



Sport

BY RICHARD BECHT

Chasing the record

Can the Fed Express still deliver?



Roger Federer: going for his 14th grand-slam title.

Roger Federer used to know more about winning than just about anyone on the globe.

For four-and-a-half years – 237 weeks, to be precise – he was ranked the tennis world's No 1 men's singles player. If he had challenges playing on clay – always had, always will – he was close to invincible on every other surface and markedly superior to the next best in line.

There never seemed any doubt he would some day own every record of substance, above all toppling Pete Sampras' count of 14 grand-slam titles.

But now, with this year's second grand-slam tournament, the French Open, about to start (May 24), it's reasonable to ask whether Federer will indeed win again at the highest level.

Considering he secured his 13th grand slam as recently as last September – the US Open – it seems preposterous to even consider such a predicament. Yet while it's premature to speak of a total eclipse, he has been in gradual decline; the signs

were there for all to see both before his 2008 US Open win and since.

Indeed, through much of last year the Fed Express started to wobble and he's still wobbling, battling more than a little to stay on the tracks, another victim of that rare ability sport has for brutally exposing and scrutinising even the best of the best.

If that has been sad to watch, it has also been inevitable. Combine sport's foibles and Father Time – not to mention a feisty challenger in Rafael Nadal – and something will give. The fact is Federer will count 28 candles on his birthday cake on August 8, which puts him close to superannuation class in professional tennis terms.

Witness an exceptional performer in Sampras. He began to splutter around the same age but reasserted himself to pick up the 14th of his grand slams as a 31-year-old at the 2002 US Open.

That comparison reinforces what a genius Sampras was; there's a gnawing suspicion that he wasn't always given his

due when he finished, that many in the sports world weren't always so fulsome in their acknowledgement of him.

Since Sampras departed, Federer has regularly been handed the "best-ever" label, but wondrous though he is, true greatness can't be bestowed until he not only matches but beats Sampras' 14 grand slams.

Just as Federer usurped Sampras, so Nadal has done to Federer. It's the way it so often works.

In that respect, 2008 was a transition time as Federer failed to even reach the Australian Open final (breaking a run of 10 consecutive grand-slam final appearances) before twice losing in the final to Nadal at the French Open and Wimbledon. The first was expected but the second was far more poignant as Federer's dominance on grass was ended by the baseline-slugging Nadal.

Since last year's US Open triumph, Federer has won just one ATP Tour title – the Swiss Indoors – and this year has been a constant struggle so far, his glorious and tearful defeat – by Nadal, naturally – in the Australian Open final rather defining where he is at.

The red clay at Roland Garros is no place to expect any sort of recovery.

His one hope of salvation is Wimbledon a few weeks later. Sentimentalists would relish even a brief resurgence, but it's sadly true that this special player will need to find extraordinary reserves to rediscover his grand slam-winning ways. ■

Singles champions at the last 10 French Open tournaments

Year	Men's Singles	Women's Singles
1999	Andre Agassi (US)	Steffi Graf (Germany)
2000	Gustavo Kuerten (Brazil)	Mary Pierce (France)
2001	Gustavo Kuerten (Brazil)	Jennifer Capriati (US)
2002	Albert Costa (Spain)	Serena Williams (US)
2003	Juan Carlos Ferrero (Spain)	Justine Henin-Hardenne (Belgium)
2004	Gaston Gaudio (Argentina)	Anastasia Myskina (Russia)
2005	Rafael Nadal (Spain)	Justine Henin-Hardenne (Belgium)
2006	Rafael Nadal (Spain)	Justine Henin-Hardenne (Belgium)
2007	Rafael Nadal (Spain)	Justine Henin (Belgium)
2008	Rafael Nadal (Spain)	Ana Ivanovic (Serbia)

Rafael Nadal

