



Men in Shorts, and a Yellow Bouncy Object

July 6, 2008, Wimbledon, England—the focus of the eyes and ears of most tennis enthusiasts all around the world. The keynote event was nothing short of a thriller and the ultimate conclusion was one that will be remembered for a long time to come. The young left-handed Spaniard, Rafael Nadal, would defeat the 5 time consecutive reigning champion, Roger Federer, native of Switzerland, in a Wimbledon men's singles final record-setting 4 hours and 48 minutes. The actual duration of the match went well past 6 hours due to two rain interruptions. It was Rafael Nadal's second attempt to oust Federer on grass—a grand slam turf on which Federer has dominated men's tennis for the past five years.

If you are not a tennis enthusiast, or you simply could care less about two people running back and forth, striking a bouncy round

yellow object for hours, I urge you to read on. As a long time tennis enthusiast and a prior amateur competitive tennis player, I obviously have a passion for the sport; however, I elected to write an editorial on this event because it has many obvious lessons—to the perceptive eye—and a connection to the topic of respect! Are these two young players—Federer and Nadal—worthy of respect? If so, what type of respect and how much? That depends, doesn't it?

First, why was this match significant? What was at stake? For Federer it was an opportunity to join an elite group of only two other men who have ever won more than five Wimbledon singles titles. A victory this year would have solidified his name in the history books accordingly! For Nadal a win would earn him his first Wimbledon title and place him as the second Spaniard to ever win the title—the first Spaniard (Santana) winning it in 1966. Also, a victory would highlight his achievement as a landmark Wimbledon event capturing the end of an era—the five year dominance of Federer, his ultimate nemesis. Moreover, the timing of a victory would coincide with the recent success of the Spanish football (soccer) team in the 2008 Euro Cup, refueling the ongoing celebration of an entire nation. So, again, was this Wimbledon event significant? From a world class sports perspective, and a tennis world perspective, YES!

The Big Picture and the Facts

Roger Federer (27 yrs old), ranked #1, has won 12 grand slam singles titles, none of which include a French Open title. His career singles title stands at 55.

Rafael Nadal (22 yrs old), ranked #2, had won 4 grand slam titles, prior to July 6th, all French Open titles. His career singles title stood at 28 prior to this year's Wimbledon grand slam.

Source: Wimbledon.org



Right after winning his fourth consecutive French Open (grand slam) singles title Nadal left Paris and headed for England to play in the Queen's Club tournament, the popular grass court tournament that precedes Wimbledon by one week. This tournament is popular because it serves as a rehearsal for Wimbledon for many of the top tennis players. Nadal's objective was to recalibrate his game (from the clay court tactics of the French Open to the fast-paced grass court mechanics of Wimbledon) and prepare for the elusive grand slam title—his clear focus. That strategy would prove wise since he went on to win the Queen's Club tournament for the first time, giving him the mental boost he needed ahead of Wimbledon.

Federer, on the other hand, left Paris after a rather embarrassing defeat in the French Open singles final to—guess who—Nadal, his nemesis on clay, and the only grand slam surface on which he has yet to win a title. Nadal had won in a convincing fashion in three straight sets — 6-1, 6-3, 6-0, and Federer opted to prepare for and focus on Wimbledon in private, knowing he had a major feat ahead of him and that the likely person that could stop him just rolled over him, albeit on a clay turf.

By the morning of Sunday, July 6th, after two grueling weeks of facing off against the best tennis players in the world, Federer and Nadal had accomplished their objective of reaching the Wimbledon men's singles final and engaging in an opportunity to make history—one way or the other. Their different strategies to remain focused on their prize had paid off.

Lesson #1

Always Stay Focused – When you are in pursuit of your dream, do not let any distractions take you off course. Focus on the prize and follow a path toward that prize.

The singles final match started, and continued with two interruptions, with both players playing to their strengths and exploiting the other's weakness. Nadal, the supposed challenger, attacked Federer's backhand—his (Federer's) weaker side—with his heavy and consistent difficult-to-handle topspin shots; Federer, in turn, focused on his powerful first serve—a deadly weapon known to all the top players who have lost to him over the past years—and sought every opportunity to run around his backhand, which was under constant attack by Nadal, to hit his hallmark inside-out forehand—another reliable skill that he has artfully mastered. Each player came with a game plan that had been thoroughly rehearsed, and each player exercised tremendous discipline in executing the plan.

**Lesson #2**

Remain Disciplined – In the pursuit of your dream, keep with a plan that works and remain disciplined through the ups and downs.

Consistent with the history of Wimbledon, England, the weather played its role. On two occasions—first during the third set and again during the fifth (final) set—the match was suspended due to rain. For tennis players who have played competitively, they know first hand that an interruption of a match can be a blessing or a curse. The first rain interruption seemed to have helped Federer who had dropped the first two sets 4-6, 4-6. Once the game resumed in the third set Federer seemed to have regrouped and was able to elevate his game to another level. Nadal, on the other hand, maintained his level of play and quickly matched Federer's level of performance in stride. Both players seemed not to have been bothered much by the interruptions and were able to resume a higher level of performance each time.

The match continued into a fifth and final set after Federer edged Nadal in back-to-back tie-breakers in the third and fourth sets. Nadal had two great opportunities in the fourth set tie-breaker to win the championship title, but Federer would not allow either.

Lesson #3

Performance Matters – No dream is achieved without performance; sooner or later you will have to perform at your best which just might be good enough.

The fifth set remained tied at six games a piece (6-6), a point in the match which would normally lead to the start of a decisive tie-breaker; however, the Wimbledon tradition eliminates a fifth set tie-breaker and requires ultimate victory by a win of 2 games. The cliff-hanger would only last 4 games after Nadal broke Federer and won the set 9-7 in stunning fashion. The young Spaniard had done it 6-4, 6-4, 6-7(5), 6-7(8), 9-7; he had secured his first Wimbledon title by defeating the defending champion, the best player on grass, and one of the best players that ever played the game of tennis. He also etched his name in the history books by becoming one of a few players—male or female—to win a grand slam singles title



Federer (Left) congratulating Nadal (Right)
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on the slow clay courts of Roland Garros (France) as well as the fast grass courts of Wimbledon (England) in the same year.

After the match, in a very emotional TV media interview with John McEnroe—one of the greatest players to compete in world class tennis—Rafael Nadal responded to a great question from McEnroe. Nadal was asked what he did differently from last year to better prepare for this year. Nadal promptly stated that the key for him this year was a better attitude—that is, mindset. Last year (2007) Nadal lost the Wimbledon title in another 5 set thriller to Federer after failing to capitalize on a few key opportunities. Clearly, he (Nadal) had learnt a thing or two from that painful experience.

Lesson #4

Positive Attitude – Always maintain a positive attitude. Your ability to get out of a slump may well depend on your attitude.

As is the custom at the All England Lawn Tennis & Croquet Club, each player is interviewed before the crowd upon completion of a title match. Roger Federer, though defeated, showed grace and class—hallmarks of a true champion. He maintained a smile through much of the interview, acknowledged the great performance and achievement of his archrival, paid compliment to the crowd for their support, and looked forward to a future opportunity to compete with Nadal again right there on Centre court.

Rafael Nadal was equally graceful and classy. He showed nothing but humility in victory. He congratulated Federer for a great match, and showed utmost respect by acknowledging him (Federer) as still the #1 player in the world, despite his loss, and looking forward to facing him again. He (Nadal) had nothing else to prove (for now); his performance on this day had done it all for him. He was the newly crowned Wimbledon champion.

Lesson #5

Sportsmanship – Your conduct in victory speaks as loud as the victory itself.



Roger Federer has been a world class tennis champion for quite a while now. Since he became a Pro in 1998 he has won 55 singles titles—12 of which are grand slam titles. He has also won the Laureus World Sportsman of the Year Award four years in a row. The award recognizes athletes who exude sporting excellence and who use their sporting achievement to foster social change for good. Equally important is his performance off the tennis court. He has been and continues to be a great role model for many youth and aspiring tennis players all over the world.

Rafael Nadal has been a Pro since 2001 and has racked up 29 singles titles, 5 of which are grand slam titles including this year's Wimbledon title. He also remains a positive role model for youth and aspiring tennis players, and promises to represent the sport of tennis well. His humility after his biggest tennis victory, as demonstrated on Sunday evening, July 6th, in England—if maintained—will prove to be a great personal asset and inspiration for others for years to come.

So, are these two gentlemen worthy of respect, I ask? If so, what type and how much respect? Do you share any of their work ethics? Do they exhibit any admirable traits that are worthy of respect? You do not have to be a tennis enthusiast to appreciate what these young men accomplished; however, anyone can draw inspiration from the way they both pursued their passion. They clearly earned our respect.

Focus, discipline, performance, attitude, and sportsmanship—five important lessons of the day on Sunday, July 6th, 2008 watching a couple of guys in shorts hitting a bouncy round yellow object back and forth for five hours!

(Reader views welcome: ektimis@ntaiwo.com)

Cheers and thank you - N. Taiwo