

A GOLDEN ERA

By Malcolm Folley
THE MAIL ON SUNDAY

Producing tennis of a stunning, sometimes chilling ferocity, Novak Djokovic, Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer have taken a stranglehold on the game with Andy Murray stalking them from close quarters. Between them, they have created the impression the game has never been more vibrant, vigorous or virtuous. But how will history judge them against the memories of the ghosts of summers past?

By any criteria, the current era is rightly deemed a golden period for men's tennis. "I think it's an incredible time for the game," says John McEnroe. "I think we better enjoy it while it lasts. The shots that these guys can come up with are phenomenal. They have taken the baseline game to a whole new level. They get into a war of wills, where they're just out to try and break one another until one of them, literally, falls over."

Rod Laver, who will be always mentioned in any legitimate discussion, in any language, when men talk of the giants of the game, shares McEnroe's passion for the level of sustained entertainment provided by this quartet. "With these guys at the top, tennis today is unbelievable," Laver said in January this year, speaking on the court named after him in Melbourne.

So, is this the greatest era of all time? Boris Becker, a three times Wimbledon champion, thinks not. "It's just

not possible to say one era is better than another," argues Becker. "Every era that has gone before has been good at that moment. I played with John McEnroe, Jimmy Connors, Ivan Lendl, Mats Wilander, Stefan Edberg, Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi. To win a major, throughout the ages, you have to be a good player.

"But there is no doubt one reason why Andy Murray has yet to win a major championship is that he is playing at the same time as two of the all-time greats, Roger and Rafa. This is the situation Andy has to confront, a situation now further complicated by Djokovic's immense improvement. Yet I like the fact

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ROGER FEDERER



Ken Rosewall
1950s



Lew Hoad
1950s



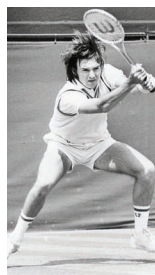
Rod Laver
1960s



Fred Stolle
1960s



John Newcombe
1970s



Jimmy Connors
1970s



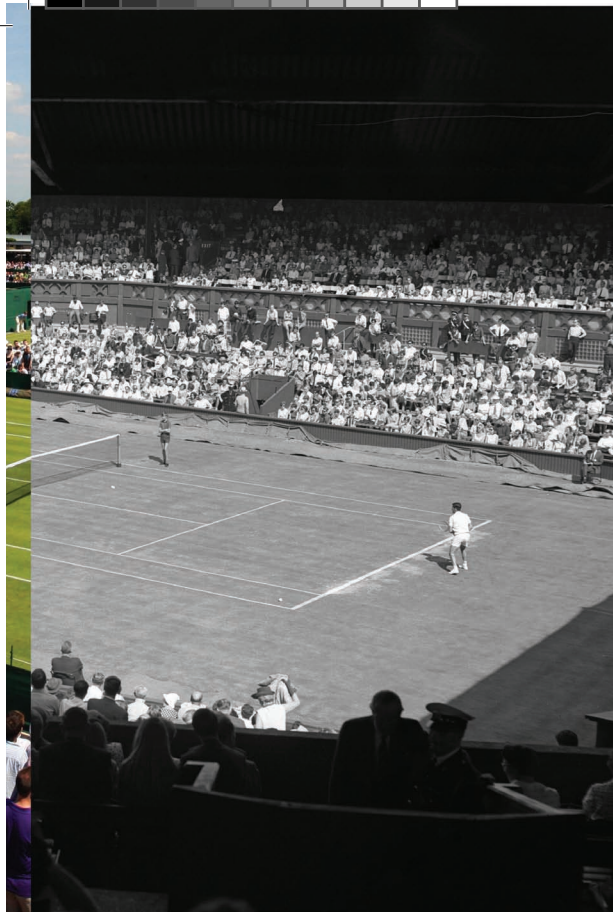
Bjorn Borg
1970s



John McEnroe
1980s



Mats Wilander
1980s



"It's just not possible to say one era is better than another. Every era that has gone before has been good at that moment."

BORIS BECKER

that Andy considers this a challenge, not an obstacle."

There can be no truthful answer to the question; only subjective opinions. The equipment modern-day players have at their disposal is unrecognisable from that used in the 1960s or 1970s. Graphite rackets have replaced wooden ones. Court surfaces have been radically improved. Training methods have been scientifically modified. The world has become a smaller place due to improved transportation.

"If equipment's the biggest change, the guys themselves get bigger, stronger and more athletic," says McEnroe. "In some sense, the game has become more of a track meet than a tennis match. The guys who are better athletes are winning more than they used to against guys who are better players."

Memorably, Laver and Federer sat together in Melbourne at the beginning of

this year and paid tribute to one another. In one camera shot, the past and present. Laver remains the only man to have won the Grand Slam twice, in 1962, then again in 1969 when

the Open era was a year old. Federer is acknowledged as the most successful player of all time with 16 Grand Slam singles titles, six of them won here on the Centre Court at Wimbledon.

"I look back with great thanks for what Rod, and the players of his era, did for the game," says Federer. "I am happy to have the record number of Grand Slam titles, but I know it could have been very different."

What he means is that, for some years, players like Laver, Lew Hoad and Ken Rosewall, were unable to play in the Grand Slam championships after they had turned professional when the game was still officially an amateur one.

Fred Stolle, now an agreeable member of the media corps, recalls how in those days, life on the tour was for the immensely talented tennis troupe from Australia, the moustachioed heart-throb John Newcombe among them. "We left Australia with two pairs of tennis shoes, and four shirts and two pairs of shorts from the Fred Perry sportswear company to last us seven months," chuckles Stolle, who won two Grand Slam singles titles, and was runner-up for three years in succession at Wimbledon. "We had between four and six rackets."

Stolle added: "A lot of people lose sight of the fact that we played serve-and-volley tennis, as three of the Grand Slams were on grass: the Australian Open, Wimbledon and the US Open. The only surface that was different was in Paris where the French Open was on clay, as it still is. Yet, for all that, there is a lot of rubbish spoken when people count Grand Slam titles and make comparisons between players' records as a judgment as to who was better than who.

"As a professional, before the game went Open, Rocket (Laver) wasn't able to play in 20 Grand Slam tournaments. He's on the board with 11 titles, so how many might he have won? Similarly, Rosewall and Hoad missed out on a great number of them. So, the numbers are misleading."

At 73, and calling on a lifetime's experience within tennis, Stolle rates Hoad as the best player of his era, but regards McEnroe as an enviable artist of the game. "I enjoyed watching Bjorn Borg



1980s

Boris Becker



1980s

Ivan Lendl



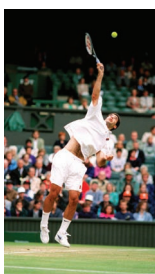
1980s

Stefan Edberg



1990s

Andre Agassi



1990s

Pete Sampras



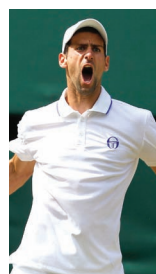
2000s

Roger Federer



2000s

Rafael Nadal



2010s

Novak Djokovic



2010s

Andy Murray



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and Jimmy Connors, but the player I most liked to watch was McEnroe. He was able to do more with a racket.”

Only the aura of Borg – who looked like a rock star, but behaved like a choir boy on court – could dissuade McEnroe from misbehaving. Paradoxically, Connors and McEnroe could turn the game into a street-brawl on sight of each other. Age, of course, has mellowed them, and they relive past battles like old soldiers.

Becker and Edberg also delivered some epic duels. Unforgettably, they met in the final here at Wimbledon three times in a row: Becker served a bombardment of aces and dived all over the court; Edberg had balletic grace and a divine volley.

Soon afterwards, an American called Pete Sampras rose to world No.1. ‘Pistol’ Pete, as the tabloids named him, became engaged in a hypnotic rivalry with Andre Agassi, who possessed the greatest return

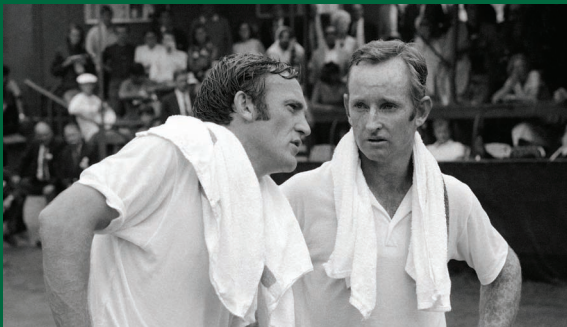
of serve seen since Connors roamed the courts loud and proud. Their different approach to winning tennis matches made for a feast of fascinating encounters.

For a while, after the two Americans aged and faded, Federer had things much his own way. But then Nadal arrived from the Spanish island of Majorca with his muscular build, contagious enthusiasm and heavy top-spin game, and the two men shifted tennis to a new level. It is to his immense credit – and our great fortune – that Djokovic somehow contrived to find a way to plant his game at the summit of the tennis mountain at Wimbledon last year.

With Murray becoming a greater threat, these are intoxicating times indeed. So, once again, is this the greatest era of all time? Truthfully, does it matter? As McEnroe said, “Just enjoy it while it lasts.”



Memorable matches from the past



**1969 US Open final:
Rod Laver beat Tony Roche
7-9, 6-1, 6-2, 6-2.**

The man known affectionately to his Australian friends to this day as ‘Rocket’ completed a calendar Grand Slam for a second time and no man has been able to emulate that accomplishment in the 43 years since.



**1980 Wimbledon final:
Bjorn Borg beat John McEnroe
4-6, 7-6, 7-6, 6-4.**

The match will be forever remembered for the drama and suspense of the third-set tie-break won 18-16 by McEnroe before Borg secured his fifth consecutive Wimbledon Championship, and the last great triumph of a career that he brought to a premature end. McEnroe retired with seven Grand Slam singles titles – but he is unashamed to admit this is the match he is most asked to discuss.



**1999 French Open final:
Andre Agassi beat
Andrei Medvedev
1-6, 2-6, 6-4, 6-3, 6-4.**

Only 18 months earlier, Agassi had been ranked No.141 in the world. His victory from two sets down meant that he became just the fifth man in history to win all four Grand Slam singles titles in his career, placing his name alongside Don Budge, Rod Laver, Fred Perry and Roy Emerson, followed of course by Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal.



**2008 Wimbledon final:
Rafael Nadal beat Roger Federer
6-4, 6-4, 6-7, 6-7, 9-7.**

The end for Federer, after five consecutive Wimbledon titles, came as darkness fell after the longest-ever final on Centre Court, an epic match lasting 4hrs 48mins. At 22, Nadal became the first man since Borg in 1980 to win the French Open and Wimbledon titles back-to-back.

