



HAIL! THE KING!

By Vojin Velickovic
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If Novak Djokovic had lived in ancient times, he would have been a hero, a conqueror. He would have helped Alexander the Great reach Melbourne; he would have aided Caesar in expanding the Roman Empire to New York via Wimbledon; he would have competed with Spartacus to be the best in the Arena.

Fortunately, that did not happen. Alexander the Great was stopped at Chennai; Caesar missed the Atlantic legs of the Grand Slam, Spartacus was saved from the blushes of being second best and we had the opportunity to enjoy one of the finest seasons in tennis history, culminating on the lawns of Wimbledon.

"For me it was the dream come true, because this is the most prestigious tournament in the world, one that cherishes the finest traditions of tennis. Along with France, England is the country where tennis was invented. Grass is a very rare surface; we have an opportunity to play on it only one month in a whole year. The very first tennis match I watched on TV was from Wimbledon. It was in 1993, when Pete Sampras won his first title. That is my first tennis memory and I was so intrigued that I asked my father to buy me my first racket. This is how it all began. Precisely because of that picture, which I keep in my mind even now, I always wanted to win Wimbledon."

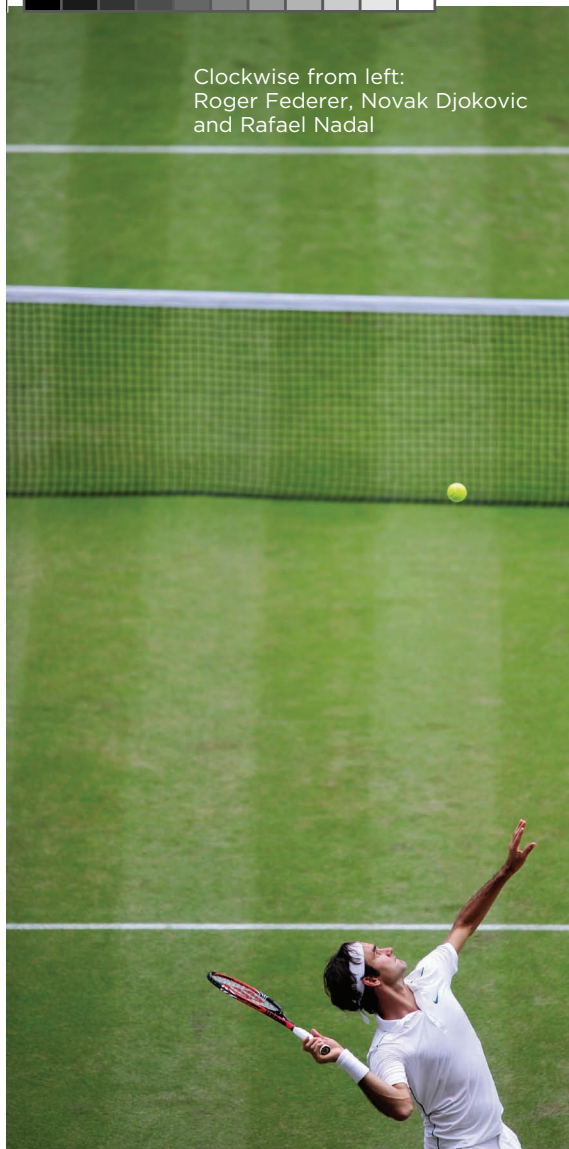
This is how the best tennis player on the planet describes why the Gentleman's Singles Championship has been the climax of his life so far.

Djokovic is just like those famous names from history: he does things not to gain riches, but immortality. If you add, too, that he was only 24 at the time and enjoyed the rare pleasure of fulfilling two dreams in just three days when he became world No.1 for the first time following his semi-final win, it is understandable why he will never forget Wimbledon 2011.

The tale of the tournament revolved around the young Serbian pretender and Rafael Nadal, one year older and the reigning champion. The Spaniard was not only defending his Wimbledon title, but also his world No.1 spot, the crown jewels of tennis. By the end of the tournament he would be stripped of both.



Clockwise from left:
Roger Federer, Novak Djokovic
and Rafael Nadal



Djokovic came to London with only one defeat in the previous six months and Nadal had lost all four of their meetings. The Spaniard's sixth title on the clay of Roland Garros had prevented 'Nole' from becoming world No.1 a month earlier and the big question on the lips of tennis fans was who would be on top after the SW19 fortnight.

For the first time in almost a decade, the man who made an art out of tennis, a certain Roger Federer, was pushed into the shadows. The talk in the stands was not of him winning a Slam for the

17th time, but of the titanic battle the two young lions were fighting for the two biggest crowns in tennis.

The opening rounds went according to expectation. For the first three matches, neither Nadal nor Djokovic experienced too many difficulties. Then, in the fourth round, the first winds of change blew, but not for long. "Nadal is injured and may have to retire from The Championships," the rumours whispered. Had that happened, Djokovic would have immediately become the new king of tennis, the world No.1.



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A large crowd of Serbian fans at Wimbledon, many wearing red and blue clothing, cheering and waving flags. The image shows a dense group of people, mostly men, with some women, all appearing to be of Serbian descent. They are wearing various items of Serbian-themed merchandise, including a white cap with 'СРБИЈА' (Serbia) in red Cyrillic letters, a red and blue striped flag, and a t-shirt with a Serbian coat of arms. Several individuals have blue and red face paint on their cheeks. The crowd is cheering, with some people raising their hands and waving flags. In the background, a green building with large windows is visible, and a professional video camera on a tripod is positioned to capture the scene. The overall atmosphere is one of excitement and celebration.



Jo-Wilfried Tsonga

But Nadal was a more powerful fighter if he carried on. After an injury so severe it repelled Juan Martín del Potro, he fought the next tournament and went on to win in Rome.

Djokovic's turn came in the quarter-finals. Although he was set to Cypriot Marinos Paganiatou in the third round, the prize was greater. It looked like a shot for a sensation: it was a Grand Slam; his was the player to reach the final since Boris Becker's loss after the first two rounds. He was playing well, but he was hit through again by the Australian with a return from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

When Djokovic was 17 years old, he pretended to be expected that his was the most successful of this era. At that time, he was sailing through

Tsonga produced one of the best displays of tennis on grass in recent Championships.

With a two-set lead against Frenchman Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, all bets were that the Swiss maestro would, exactly as in Paris, be the challenger for both of Nadal's crowns.

Djokovic's turn to shiver came in the quarter-finals. Although he had lost one set to Cypriot Marcos Baghdatis in the third round, the pressure was now much greater. It looked like the perfect scenario for a sensation: it was the second week of a Grand Slam; his rival was the youngest player to reach the last eight at Wimbledon since Boris Becker, and the score was even after the first two sets. Djokovic was not playing well, but his survival instincts saw him through against Bernard Tomic, an Australian with roots from neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina.

As one of very few players outside the Rafa and Roger duo with a winning head-to-head record against Djokovic, the Frenchman was the penultimate barrier between the 24-year-old Serb and destiny. Tsonga proved to be a very dangerous opponent from the beginning, and served for the first set, but when he missed his opportunity, the tide changed completely. Djokovic went into a 2-0 lead. Tsonga hit back in the hugely important tie-break third set 11-9 but it was not enough. Nole beat big Jo 7-6 (4), 6-2, 6-7 (9), 6-3. It was only his third win in eight encounters, but as sweet as that in the 2008 Australian Open final.

Petra Kvitova

Not only had Petra Kvitova won the biggest trophy at her very first Grand Slam final, but she then gathered momentum and finished the year winning the WTA Championships in Istanbul and the Fed Cup in Moscow.

A new king was hailed, but there was no time to savour his first coronation. The next challenge was just around the corner. Rafael Nadal, the defending champion and a wounded tiger after four consecutive defeats against the player who had already snatched the top spot from his hands, was gathering all his strength to avert another defeat.

Alas, it was all to no avail for Nadal. The more they played, the less complicated became Djokovic's path to victory. The Serb raced into a two-set lead, demolishing Nadal in the second. Nadal then fought back to equal terms, but just as against Tsonga, Djokovic found his best game when the stakes were highest and emerged victorious, 6-4, 6-1, 1-6, 6-3.

Even though the final lacked the classic drama of a five-setter, there were moments that will stay forever in the memory of all those who watched this first win of a champion who ruled not only Wimbledon in 2011, but the whole world of tennis.

While on the men's side the situation was quite clear from the beginning, the ladies were less predictable, even to the extreme. Wimbledon's mightiest dynasty was back, both Venus and Serena Williams returned to the courts after long periods of absence because of injuries; Maria Sharapova was trying to revive memories of the 2004 win that propelled her into the tennis stratosphere; Caroline Wozniacki was looking for that elusive first Grand Slam trophy; Li Na came to London as the most successful woman in the big tournaments in 2011 after the Melbourne final and her Paris win; Sam Stosur looked a good pick because, as an Australian, she had learned tennis on grass; but very few guessed who the name of the champion would be.

A lefty from the Czech Republic as a winner? That looked more like a lesson from history than a real possibility, since Martina Navratilova was the last southpaw to reign at Wimbledon.

But Petra Kvitova proved that history occasionally repeats itself. She won the

final against Sharapova in straight sets 6-3, 6-4 and, at 20, became the youngest champion since 2004. Not only had she won the biggest trophy at her very first Grand Slam final, but she then gathered momentum and finished the year winning the WTA Championships in Istanbul and the Fed Cup in Moscow.

These are the reasons why 2011 will never be forgotten – two new champions, one crowned as world No.1 and another tipped to do the same before long; two great players with unique ways of thinking on the court, two born winners who will not go on cruise control to enjoy life after taking the biggest prize in tennis, but who will instead play for more and more.

Both the Serb and the Czech will be eager to defend their titles this summer, but the stakes are even higher. For this year, and maybe never again, the Olympic tennis tournament will also be played on these famous grounds in SW19, offering the unique possibility of two celebrations on the same lawns.

