



# Strokes of Genius: Federer, Nadal, and the Greatest Match Ever Played

By L. Jon Wertheim

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**Strokes of Genius: Federer, Nadal, and the Greatest Match Ever Played** By L. Jon Wertheim

In the 2008 Wimbledon men's final, Centre Court was a stage set worthy of Shakespearean drama. Five-time champion Roger Federer was on track to take his rightful place as the most dominant player in the history of the game. He just needed to cling to his trajectory. So in the last few moments of daylight, Centre Court witnessed a coronation. Only it wasn't a crowning for the Swiss heir apparent but for a swashbuckling Spaniard. Twenty-two-year-old Rafael Nadal prevailed, in five sets, in what was, according to the author, "essentially a four-hour, forty-eight-minute infomercial for everything that is right about tennis—a festival of skill, accuracy, grace, strength, speed, endurance, determination, and sportsmanship." It was also the encapsulation of a fascinating rivalry, hard fought and of historic proportions.

In the tradition of John McPhee's classic *Levels of the Game*, *Strokes of Genius* deconstructs this defining moment in sport, using that match as the backbone of a provocative, thoughtful, and entertaining look at the science, art, psychology, technology, strategy, and personality that go into a single tennis match. With vivid, intimate detail, Wertheim re-creates this epic battle in a book that is both a study of the mechanics and art of the game and the portrait of a rivalry as dramatic as that of Ali–Frazier, Palmer–Nicklaus, and McEnroe–Borg.

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## Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

### Amazon Exclusive: Blake Bailey Reviews *Strokes of Genius*

**Blake Bailey** is the author of *Cheever: A Life*, which the *New York Times* called "a definitive, Dickensian rendering of a complete and complicated life, addictively readable and long overdue." His last book, *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates*, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Read his exclusive Amazon guest review of *Strokes of Genius*:



If, like me, you regard Roger Federer as one of the three or four most glorious athletes in human history, and an awfully nice guy to boot, then the years 2004 to 2007 were golden years for you. This was the "Federer era" in tennis, when he won 11 of 16 Grand Slam tournaments and amassed an astonishing match record of 315-24. Nor was there much of the nasty tension entailed by hard-fought five-set matches; as a fan of Federer, one had only to sit back and sigh at the artistry--the elegant angles, the impossible retrievals, the bazooka forehands--while Federer rose to the occasion (good-naturedly) again and again, usually in straight sets.

This belle époque might have continued, if not for the rise of the musclebound Spaniard, Rafael Nadal, indisputably the greatest clay-court player of all time. For a while it seemed, at worst, that neither Federer nor anyone else would win the French Open as long as Nadal was healthy; but then Nadal began to dominate on faster surfaces, too. Transcending himself in the fifth set, Federer managed to defeat Nadal in the 2007 Wimbledon final (perhaps the third or fourth greatest match ever played) and thus equal Borg's Open-era record of five straight Wimbledon titles. Borg himself, however, predicted that Nadal would not only win the next Wimbledon, but goad the demoralized Federer out of tennis entirely--reminiscent, that is, of McEnroe's effect on Borg, who retired at age 26 after losing his edge in the rivalry.

As L. Jon Wertheim points out in *Strokes of Genius*--his riveting analysis of the 2008 Federer-Nadal Wimbledon final, and an instant classic of tennis literature--the "clashing styles" of the two greats have made theirs the gold standard of sports rivalries: "Feline light versus bovine heavy. Middle European restraint and quiet meticulousness versus Iberian bravado and passion. Dignified power versus an unapologetic, whoomphing brutality. Zeus versus Hercules." A senior writer for *Sports Illustrated*, Wertheim describes the

match itself with expertise and élan ("an oil painting of a forehand volley"), while widening and tightening his lens to examine almost every aspect of the modern game: the curious obsolescence of the serve-and-volley approach; the evolution of the racket (natural gut versus polyester, etc.); the vagaries of various players, most notably Nadal and Federer. (Fun fact: Nadal--whose "awkward" left-hand game has given Federer such fits--is actually right-handed.)

These digressions, so nicely deployed, helped distract this reader from a *very* unhappy ending: 6-4, 6-4, 6-7, 6-7, 9-7, which one fan aptly likened to "watching an angel fall." This much we know (and never mind the woe that, Federer-wise, would follow), but did you know that in England, at 9:20 P.M., there was a 1400-megawatt power surge when millions rose as one from their couches to switch the lights on, released at last from the intolerable tension of the greatest match in history? For that detail, and many like it, you need Wertheim's engrossing book.

#### From [Booklist](#)

\*Starred Review\* Like the singular match that inspired it, this account of the 2008 Wimbledon final between Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal is compelling from the get-go. Senior Sports Illustrated writer Wertheim begins with this observation: "Bracketed together as they are, most rivals have the good sense to know that, finally, they are better for the existence of their nemesis." And so Federer and Nadal were each better in the grueling yet brilliant five-set match that Nadal won in twilight. Wertheim sets the stage well, putting the rivalry into context and discussing each man's playing style ("Relentless genius Federer versus unbending will Nadal"), then launches into crisp and colorful play-by-play, freezing the action throughout with intriguing discourses on such issues as the preponderance of champion lefties, the (thankfully) slower Wimbledon grass in recent years, each of the two players' development, and the mostly charming peculiarities of the Wimbledon tournament (no play on the middle Sunday, for instance). Hardcore tennis fans will revel in Wertheim's expertise and his proximity to the players and their event; others can't help but be attracted to a vision of two champions and a rivalry in their prime. --Alan Moores

#### Review

"Imagine a world heavyweight championship fight in a cathedral. Jon Wertheim brings one back to nail-biting-life in *Strokes of Genius*. His stirring blow-by-blow (and behind the scenes) account of the 2008 collision of Roger Federer and Rafa Nadal in the tennis temple—Wimbledon's Centre Court—illuminates a kingdom changing hands. An engrossing book, Nadal over Federer overseen by Wertheim make an unforgettable trio."

—**Bud Collins**

"... A volume that should appeal to those who care little about tennis. Why? Because it manages to be -- simultaneously -- about achieving greatness at an endeavor, about handling the fame wrought by greatness, about the psychology of friendship and sportsmanship, about the role of sports in societies and about the positives and negatives of intense competition." —*Cleveland Plain-Dealer*

"Wertheim has not only given that glorious moment in tennis history the precise kind of literary treatment it merits, but he has done more than that. Writing with clarity and superb interpretive insight, conveying a depth of appreciation for both players that few of his peers could equal, building drama across chapter after chapter, Wertheim does a masterful job of allowing all of us to revisit an incomparable occasion . . . Compelling and penetrating . . . An honorable piece of work, one that will appeal across the board to fans, and one that will enhance the landscape of tennis literature."

—TennisChannel.com

“Compelling . . . Hardcore tennis fans will revel in Wertheim’s expertise and his proximity to the players and their event; others can’t help but be attracted to a vision of two champions and a rivalry in their prime.” — *Booklist*, starred review

“Comprehensive and thoroughly engaging . . . Wertheim’s informative backstories behind the clash itself and the contrasting personalities...should convince readers that this drama-filled and high-quality duel of tennis titans gives the historic 1980 Borg-McEnroe final a well-earned run for its money. Recommended.” — *Library Journal*

“Gripping . . . Wertheim’s involving tone is well suited to the sweep of his project, which successfully reawakens the excitement of one of the greatest encounters in sports history.” — *am NewYork*

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