playing experience, and study the patterns of play. Examine what you did on the big points, look at serve percentages, look at who won more points from the baseline, look for times when you could've been more aggressive but remained passive, and so on.

The Return of Serve

It is often said that the return of serve separates the men from the boys and the good from the great. Maybe it is fair to say we are only as good as our return of serve? During the course of the match, Federer had many break points. He saw 11 second serves on his 23 break points and did not once try the SABR tactic. This was a big error because Federer did not stick to his recent tournament aggressive game plan on the bigger return points and play the way he had to play.

Federer converted 1 of 11 of break points on Djokovic's second serve, and this just happened to be the only time Federer finished at the net at one of these crucial moments. On second serve break point exchanges, Federer missed 3 returns; he hit 29 backhands (his weaker shot) and only 20 forehands (his weapon) and ended at the net only once. On these break points, Djokovic started with second serves but finished by forcing 9 errors, hitting one winner, and kept the ball deep enough to keep Federer at bay.

In earlier rounds, Federer was relentlessly, pouncing on second serves. On the other hand, Novak did stick to his game plan. Novak made Federer play many long rallies, and seemed to always make him play the extra ball. Maybe Roger pressed a bit too much, as often happens when we play fast players who get a lot of balls back. But the important thing to remember is to stick with your strengths when under pressure. Federer did not return aggressively enough off of the second serve returns and this took pressure off Djokovic.

The number one aspect of tennis I never see practiced enough is the return of serve. And I certainly do not see it practiced enough with purpose or under pressure situations. The return can only go three places: down the line, through the middle, or crosscourt. Practice all three using specific targets. Try making 10 returns in a row to all 3 sections of the court. Start with crosscourt, and if you do not make 10 in a row then start again. Do the same with the down-the-line and the up the middle. And have your coach vary the serve in this drill. Too many times in practice, the returner is told by the server where the serve is going. This is only fine when working on a certain type of return, i.e. a heavy forehand crosscourt return from the deuce court off of a first serve.

Believe in Yourself

I have had many conversations about this year’s US Open men’s final with countless people from different playing levels, age groups, genders, etc., and most people across the board comment on the amount of blown opportunities by Federer. And they would be right. But, as the stats also show, let’s give some credit to Djokovic for playing so tough under pressure. His ability to serve accurately at key times was simply amazing. To me, if you do not play your game and stick to your strengths under pressure, think Federer, it tells me you do not fully believe you can beat your opponent.

As I mentioned earlier, Federer had success on the break point where he was aggressive and finished at net. On all other break points, he lacked aggression and this played into Djokovic's hands. Only Federer truly knows why, but judging by the statistics and style of play throughout the match, I think we can safely say he did not believe he could win.

There are always two matches going on for Federer when he plays Djokovic. And always two matches going on for every match someone plays for that matter — the match that contains point play and the match in between the points. Federer must have experienced a lot of doubts in his match between points because of the lack of conviction that he executed during play. I also believe Federer missed a lot of mid court forehands because he lacked belief. Part of this is probably due to playing someone so fast because he fears that if he doesn't hit a near perfect shot, Novak will have a solid attempt at a passing shot.