

THE ROGER FEDERER STORY

Quest For Perfection

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Contents

From The Author	v
Prologue: Encounter with a 15-year-old.	ix
Introduction: No One Expected Him	xiv

PART I

From Kempton Park to Basel	3
A Boy Discovers Tennis	8
Homesickness in Ecublens	14
The Best of All Juniors	21
A Newcomer Climbs to the Top	30
New Coach, New Ways	35
Olympic Experiences	40
No Pain, No Gain	44
Uproar at the Davis Cup	49
The Man Who Beat Sampras	53
The Taxi Driver of Biel	57
Visit to the Top Ten	60
Drama in South Africa.	65
Red Dawn in China	70
The Grand Slam Block	74
A Magic Sunday	79
A Cow for the Victor	86
Reaching for the Stars	91
Duels in Texas	95
An Abrupt End	100
The Glittering Crowning	104
No. 1	109
Samson's Return	116

New York, New York	122
Setting Records Around the World.	125
The Other Australian	130
A True Champion.	137
Fresh Tracks on Clay	142
Three Men at the Champions Dinner	146
An Evening in Flushing Meadows	150
The Savior of Shanghai.	155
Chasing Ghosts	160
A Rivalry Is Born	163
Two New Friends: Woods and Sampras	169
The Perfect 10	175

PART II

The Person: Nice but Firm	183
The Player: Like a Chameleon	190
The Opponent: Just to be in his Shoes.	197
The Entrepreneur: Sign of the Hippo	204
Everybody Wants Him: The Everyday Media Routine.	215
The Celebrated Man: The Media's View	220
The Ambassador: On a Noble Mission	225
Timeline	231
Quotes On Roger Federer.	239
Grand Slam Man	244
From The Publisher	245
List Of Press Sources For Quotations.	246
Index	247

CHAPTER 1

From Kempton Park to Basel

The village of Berneck is situated in the northeastern corner of Switzerland in the St. Gall Rhine valley, where the Alpine foothills are kissed by the famed Foehn winds and the inhabitants speak a rough dialect of German. The people of this village feel a closer association to Austria and its Vorarlberg state—located just on the other side of the Rhine—than they do Switzerland’s major cities of Zurich, Bern or Geneva. A few kilometers to the north, the Rhine flows into Lake Constance, where the waters comprise the borders between Switzerland, Austria and Germany.

Roger’s father, Robert, grew up in Berneck as son of a textile worker and a housewife. At the age of 20, he left the area and followed the course of the Rhine and arrived in Basel, a border city in the triangle between Switzerland, Germany and France and where the Rhine forms a knee joint and flows north out of the country. Basel is where some of the world’s most important chemical companies are headquartered and Robert Federer, a young chemical laboratory worker, found his first job at Ciba, one of the world’s leading chemical companies.

After four years in Basel, Robert Federer was seized by wanderlust, and in 1970, he decided to emigrate and pull up stakes from Switzerland. It was a coincidence that he chose South Africa, but also due to formalities. Among other things, he could get an emigration visa with relative ease in the country dominated by Apartheid. It was also a coincidence that he found a new job with the same employer he had in Switzerland, Ciba. The chemical company, along with several other foreign companies, was located in Kempton Park, an extended suburb of Johannesburg near the international airport.

It was in Kempton Park where he met Lynette Durand, who came to work for Ciba as a secretary. Afrikaans was the spoken language on her family’s

farm—she had three siblings; her father was a foreman and her mother was a nurse—but Lynette went to an English school and her intention was to save money as quickly as possible and to travel to Europe. She preferred England, where her father was stationed during World War II.

Robert Federer is a modest and unpretentious man who usually remains in the background. He prefers to observe and listen quietly and then to steer things in the direction desired. He is small of stature with a prominent nose and he has a distinct mustache. He is athletic, strong, quick-witted, funny, cosmopolitan and easy-going. Nothing characterizes him better than his ringing laughter that draws his eyes into narrow slits and raises his bushy eyebrows. Despite his affability, he knows how to defend himself when crossed. He is realistic but decisive. A female portrait painter once described him as being “caustic, having the bite of a bear.”

Lynette, the charming 18-year-old secretary with the piercing eyes, instantly made a favorable impression on Robert Federer when he saw her in the company cafeteria in 1970. They met and eventually became a couple. Robert took Lynette to the Swiss Club in Johannesburg to introduce her to his new hobby—tennis. The young woman, who used to play field hockey, was instantly enthused about the sport and began to play regularly. The couple had a wonderful time in South Africa—Apartheid hardly affected them.

Robert Federer cannot really explain why they moved to Switzerland in 1973. “You had this feeling of being a migratory bird,” he said. Back in Basel, he often asked himself why they didn’t stay in Africa, especially because his consort admitted to having difficulty with the confines of Switzerland and the narrow mentality of its people. “But one learned quickly to adjust,” she said. The couple married and a daughter, Diana, was born in 1979. Twenty-months later, Lynette Federer then bore a son, on the morning of August 8, 1981 in Basel’s canton hospital. He was named Roger because it could also be pronounced easily in English. Roger’s parents, even in the first hours of his life, felt that one day it could be beneficial for their son to have a name that was easy to pronounce in English.

The name Federer was already familiar in Berneck before 1800, but it is actually an extremely uncommon clan name in Switzerland. The most famous Federer up to that point was Heinrich Federer, a priest turned poet who died

in 1928. In 1966, on his 100th birthday, he was immortalized on a Swiss postage stamp.

In the 1970s, the Ciba Company that Robert and Lynette Federer continued to work for in Switzerland sponsored a tennis club in Allschwil, a suburb of Basel, and the Federer family soon became regular players. Lynette displayed a great talent for the sport with her greatest triumph coming when she was a member of the Swiss Inter-club senior championship team in 1995. She loved tennis so much that she soon became a junior tennis coach at the club. She later became involved in the tournament organization at the Swiss Indoors, the ATP tournament in Basel, working in the credential office.

Robert Federer was also a committed tennis enthusiast and was a regionally-ranked player. He and his wife would later more frequently hit the golf course, but at the time, tennis still came first. Lynette often took her son to the tennis courts. Young Roger was fascinated by balls at a very young age. "He wanted to play ball for hours on end—even at one-and-a-half years old," his mother recollected. His skill was plainly apparent: He could hardly walk but he managed to catch larger balls. Little Roger hit his first tennis ball over the net at three-and-a-half years old. At four, he could already hit twenty or thirty balls in a row. "He was unbelievably coordinated," his father gushed.

The Federer family was neither rich nor poor, just solid Swiss middle class. Roger grew up in a townhouse with a yard in a quiet neighborhood in Wasserhaus in Münchenstein, a suburb of Basel. Impulsive and ambitious, he was not an easy child. "Defeats were total disasters for him, even at board games," his father remembered. He was "a nice guy" in general "but when he didn't like something, he could get pretty aggressive." Dice and game board pieces sometimes flew through the living room.

Even as a little boy, his mother said, he always did as he pleased and attempted to push limits, whether it involved teachers at school or his parents at home or with sports. "He was very vibrant, a bundle of energy, and was sometimes very difficult," said Lynette. When forced to do something he didn't like, Roger reacted strongly. When bored, he questioned it or ignored it. When his father gave him instruction on the tennis court, Roger would not even look at him.

Roger was a popular boy, always friendly, not arrogant, well-behaved—and very athletic. He tried skiing, wrestling, swimming and skateboarding but it was sports that involved balls that especially fascinated him. He played soccer, handball, basketball, table tennis, tennis and, at home, he even played badminton over the neighbor's fence. He always had a ball with him, even on the way to school. One of his idols was Michael Jordan of the NBA's Chicago Bulls. He was outdoors every free minute he could muster. Work in the classroom that required concentration and sitting still wasn't his thing. He was not an ambitious student at school and his grades were mediocre.

Robert and Lynette were the ideal parents for a sports fanatic like Roger. They let him run free when he wanted to but didn't force him. "He had to keep moving, otherwise he became unbearable," Lynette said. She and her husband emphasized taking up various kinds of sports. They took him to a local soccer club called Concordia Basel at an early age so that he would learn to interact with teammates and become a team player.

His mother, however, declined giving her son tennis lessons. "I considered myself not to be competent enough and he would have just upset me anyway," she said. "He was very playful. He tried out every strange stroke and certainly never returned a ball normally. That is simply no fun for a mother."

For hours, Roger hit tennis balls against a wall, a garage door, in his room against a wall or even against the cupboard in the house. Pictures and dishes were not safe and his sister's room wasn't spared either. "Things would sometimes break," Roger admits today. Diana didn't have an easy time with her brother and was forced to put up with the antics of her rambunctious younger brother. "He would always come around shouting when I was with my friends or he would pick up the receiver when I was on the phone," Diana said. "He really was a little devil."

As is the case for siblings of the highly-talented, it wasn't easy for Diana to stand in her brother's shadow. Whenever the family went out together, Roger became more and more frequently the center of attention. Lynette took her aside once: "Diana, it's no different for you than for your mother," she told her daughter. "Many people talk to me but the topic is always your brother."

Diana, an aspiring nurse, only occasionally watched her brother's matches. For example, at the 2005 Masters Cup in Shanghai, she and her mother left the stadium in mid-match to go on a vacation to South Africa. Diana is proud of her brother but prefers not being in the limelight and doesn't assiduously follow every detail of his career. For example, when she watched Roger play Tomas Berdych of the Czech Republic at the Swiss Indoors in Basel in 2005, she had no idea that Berdych had surprisingly defeated her brother at the Athens Olympics one year earlier, dashing his dreams of an Olympic medal.

CHAPTER 2

A Boy Discovers Tennis

Roger Federer's first idol was Boris Becker. He was four years old when Becker won his first Wimbledon title in 1985 and Germany, subsequently, came down with collective tennis fever following the epic win by their native son. Roger cried bitterly in 1988 and in 1990 when Becker lost Wimbledon finals to Stefan Edberg. Federer the boy watched tennis matches on television for hours on end. His mother was amazed at the details he retained.

"I liked tennis the best of all sports," Roger said looking back. "It was always exciting and winning or losing was always in my hands." He quickly became the best in his age group just after entering school and was allowed to participate in special training sessions three times a week at a loose union of tennis clubs in Basel and its environs. It was at these special training sessions where he met Marco Chiudinelli, another talented youth a month younger than him also from Münchenstein. The two became friends and spent considerable time together off the tennis court.

After training, the two boys sometimes played squash with their tennis racquets and played table tennis and soccer against each other. Their parents both jogged and bicycled together. When a region-wide top tennis group was formed, Roger and Marco, both eight-years-old, became members of the group, despite playing at different clubs—Federer at the Old Boys Tennis Club, where training conditions were better for him than at the Ciba Tennis Club in Allschwil, and Chiudinelli at the Basel Lawn Tennis Club.

"It was pretty loud when we were in training," Chiudinelli recollected. "We talked more than we trained. Training didn't seem too important to us. We just wanted to have a good time and we goofed around a lot. One of us was frequently kicked off the court."

Federer and Chiudinelli soon became the black sheep of the group and their parents were angry to discover that one or the other was forced to sit on the sidelines and watch half of the practice sessions for disciplinary reasons.

“Roger lost to practically everybody in training,” said Chiudinelli. “He was the only one that I beat, but the difference was enormous. When it came down to business, he could flip a switch and become a completely different person. I admired that about him. I could give him a thrashing in training but when we played at a tournament a day later, he gave me a thrashing. Even back then he was a real competitor.”

The two eight-year-olds played against each other for the first time at an official event at a tournament called “The Bambino Cup” in Arlesheim. “Back then we only played one long set of up to nine games,” Chiudinelli explained. “Things weren’t going well for me at the beginning. I was behind 2-5 and I started to cry. We cried a lot back then even during the matches. Roger came up to me and tried to comfort me when we switched sides. He told me everything would be all right, and in fact, things did get better. I took the lead 7-6 and noticed that the tide had turned. Then he began to cry and I ran up to him to give him encouragement and things went better for him. It was the only time that I could beat him.”

Roger trained with Adolf Kacovsky, a tennis coach at The Old Boys Tennis Club who everybody called “Seppli.” Like many of his fellow Czechs during the “Prague Spring” in 1968, Kacovsky fled Czechoslovakia and the Russian tanks that rolled into the Czech capital to quell the rebellion. He arrived in Basel one year later, via Tunisia, where he was the club’s head professional until 1996.

“I noticed right away that this guy was a natural talent,” said Kacovsky of Federer. “He was born with a racquet in his hand.” Federer was only given group lessons at first but soon received special one-on-one attention. “The club and I quickly noticed that he was enormously talented,” Kacovsky said. “We began giving him private lessons that were partly funded by the club. Roger was a quick learner. When you wanted to teach him something new, he was able to pick it up after three or four tries, while others in the group needed weeks.”

The star pupil was not only talented and in love with hitting the ball but also ambitious. Kacovsky recounted that Roger always said that he wanted to become the best in the world. “People just laughed at him, including me,” he said. “I thought that he would perhaps become the best player in Switzerland or Europe but not the best in the world. He had it in his head and he worked at it.”

However, Roger’s tournament career at the club began with a fiasco. In his first tournament competition at the age of eight, he lost his first serious competition 6-0, 6-0, although, according to his own estimation, he didn’t play all that badly. Not surprisingly, Federer cried after the loss.

“His opponent was much bigger,” said Kacovsky. “He was also very nervous in his first game where the match really counted.”

Roger constantly sought out people to practice with and if he found no one, he hit balls against the wall, over and over for hours. At age 11, the Swiss tennis magazine *Smash* first became interested in him. A small article appeared about the young Federer in October, 1992 after he reached the semifinals at the Basel Youth Cup, a gateway series to competitive tennis. Although Roger was improving rapidly, he still suffered many bitter defeats. Dany Schnyder, the younger brother of the later top women’s player Patty Schnyder, became his arch rival and his biggest junior adversary. “I tried everything but it didn’t make a difference,” Roger recollected. “I always lost and lost decisively.”

Schnyder, six months older than Roger, grew up in the neighboring village of Bottmingen and has fond recollections of his junior duels with Roger. “We played against each other 17 times between the ages of eight and 12,” he said. “I won eight of the first nine matches but lost the last eight matches. Roger always played aggressively. I kept the ball in the court for the most part. Everything went wrong for him at the beginning. His gambles didn’t pay off. That’s probably why I won. But then suddenly his shots stayed in.”

“I was surprised to see Roger suddenly storm to the top,” said Schnyder, who eventually gave up his tennis career to pursue academics. “One noticed that he had good strokes at 11 or 12, but I never would have thought that he would become the No. 1 player in the world. I think what he’s accomplished is great—but he’s not an idol, a world star or a super hero for me. Whenever we see each other, he’s still the same guy as when we first met.”