
MacBook Air

This interview was convened around a laptop and various bits of tennis footage that provided a visual soundtrack for the conversation. Links to the videos are provided whenever possible (some coverage was only available on subscription tennis TV — exclusivity remains a draw for tennis fans). Roger Federer's shot as described by David Foster Wallace is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDwG5rJVtdc.

Cover image: Miguel Abreu Gallery office, photograph by Justin Warsh, 2015.

We've all got our examples. Here is one. It's the finals of the 2005 U.S. Open, Federer serving to Andre Agassi early in the fourth set. There's a medium-long exchange of groundstrokes, one with the distinctive butterfly shape of today's power-baseline game, Federer and Agassi yanking each other from side to side, each trying to set up the baseline winner … until suddenly Agassi hits a hard heavy cross-court backhand that pulls Federer way out wide to his ad (= left) side, and Federer gets to it but slices the stretch backhand short, a couple feet past the service line, which of course is the sort of thing Agassi dines out on, and as Federer's scrambling to reverse and get back to center, Agassi's moving in to take the short ball on the rise, and he smacks it hard right back into the same ad corner, trying to wrong-foot Federer, which in fact he does — Federer's still near the corner but running toward the centerline, and the ball's heading to a point behind him now, where he just was, and there's no time to turn his body around, and Agassi's following the shot in to the net at an angle from the backhand side … and what Federer now does is somehow instantly reverse thrust and sort of skip backward three or four steps, impossibly fast, to hit a forehand out of his backhand corner, all his weight moving backward, and the forehand is a topspin screamer down the line past Agassi at net, who lunges for it but the ball's past him, and it flies straight down the sideline and lands exactly in the deuce corner of Agassi's side, a winner — Federer's still dancing backward as it lands. And there's that familiar little second of shocked silence from the New York crowd before it erupts, and John McEnroe with his color man's headset on TV says (mostly to himself, it sounds like), "How do you hit a winner from that position?" And he's right: given Agassi's position and world-class quickness, Federer had to send that ball down a two-inch pipe of space in order to pass him, which he did, moving backwards, with no setup time and none of his weight behind the shot. It was impossible. It was like something out of "The Matrix." I don't know what-all sounds were involved, but my spouse says she hurried in and there was popcorn all over the couch and I was down on one knee and my eyeballs looked like novelty-shop eyeballs.

Justin Warsh: That paragraph is borrowed from "Federer as Religious Experience," by David Foster Wallace in the August 20, 2006 *New York Times Magazine*. It's a pretty vivid description of something that has to be seen, but also something that, if you aren't an avid tennis fan, you might only be able to see if you read the description.

Miguel Abreu: In the '70s, a paradigm shift occurred where players like Björn Borg broke the game down from its previous serve and volley at the net days and pushed the game's action to the back of the court. These new kinds of players pioneered what would become today's dominant strategy — ground strokes with a lot of top spin from the back court — which gave way to a defensive shift in the game. The revolution was spurred on by the invention of new larger-head rackets which replaced the small wooden ones. Made of carbon compounds, the new rackets have a larger sweet spot and can make shots more than twice as hard.

This led to all the defensive back court players like Boris Becker, Pete Sampras, Jimmy Connors. At this point, mostly nobody was serving to volley anymore. Sampras hit a one-handed backhand but, for an offensive player, he still stayed in the back a lot. Federer is an interesting example today — even though he uses his one-handed backhand like an offensive player and will come to the net once in a while, he is mostly hitting these huge forehands from the back; this is the way most players win games today. But he also has finesse, which makes him a follower of John McEnroe. Federer is basically the last player who plays a touch game like that. In the past, you could only hit winning shots from the net but today, if you go up closer, the balls are hit so fast that they'll pass right by you.

Since everybody is able to hit so hard past each other today, the current exceptional players are starting to move forward a little bit, but not a lot — even top players like Novak Djokovic (who's considered the *ultimate* defender), Rafael Nadal, and the mid-career Federer. So, we'll see; I think the future players will move closer to the net in order to distinguish themselves from all the massive back court players.

(brings up first match)

Miami Open 2015 doubles final: Bob Bryan & Mike Bryan vs. Vasek Pospisil & Jack Sock (www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3GXuySjlvw)

MA: This one is interesting, pedagogically speaking, not only to see how doubles functions today but to trace the evolution of the game.

In doubles, traditionally the first player hits a very hard serve and runs to the net, to intercept and finish the point. But now the returns are so fast that the net has become a dangerous place. You can see here how Pospisil is not really a serve and volleyer — he hesitates; doesn't rush the net with confidence like they used to.

I'll show you an interesting point right here — see how he just hit it so hard, past the net player? Beautiful return.

JW: Do you have a favorite tennis player of all time or any that you always keep tabs on?

MA: Of course — I follow the top players like Federer, Wawrinka, and Nadal, but yeah, I follow some obscure ones, too. There's a young player, Grigor Dimitrov from Bulgaria, who's an all-around one-handed backhand player, a full talent. Recently, he made the top ten, so he's getting a lot of attention. It's possible he might become today's best player. Another really interesting one is Dominic Thiem from Austria, who also plays a one-handed backhand with a lot of topspin, which is rare.

JW: David Foster Wallace wrote about religious epiphanies with players like Federer — do you have any religious moments in the sport?

MA: I used to *really* go watch tennis. Every year I'd go with Pieter Schoolwerth, and we would spend a whole day at the early rounds of the U.S. Open. It can get quasi-religious — where you get in the zone and don't answer calls, just staying there for 12 hours. We would spend all day at the courts, but now it's getting harder to do this. It used to be much more relaxed, now you have security everywhere, it's harder to get in, and there are more people — but it's still fun.

JW: Coupled with the change in strategies, it seems like a very different game today.

MA: Players now have to know how to hit like machines, and that kind of game is hard to combine with finesse. But I'm sure one or two top players will manage to combine both. You used to be able to be less fit. The years of people like Vitas Gerulaitis, who was some kind of night-clubbing

playboy but still able to make top five in the world, are over. They all have to be in incredible physical condition and behave.

JW: So it used to more like Formula 1 Racing where everybody was going off and doing crazy stuff?

MA: Yes, and even Formula 1 isn't like that anymore. Now the drivers are all employees of huge companies. With all of these corporate pressures, and the money involved, there's less room for character and … divergence from the laws of physics (laughs).

Oh *this is amazing* (laughs). See that? Incredible shot. Can't do anything — they're right there at the net, but it's just so fast that he can't even see it to make the volley.

(Bryans win.)

See — it happens too fast — they just win on one point. One mistake and you've lost the tiebreaker. Okay so that was that, now lets go to singles.

Miami Open 2015 singles quarter final: John Isner vs. Kei Nishikori (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eadpam03EAU)

MA: This match is interesting because it shows two conflicting styles of play. It's between John Isner, a six-foot-ten American with a huge serve, and Kei Nishikori, a Japanese player who is not that tall and plays a great backcourt game. Isner is kind of a caricature of a tall, big-serving player who barely has a chance anymore, but wins on his serves. Even though he is supple and can hit hard, and on the ground as well, with a shorter player like Nishikori, if they get into a long rally, he'll probably make a mistake. Isner's body is just too big for him to keep up — the parameters of the shot and the physics are against him; just to find the right angle with such a large body and stroke is very difficult. He has such an advantage on the serve, and he comes in there and puts his bullets down. But he's not a volleyer because low balls are too difficult when you're that tall. The other problem for him is the grind of the tour for a body of this size.

Here he's coming to the net for the first time, but it's amazing that it's not systematic. Isner has this big forehand and hits winners from the back, because if he doesn't win the point on his 140 mph serve, the return is often weak.

See? Beautiful shot. Nishikori was forced to put the ball up weak, and Isner has a good enough forehand to just put the ball away. Now it's 40-love — nice thing about this is it's a catch up so we can jump ahead.

(scrolled forward to the tiebreaker at the end of the game)

So, the shorter guys like Nishikori, even though they have smaller reach, can make more precise adjustments, which translates to less missing and more consistency.

JW: You said before that Isner is at the end of his career …

MA: Well, not completely — that's another interesting thing that's changed. In the late '70s, early '80s, you had teenagers winning Grand Slams. Björn Borg was a teenager when he first won at Roland-Garros (the French Open). Michael Chang won in the '80s when he was 17 years old. Players were getting younger and younger, but strangely enough, in the last five years, 30 year-old players towards the end of their careers are starting to win again. Isner might be close to 30, Federer is 33. I don't know why this happened, but it could be that today's players are just getting more physically fit every year and they end up peaking later. It's strange.

That's another giant, John's mother, Karen Isner.

JW: Don't eat me!

MA: (laughs) So for a player like Isner with this weapon of a serve, it's pretty clear he's going to win his service games, so he doesn't have to think so hard. He can take a few more chances because all he has to do is concentrate on making a few returns.

In a tie-breaker, you have a more focused number of points, so if you

win more points on your serve than the other person, you get a major advantage, and that's how Isner wins most of his matches. Nishikori on the other hand, he only serves to put the ball into play but doesn't expect to win the point.

Beautiful shot — see, Isner put two high-risk, powerful shots down the baseline and now he's up 30-love. You couldn't hit that hard before. Now it's 40-love. Three great points for Isner. Out of nowhere, it looks like Nishikori is going to lose the first set.

The nice thing about having such a strong serve is that it's one point where you can truly rely on yourself: You can take chances. In a close, stressful game, this equates to a serious advantage, even if the other player is starting to take over — winning the psychological battle, the war. In this game, Isner could feel a bit nervous because he's the underdog beating a higher-ranked player but, with a serve like his, it doesn't matter what's going on; he just has to do his routine and he's won the match. You might notice that there's nobody in the audience that's very chic or interesting, no celebrities.

See that return serve? Bullet — he just went for it and swung like a home run. He's in the zone, he's even smiling. Isner right now is hitting so precisely to keep the ball in play, straight down the line.

Nishikori is an Academy Bollettieri product. He moved from Japan at 13 and went to the same tennis academy where I was in Bradenton, Florida.

I started playing tennis with my father, who was a recreational player, and he got me hooked. He rented an apartment outside of Paris in a beautiful chateau that was converted from a stable. In the estate, there was a tennis court that nobody used, and we played there a lot — every weekend. I was around seven or eight.

My father wasn't that good and, even though he didn't hit the ball hard, would beat me every time. I started getting better and won games here and there, but I just didn't have the consistency he had. I was a very poor loser — throwing my racket, furious! (laughs) So, that was that for a number of years, and then all of a sudden, one day while we were on

vacation in Zermatt, Switzerland, I started beating him on the clay court. From that point on, I started beating him regularly.

I was taking lessons already in Paris at the Polo Club, but then I went to a tennis camp in Wisconsin one summer run by Nick Bollettieri. I was probably 14 or 15. There, I played pretty intensively, I think for six weeks. We're talking 1976. At the end of the summer, Bollettieri asked me if I wanted to come and train in Florida, and I was thinking "whoa that's intense." I was honored, and I asked my parents if I could — I was living in Paris at the time, and it was a wild idea to go to Florida for a year.

They agreed and let me go. Bollettieri had an academy in Bradenton, south of Tampa on the gulf coast where he was starting a tennis school inside another campus. He had courts and a club, and there were about 30 of us. It was a proper tennis academy — we would train for about four hours a day in the afternoon. We had rooms, it was like extended camp. I trained with future top players like Jimmy Arias, who became number seven in the world, and was roommates with Paul Annacone, who eventually made the quarterfinals at Wimbledon. He later became Sampras' coach. Carling Basset and Pablo Arraya were also there.

The kids were very serious, competitive, ruthless — trying to become professionals, and I was this kid from Paris who could play, although I couldn't really compete with them. At the same time, I learned a lot and was humbled, because you know teenage boys who are trying to get to the top are not necessarily nice people. I had to learn my place.

JW: I can imagine that attitudes must have been extreme, before you're even self-conscious enough to realize.

MA: It was hard on my ego and self esteem, but I gained spirit and learned how to fight. I probably improved more than anybody that year, because I wasn't even close to being as good as they were. By the end of the time, I could play with them but still couldn't win. I became friends with some of the players and became a student of the game, sort of coaching with them while training.

See all of this towel stuff between points? That was unheard of when I first

started, they have maximum 25 seconds between each point.

JW: Is the towel stuff to throw off the rhythm of the other player? Like a momentum thing?

MA: No, they just want it — but there's no more complaining, screaming, throwing the racket anymore.

JW: Yeah, in some of the older games I watched players really wig out. Are today's players just more professional, attitude wise?

MA: They're different — sports is one place where Darwinism really works. The top players today would just destroy the top ones from the past if you put them against each other with the same equipment. If you put this man against Rod Laver with the old rackets, Laver wouldn't have a chance.

JW: Is it because of a change in strategy, training?

MA: It is the physical aspect; the muscles and strokes are much more efficient today and there is an unprecedented level of training. Of course I'm speculating, but I'm pretty confident. I'll show you an old match with Vitas Gerulaitis so we can compare. He was a friend of McEnroe's, a player from the '70s, early '80s that died of a cocaine overdose, I think.

(At this point, we search a *New York Times* obituary. Vitas Gerulaitis accidentally died due to carbon monoxide poisoning in a pool tent.)

MA: I thought it was cocaine.

RIVERHEAD, L.I., May 23 — A pool mechanic's failure to install an extra $1.44 worth of plastic exhaust pipe led to the death of Vitas Gerulaitis, the tennis player, as he inhaled carbon monoxide fumes from a new $8,000 pool heater last year, Suffolk County prosecutors said today. (...) Mr. Gerulaitis, 40, a retired tennis star who was accustomed to a life of fame, wealth and glamour, died in September in the most mundane manner, napping in the pool cottage of a Southampton estate owned by a real estate executive, Martin Raynes.

JW: Were the young players partying all the time, doing drugs, the kind of things high school students do?

MA: Not at all, really. Well, some were; but I wasn't. Bollettieri was a marine drill sergeant, so he ran a really tight ship and wouldn't have tolerated any of that. I think people kind of knew that, but maybe other players did more than I knew.

JW: He was really a marine drill sergeant?

MA: Yes, originally. He would yell at us like one—he was very tough.

JW: Like "schnell!" type things?

MA: "Come on you hyenas!"

Volvo Masters 1981 singles final/tiebreak (3rd set): Vitas Gerulaitis vs. Ivan Lendl (www.youtube.com/watch?v=SzF»kqvpw-8)

MA: See how Gerulaitis returns and comes to the net?

JW: He's pretty wild looking.

MA: More fun, right? See his forehand—there's absolutely no spin on it, it's just flat. He pushes it back over then runs to the net. You couldn't win a point like this today.

Gerulaitis might be the first one who uses the towel. Most of us didn't have one back then—Gerulaitis doesn't give it to the ball boy, he just throws it on the ground.

Ivan Lendl has a more economical game—he was one of the first to take massive shots from the baseline. Nice! Another lob! It was much more exciting in those days. Match point for Lendl.

(Lendl wins.)

French Open 1980 singles final: Björn Borg vs. Vitas Gerulaitis (www.youtube.com/watch?v=RASGJ9nlfVw)

MA: In this game, we'll see the opposition between the ultimate defender at the time, Björn Borg and Vitas Gerulaitis, an attacker. Gerulaitis could never beat Borg and his famous headband. These were my years—I was 18 then. I used to skip school and spend whole days at the courts.

Hey, that is Jack Dorfman, the famous umpire (laughs) of the period. It was much more of a gladiator sport back then. You can see when they cut to the audience—the people seem more together.

After putting in the year at Bollettieri's camp, I came back to France when I was 15. Having improved significantly, I could beat everybody back in Paris at the club level. I became a very young player on the club team, played with the seniors and trained a lot—I went up to number two in the Paris regionals, which is one of the biggest regionals in France, in the 16-and-under category. I was beating everybody, and they were just like "Who is this outsider?" So, that was fun.

Borg was a dominant persona at the time—he would train in my club when he was playing in France. He and Gerulaitis were very good friends; they used to go out to nightclubs together.

(Laughs) The hair was outrageous.

I continued at the club level and then got into Davidson College in North Carolina, where I was on their varsity team. But then, at 18 years old, I had a serious car accident: I went through a windshield and broke my vertebrae. This ended my tennis life because my back was done. It took me a year to recover, and I was told never to play tennis again, at least not competitively, because my back couldn't sustain it. It was a big blow. I was dedicating a lot of time and probably never going to be in the top 100—so maybe it was a blessing in disguise, because then I started doing other things, like reading.

JW: Do you ever play tennis since that time in your life, just for fun?

MA: A few times, but I never manage to get back into a routine. It's complicated to do it in New York. My life is crazy in that I don't have a simple way of doing it, so I just watch and keep tabs on the tours. It's a fun thing, my little hobby, but I don't do any sports these days. I should do something. (laughs)

Borg is much more elegant. He won five Wimbeldons in a row and won the French open six times. He was basically unbeatable on clay. They used to call him "The Viking."

He's also famous for having his eyes so close together.

JW: They are really close.

MA: Gerulaitis normally hits under the ball with short strokes to use the other person's power against them, but he can't do anything against Borg. He can't even win his own serve. His forehand is very weak, and Borg is hitting a top spin. Gerulaitis is just pushing it back.

JW: With that kind of non-spin game, how did Gerulaitis get so far?

MA: Because he still has good pace, rhythm, and he puts pressure on right at the net. You can still play that way, pushing in, and slicing to keep everything low. He was a great, agile volleyer.

On clay, he doesn't have the same efficiency because the ball goes slowly, so he can't attack, which gives the other player enough time. That's why he's being destroyed here.

"Quarante-quinze."

See, now they have to repeat the score in English, because of all the imperialism, (laughs) linguistic imperialism.

"40-15."

(Borg wins.)

MA: These idiots, it's amazing how naïve the sports commentators were at the time, they could get away with anything.

JW: What did he say?

MA: Well, first he mistranslated what a reporter was asking him in English, then mistranslates Borg's own answer, then mistranslates himself. (laughs)

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