William Skidelsky

FEDERER AND ME

A STORY OF OBSESSION

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About the Book

This is not a biography of Roger Federer. Or, at least, it is only in part a biography. There is no exhaustive overview of Federer's life and career, no detailed account of his junior record, no roll call of his Wimbledon triumphs, although there have been many of them. The view it offers is partial, subjective, its shape determined by the contours of an obsession. Some time ago William Skidelsky became a fan of Roger Federer.

In *Federer and Me* Skidelsky sheds light on the greatest tennis player of all time. Through the story of one fan's obsession with his idol, he explores: the role of aesthetics in sport; the psychology of fandom; the relationship between sport and technology; the role of family dynamics in forging identity. Thought-provoking and entertaining, funny and touching, it is a personal account of a devotion that, to the extent that it is shared by millions, isn't personal at all.

About the Author

William Skidelsky is a well-known journalist and literary editor. He has been literary editor for the *Observer* and the *New Statesman* as well as deputy editor of *Prospect* magazine. He has written about tennis for the *Observer* and for *Prospect*, and is the tennis correspondent of *The Economist*'s sports blog, Game Theory. He played tennis to county level as a junior and now plays at a club in south-east London, where he is the men's captain. He lives in London with his wife and two children.

For my father, Robert, who gave me a love of the game,
and to my wife, Gudrun, who helped me see beyond it.

William Skidelsky

Federer and Me

A Story of Obsession

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I WAKE UP late, with a question in my head. Will I be going to the Wimbledon final? Before yesterday, this wasn't something I'd even considered. On Friday, when he won his semi against Milos Raonic (three 6–4 sets: surprisingly straightforward), I was so happy – so *stunned* – that he was in the final that I barely gave a thought to the possibility of my being there. But now I'm desperate to make it if I can. I've watched Federer play live about twenty times over the years, and nine times in just the past month, but I've never seen him play a Grand Slam final. Surely, this is my one opportunity: he'll never make it to another major final, at least not one I have a hope of going to. And if he does win – not likely, admittedly – how great to be able to say: *I was there*. All in all, it has to be done.

But how? Needless to say, I don't have a ticket. Centre Court tickets are notoriously hard to get hold of at the best of times. For the final, they're virtually unobtainable. The usual fallback – queuing – isn't an option; the All England Club doesn't release turnstile tickets from the semis onwards. (For understandable reasons: the queues would be absurd.) Basically, to attend a Wimbledon final, you have to be one of four things: extremely lucky in the public ballot; extremely well connected; extremely rich; a member of the Royal Family. Sadly, none of these applies to me, although my mother did discover that she is distantly related to Camilla Parker-Bowles.

The debentures are, of course, a possibility. And I haven't ruled them out. Most Wimbledon tickets are 'strictly nontransferable'. In other words, the person who buys

them has to be the one who uses them. The club strictly enforces this – or claims to. Debentures are different. Basically, it's a system of seat-leasing. You buy a five-year debenture – the current cost for Centre Court debs is £50,000 – which entitles you to all the tickets for a particular pair of seats during that period. And these tickets, unlike others, are yours to do what you want with. You can give them to friends; you can sell them on. And the debenture-holders often do the latter, raking in tidy sums. A pair of Centre Court debenture tickets for a normal day typically goes for two or three thousand. For the men's final, the figure is up near ten grand. In 2013, when Andy Murray won, there were rumours of pairs of tickets swapping hands for £30,000. In other words, debentures not only enable their holders to see lots of tennis; they can be a smart investment. Making pleasure profitable – an old English talent.

For the last twenty-four hours, I've been keeping tabs on the various websites on which debenture tickets are sold, in the hope that some strange market anomaly will result in one suddenly becoming available at a less-than-stratospheric price. This hasn't happened. The cheapest single ticket I've found is £4,000. I'm still tempted. I happen (unusually for me) to have a bit of cash in the bank. Not a huge amount, but enough to cover the ticket. And I probably would go ahead, were it not for one thing: the thought of having to tell my wife. She is currently away in Suffolk with our two-year-old son. She is eight months pregnant. She is already cross with me because I was supposed to be joining them yesterday, but I postponed on the off-chance that I managed to get to the final. If, in addition, she discovers that I've spent four thousand on a ticket – well, I can't imagine her response would be sanguine. 'You've done *what*? Spent *how* much? Our savings – our children's future – frittered away on *some fucking tennis match* …?'

No, that avenue is definitely closed. But there is one other option: the touts.

As at all major sporting events, the touts come out in force for Wimbledon. I've often seen them myself, near Southfields Tube station, lurking outside cafes, loitering by advertising hoardings. Mostly, the polished hordes who process up Wimbledon Park Road don't give them so much as a second glance. The tennis-watching public aren't interested in their furtive queries, their wheeler-dealings. ('Got any tickets you want to sell, mate?' 'Need to get into Centre Court?')

But there's surely something a bit odd about the touts at Wimbledon. How, after all, can they exist? If, as the All England Club claims, tickets for the tournament are 'strictly nontransferable' – if the club really is scrupulous about enforcing this – then there wouldn't be any point in buying touted tickets. They'd be a waste of money. Of course, it could be that the touts only handle debentures. But as the debenture-holders have websites they can legitimately trade their tickets on, why would they bother using the touts, who presumably demand a sizable cut? (Or to put it another way: why would legitimate touts bother selling their tickets through illegitimate ones?) When you think about it, it doesn't quite stack up. In fact, there are only two scenarios that explain the touts' presence. Either they are total scammers, dedicated to ripping off gullible Joe Public by offloading unusable tickets. Or the Wimbledon authorities aren't as strict about checking the provenance of tickets as they claim.

When, at around 11 a.m., I find myself on the phone to a man named Sam, whose ad for suspiciously cheap finals tickets I spotted on Gumtree, I am still unsure as to which of these two hypotheses is correct. But I am beginning to suspect that I will soon find out. Sam tells me that, yes, he can sort me out a ticket, so long as I can make it to a

particular cafe near Southfields Tube within the hour. The price will be £900. ('Yeah, I would like cash.') Nine hundred pounds is, of course, a lot of money – still far too much, really, to spend on a tennis match. But I also think that, at this three-figure level, there's some vague possibility that my wife will be sympathetic. She does live with me, after all. She knows how *seriously* I take this stuff.

I get dressed, and set off on my scooter. It will take me just under an hour to get to Wimbledon. All I have to do is withdraw the money from a cashpoint on the way. But here I discover a flaw in my plan. My bank only lets me take out £500 per day. To obtain more, customer services tell me, I'll need to visit a branch, which is impossible, it being Sunday. For a few minutes, I am in despair. To get so close and be denied! But then I collect myself. All is not lost. Surely I can borrow the extra from friends. First, though, I ring Sam back to double check: is there any chance – any chance *at all* – he'd accept a cheque? He's unyielding: 'I'd like to help, mate, but I'm afraid my company doesn't handle cheques.' In that case, can he hang on for an hour or so? He sounds distinctly dubious.

I hurriedly make phone calls. An ex-flatmate agrees to lend me £150 if I transfer the money into her account the next day. Next I get hold of Jack, who lives a bit further away but, handily, is a shipping lawyer. He seems positively delighted by my request. 'Of course, come on over,' he says, as if inviting me to pop round for a drink. I get to his house at noon. He's still in his dressing gown. ('Party last night …') I'd assumed that he would have gone to a cashpoint, but evidently this wasn't necessary: yawning, he reaches into one of his pockets and extracts a wad of notes. 'Now, are you sure two fifty is enough? Don't you want a little more, just in case …?'

Shortly before one, I arrive at the cafe with £1000 in my wallet. I get out my phone, notice that my wife has called. I dial Sam's number. No reply. I try again. Nothing. It rings

endlessly. This is, unquestionably, a further blow, but, looking around, I realise that it may not be a fatal one. There are other touts in the vicinity, arranged in small clusters. I position myself near one group, make eye contact. A leather-jacketed man peels off, walks towards me, nods his head across the road – where a pair of policeman are standing – and signals for me to follow him down a side alley. ‘You want tickets for the final?’ is his inevitable opening gambit.

‘Well, just the one please, if you’ve got any,’ I reply.

‘Hmmm, not sure if we’ve got any singles rights now, but wait here a minute, I’ll check with Dave.’

Dave comes over: he’s grey-skinned, in his late forties, veiny round the eyes. ‘You want a single? Think I can get you one. But it won’t be a posh seat.’ We haggle over the price. He wants a thousand; I bring him down to eight fifty. (The day’s business is drawing to a close; the touts, I guess, want to off-load their tickets.) Dave now enters into a discussion with the leather-jacketed man, conducted almost entirely in slang: words like ‘carpet’, ‘stretch’ and ‘nevis’ feature prominently. I am led to a cafe, where I sit down with a third man, whose job, it seems, is to act as my minder. He’s pleasant, in a laconic way. After a few minutes, a woman arrives, accompanied by a boy who looks about four years old. She and the minder know each other: ‘Hello, Steve, how’s it going?’

‘Not too bad thanks. Not long to go here. How’s the little fella?’

They chat for a while, talk about another man who, it seems, is about to be released from prison. My feelings about the touting fraternity are rapidly becoming warmer. In contrast to their feral depiction in the media, these people, despite their nefarious dealings, appear to belong to a close-knit community.

While my minder and the woman chat, my phone rings. It’s my wife. ‘Where are you?’ she says. ‘Are you going to

come down today?'

I explain that I'm not going to make it after all, that I'm in a cafe near Wimbledon, about to hand over £850 to a tout in exchange for a ticket that should – no, *will* – get me into the final.

'A tout?' she says. 'Are you crazy?'

I tell her that I have a good feeling about it, that the guy I'm buying the ticket from seems honest; she replies that I should pull out right away. Then I notice that Steve is beckoning. 'Look, sorry, I have to go.'

We head to a nearby pub, where Dave is sitting at a table with an Indian-looking man, who's counting out a large sum of money. My ticket, it seems, is a spare from an exchange with a larger group. When he's finished, Dave sits down next to me, hands me my ticket. There's a name on it – Mark Simpson – and a price: £148. It looks real enough. The date is correct. But how can I be certain that it will get me in? What happens, I ask, if they ask me to prove that I am Mark Simpson?

Dave smiles. 'Relax. They hardly ever check. But if you're worried, just head round the side, and go in through that gate at the back, number nineteen is it? The guys there aren't bothered.' I still must be looking apprehensive, because Dave adds: 'Look, if you have any problems, just come back here and see us.' Will he give me my money back? 'Yeah, yeah, I will, no problems.'

I get out my wallet, start counting my cash. Meanwhile, Dave's on the phone, dispensing more instructions: 'Tell him I've got a maggie and a bottle. So I'm going to take a monkey and give back a stretch, then we'll be all-square.'

So fastidious is Wimbledon's traditionalism, I reflect, that even the touts are out of an Ealing Comedy. I keep my wallet under the table, to avoid detection by any plain-clothed policeman lurking in the vicinity (not that it isn't obvious what we're up to). I'm flustered, though – my hands shake – and I keep miscounting, forcing me to start all over

again. Dave breaks off his call: ‘Jesus, I can make money faster than you can count it.’ Finally, I assemble the correct amount. Dave scrolls through the bills with practised ease. The deal is done. We shake hands. I haven’t (yet) been arrested.

As I walk up Wimbledon Park Road, my wife calls again. ‘Look, I think this is a really bad idea. You’re wasting an awful lot of …’

I butt in, tell her it’s too late, that I’m already heading towards the grounds with my ticket. ‘But it’s OK,’ I say. ‘The guy said I can get my money back if anything goes wrong.’

This information fails to have its intended effect. ‘A tout says he’ll give you a refund and you believe him? Bloody hell, how naïve *are* you?’

I tell her that it’s too late to worry about that, I’m about to go in.

And indeed, as it transpires, her fears *are* misplaced. The guy at the gate glances at my ticket, tears the stub, waves me through. I feel the childish thrill of having got away with something, which makes the thought of the £850 I’ve just spent easier to stomach. I walk the familiar route round the back of Court One, past Henman Hill, thickly crested with people. At the front of the crowd, right in the middle, I spot Tani, whom I met just a few weeks ago in Halle. She may be the most devoted Federer fan I’ve ever met – in fact, one of the most ardent Federer fans in the entire world – and even she hasn’t got a ticket! I wave, but she doesn’t see me. I buy an overpriced, under-flavoured bowl of nachos and make my way to Centre Court.

My seat isn’t great: I’m one row from the very back. Because of the way the roof slopes down, there’s a strange tunnelling effect: it’s as if I’m looking on the court through a viewfinder. The atmosphere up here is hemmed-in, close; we’re in our own little world. But it doesn’t matter. Federer

is about to play another Wimbledon final, and here *I* am, about to watch it.

Chapter One

The sporty one

1.

I FIRST SAW him play eleven years before this, in 2003. Also at Wimbledon, also on Centre Court. It wasn't love at first sight.

During the first week of the tournament, I received a call from a friend. He had a spare ticket for next day. Would I like to go? Although I wasn't a big tennis fan back then, it was an offer I felt I couldn't refuse. The only problem was practical. How to get out of work? I'd recently started a job as junior books editor on a weekly current affairs magazine, and the day in question – a Thursday – was our deadline. Moreover, my boss was away, leaving me, for the first time, in sole charge of our section. After giving the matter some thought, I decided that a course of brazenness would be best: I would simply leave – as if heading out for an important meeting. The next day, at noon, I sidled out of our offices, took a Tube to Waterloo and, from there, caught a train to south-west London. Predictably, my plan was foiled, in the sense that my absence *was* noticed, and resulted in a ticking off. But I've never had any regrets.

It was one of those indecisive early summer days when both sun and rain seem equally plausible. When I got to the All England Club, the first match of the afternoon was already in progress. It was between the fourth seed, Roger Federer, and a left-handed Austrian called Stefan Koubek. I'd heard that Federer, then twenty-one, was an up-and-

coming talent, but aside from that I knew nothing about him. My first impression was that, physically, he wasn't terribly prepossessing. He had a ponytail, which, in conjunction with the fat white swathe of his headband, seemed to bring out the squishiness of his features. There was a hint of bum-fluff on his upper lip. Despite his all-white attire, he looked like he belonged not on the lawns of SW19 but on the beach – or in some central European heavy metal band. The groomed, chiselled icon hadn't yet emerged from the callow shell of youth.

I arrived near the end of the first set, which Federer won 7–5, saving a set point. The next two sets were much more one-sided: Federer lost a game in each. There was a savagery to his destruction of Koubek, but it was savagery of a particular kind, combining raw power with a delicacy of movement and touch. While his opponent lurched and lumbered, Federer danced around the court in quick light steps, never seeming to be out of position. His game was virtually soundless, as if the effort cost him nothing. And this impression of calm was reinforced by his demeanour, which was curiously expressionless, almost a blank.

I remember that all this came as a surprise – even a shock – to me. For it wasn't what I'd been expecting. Tennis, which as a boy *had* been massively important to me, had faded from my life, partly because of a growing sense that the game was no longer what it had been. Where once matches had involved artistry and guile, now they tended to be contests of strength. On the slick grass of Wimbledon, they would pass in a flurry of booming aces and unreturned serves. On slower courts, they would consist mainly of pounding baseline rallies. Yet here was Federer successfully deploying a different approach, one redolent of an earlier, subtler era. Yes, his game was powerful, but it relied on timing rather than muscle. It had a precision, a sense of craft, that brought to my mind not only the greats of my boyhood – McEnroe, Edberg, Mandlikova, Graf – but

also, reaching further back, the figures I'd glimpsed in grainy black-and-white footage, and in the books I'd pored over as a child: Rosewell, Bueno, Gonzales, Laver.

The afternoon's other matches were more in line with my expectations. Venus Williams swatted aside some hapless Belgian. Then came Greg Rusedski versus Andy Roddick, the day's headline contest. Roddick was another young gun of whom much was expected; in America, he was viewed as heir to Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi. And he was certainly more immediately noticeable than Federer, with his whipper-crack serve and air of anxious bustle. But his match with Rusedski – predictably ace-strewn – was boring. I found neither player remotely enticing. The one moment of real drama was a line dispute. On a key point in the third set, with Roddick serving, someone in the crowd yelled 'Out!' when one of the American's shots landed near the baseline. Rusedski, thinking the call genuine, stopped playing. The umpire had no option but to hand Roddick the point, but when he did this Rusedski's frustration, which had been building all afternoon – he was down two sets – unleashed itself in a lengthy, foulmouthed tirade. 'I can't do anything if the crowd fucking calls it … Replay the point … Some wanker in the crowd changes the match and you allow it to happen. Well done! Well done!' The crowd, I remember, mostly responded with jeers and whistles. The ex-Canadian Rusedski may have been 'one of us', but it was clear that he would never replace Tim Henman in our affections.

What I took away from the afternoon was the memory of Federer stooping low against the grass, spearing a backhand up the line, and of the contrast between the gentle-seeming lean of his serve and the percussive crack as the ball – once again – whipped into the back fence for an ace. Those images stayed with me as, over the following week and a half, I monitored his progress through the

tournament, telling anyone who would listen how good I thought he was.

In Federer's career, Wimbledon 2003 was a hinge moment, the point when his promise finally came to fruition. With each match, his confidence billowed, as if he were discovering, for the first time, the full reach of his talents. In the fourth round he beat the young American Mardy Fish in four sets. In the quarters he saw off the gangly Dutch eighth seed, Sjeng Schalken, in three. And then, in the semi-finals, he raised his game to extravagant heights to crush the player who seemed most likely to impede his progress: Andy Roddick.

I remember watching that match on TV. After a tight first set, which Federer won on a tiebreak after (again) saving a set point, Roddick was swept away in a torrent of balletic volleys and lancing groundstrokes. I was amazed by the ease with which Federer neutralised Roddick's serve, whose up-close ferocity I'd observed for myself a week earlier. He always seemed to know where it was heading, and parried it back seemingly with time to spare. His passing shots, too, were lethal. Countless times, Roddick sent the ball to the corner and headed for the net, only to be left stranded by the sort of whipped, short-angled groundstroke that became a Federer trademark. So comprehensively was Roddick outplayed that, not for the last time in his career, he was frequently made to look inept, foolish.

Two days later, Federer faced another big server, the towering Australian Mark Phillipousis, in the final. To no one's great surprise, he won in straight sets. Though I didn't watch the match (I must have had something else on), I remember taking a pleasure in Federer's victory that was, at least in part, egotistical: it proved that my initial reaction had been correct, that my man – my 'spot' – really was something special. (This self-congratulatory impulse, I now realise, was pretty absurd: it wasn't as if he was totally

unheard of.) Yet immediately after that tournament, my attention drifted away both from tennis and from Federer, and my life resumed its previous course. I went back to the world of editing, of journalism, of building a sense of myself as an adult. For what now strikes me as a strangely long time – roughly three and a half years – I gave little thought to Federer at all.

2.

While tennis didn't mean much to me in 2003, this hadn't always been the case. As a boy, I loved the sport with an all-consuming passion. Between the ages of about five and eleven, it was – by some distance – the most important thing in my life.

I first played it – or a version of it – in the south of France. My parents owned a house in a village called La Garde-Freinet, a treacherous hour's drive from St-Tropez. We used to stay there in the holidays, but in 1981, when I was five, we decamped there for a whole year, as my father, a historian, had taken a sabbatical from his university job in order to write the first volume of his biography of the economist John Maynard Keynes. My eight-year-old brother and I attended the local school, where we learned idiosyncratic French (in my case, a tortuously ungrammatical Franglais) and formed tentative friendships with other kids from the village. It was, I think, an unsettling period for us both. My brother, who never had a good relationship with authority as a child, narrowly avoided being expelled, while I was so alarmed by the infant school's unbarricaded row of sit down toilets that I refused to use them. (On a few occasions, this stance met with predictably dire consequences; eventually, a special concession was granted whereby I alone, of all the children at the school, was allowed to use the staff facility.) Our younger sister was born in December that year – the first

home birth in the village, as the local paper noted, for more than half a century.

At the back of our house was a small walled patio, and in this my father devised a game, played with bats and a foam ball, which I suppose was a cross between tennis, squash and fives. I think the scoring was based on squash, with games the first to nine. We played this endlessly – there wasn't much to do in the village – and it was during this period, according to my father, that I developed the foundations of what would become my most potent weapon (when I was a child anyway): my single-handed backhand. In fact, my father gave me a nickname that reflected this: 'Bumbledon of the backhand'.

A year or so after we returned to England, my mother started taking me to short tennis classes at our local leisure centre in north London. Short tennis – played on a badminton court with a lowered net, plastic rackets and a foam ball – was then a popular way to introduce children to the sport.[fn1] Our coach, Bill, was a moustachioed man of about forty who bore a striking resemblance to the Canadian snooker player Cliff Thorburn. Bill was a patient teacher, and had a knack for demystifying the game's more abstruse aspects. I particularly remember his method for illustrating the value of spin. From his pocket he would produce a rubber ball, which he would dispatch from his wrist with savage reverse rotation, instructing us to chase after it. Off we would set, but as soon as the ball hit the ground, it would jag violently back towards him. Helplessly, we'd watch it loop back over us and into the safety of Bill's outstretched palm. At which point he would smile and say: 'That's why you need spin.'

Aided, no doubt, by my head start in France, I took to short tennis and was identified by Bill as having talent. After a few months, I got the chance to put my skill to the test in the Middlesex Short Tennis Championship – an event that took place, oddly enough, at the same leisure centre

where our weekly classes were held. (Despite its rather lofty-sounding title, I'm not sure how extensive its reach really was.) My father and I entered the parent-and-child doubles, and I entered the under-10s singles. My father and I easily won the doubles, and in the singles I made it through to the final, where my opponent was a stick-thin boy with a handicap: one of his legs was slightly shorter than the other. The match took place in front of what I remember to be a huge crowd (a makeshift grandstand had been erected along one side of the hall) and was a tense, drawn-out affair. My opponent's disability meant that he moved with a limp, but he covered the court with surprising agility, and was particularly good at running round his (weak) backhand and pummelling my own backhand with his (vicious) forehand. This became the pattern of the match: his forehand to my backhand, point after point. Although my single-hander was my best shot, it eventually faltered in the face of this Nadal-like onslaught, and he ended up a narrow victor.

There is a photograph of me after the match, clutching my plastic runner-up trophy, my eyes flecked with tears. It was my first serious taste of defeat on a tennis court, and I still remember the anguish it caused me, the mix of disbelief and desolation. At school the next day I got to stand up in front of the class and show off my trophy, but it was scant consolation. I felt – for a few days at least – empty inside, as if all meaning had drained from my life. Looking back, I can see that, in many ways, it was for the best that I lost. A year or so later, I encountered my conqueror again, this time on a full-sized court. His disability meant that he was never going to be a good tennis player, and I beat him comfortably. Short tennis had been his one shot at glory.

It was during this period that I saw my first live professional tennis. In November 1984, my mother took my brother and me to the semi-finals of the Benson and