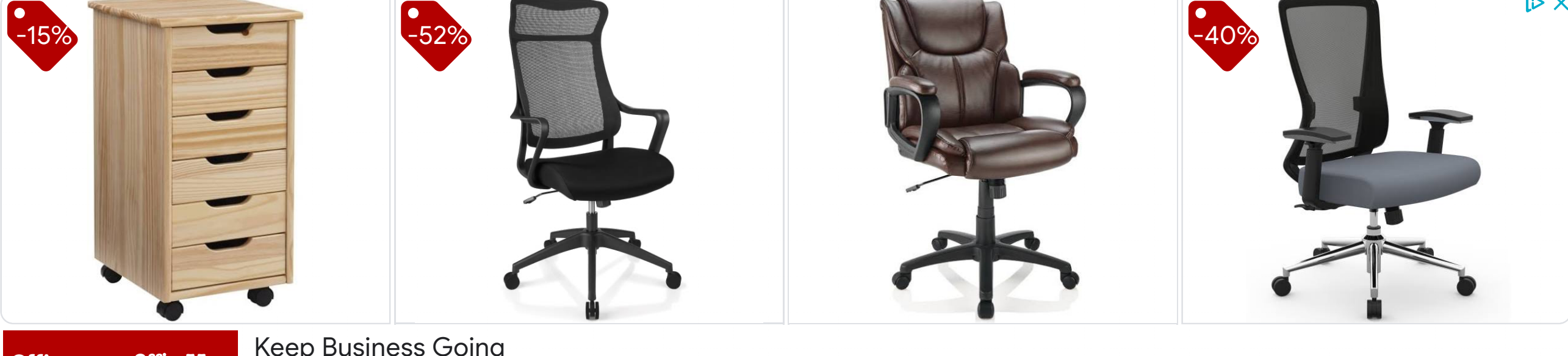


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‘The Master’ Review: Swiss Movement

Roger Federer, now 40, first picked up a tennis racket at age 3. He has played more than 1,700 tour-level matches—and won 80% of them.



Roger Federer at Wimbledon in 2012. PHOTO: LEON NEAL/AFP/GETTYIMAGES

By Edward Kosner
Sept. 2, 2021 6:18 pm ET

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That flying forehand. The precision serves that skip off the tape at the T. The elegant footwork. The deft half-volleys and sliced backhands. The sly, confident smile. For two decades, tennis connoisseurs and hackers have marveled at the artistry of Roger Federer, the Apollonian tennis star of this era.

The Swiss wizard has just turned 40 and, injured yet again, had to drop out of the U.S. Open now under way. His spectacular rivalry with Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic is almost certainly over. So this is the right moment for the definitive story of how Federer became Federer and thrived at the pinnacle of 21st-century pro tennis. “The Master” by Christopher Clarey is that book. It’s subtitled “The Long Run and Beautiful Game of Roger Federer,” and Mr. Clarey, the adroit tennis writer for the New York Times, does full justice to both. Deeply reported and crisply written, the book could be a snooze for readers immune to tennis’s appeal, but it’s a treat for those who love the sport and the men and women who play it at its demanding best.

The unflappable Roger, with his exquisite strokes, adoring wife and two sets of twins cheering from the players’ box, Nike and Rolex endorsements, and international fan club (including the Vogue editor Anna Wintour), evolved from a slobbish adolescent addicted to videogames who once huddled sobbing under the umpire’s chair after losing a match.

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The Master: The Long Run and Beautiful Game of Roger Federer

By Christopher Clarey Twelve

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As Mr. Clarey tells the story, young Roger’s long, unsentimental tennis education—he quit school at 16—involved no-nonsense parents, a succession of astute coaches, an innovative trainer, and a sophisticated sports psychologist. When the boy acted up on the court at the modest club in their hometown of Basel, his father, Robert, drove off leaving a 5-franc coin on the bench for him to use getting home. At 14, speaking only Swiss German, he went off to a tennis academy and school where coaching and academics were conducted solely in French. He survived, and wound up fluent in German, French and English with a smattering of Spanish, Swedish (from a coach) and Afrikaans (from his mother).

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“The Master” accurately describes the future paragon as an annoying kid. Once young Roger starts the long climb up the world tennis ladder, he gets a bye. Indeed, in 406 pages I counted just one quote suggesting that his serene exterior masks less-appealing responses to life’s aggravations. But the champ is still prone to crying after big wins and losses, as the author duly notes. A British tabloid once labeled him “ROGER BLUBBERER.”

There are certainly enough superlatives about the resilient Federer to fill a book. Young Roger first picked up a racket at age 3 and he has played more than 1,700 tour-level matches plus 800 others, winning 80% of them. He captured his first Wimbledon title at 21 in 2003, and at 22 was ranked No. 1 in the world. Overall, he’s tied with Djokovic and Nadal in winning 20 Grand Slam tournaments—eight at Wimbledon, six Australian Opens, five U.S. Opens, and a lone French Open (in 2009, when Nadal was eliminated earlier). He is the only tennis player to earn \$1 billion in his career, 90% of it in appearance fees and sponsorships (including a 10-year, \$100 million deal with Nike). Forbes estimates that last year, at 39, he earned \$106.3 million, only \$6.3 million of it by actually playing tournament tennis.

But it is the dazzling quality of the Federer game that’s most remarkable. “He will show you something new in every match,” says a savvy tennis analyst I know, “making a shot you’ve never seen that only Roger could execute.” In the book, Billie Jean King calls him “the most beautiful and balletic player I’ve ever seen.” Mr. Clarey compares him to the Baroque master Peter Paul Rubens: “prolific, well-adjusted, enduring, and perfectly accessible to mainstream tastes yet capable of giving chills to the experts with his brushwork and composition, too.”

But nobody’s perfect. Federer actually lost two of the greatest matches he ever played. In 2008, his French Open nemesis Nadal beat him in five sets at Wimbledon. Eleven years later, he and Djokovic played the longest final in the then-142-year history of Wimbledon—a 4-hour, 56-minute marathon. At 7-7 in the fifth set, a tiring Federer broke the relentless Djokovic, then flubbed two match points. Forty-four minutes later, the Joker finished him off in a tie-break at 12-12.

Among the pleasures of Mr. Clarey’s book are his perceptive sketches of rivals, contrasting their backstories, temperaments and skills to his subject’s. “Djokovic,” he writes, “talked about Federer’s so-called SABR (Sneak Attack by Roger), in which he moves unusually close to the service box to hit a half-volley return . . . ‘Will he come to the net? Will he stay back? Will he chip it? It keeps you guessing all the time, and that’s why it’s so tough to play Roger.’” And: “Federer was elegance, acquired cool, and effortless power; Nadal was exuberance, innate fire, and flexed biceps. Federer was smooth and classical; Nadal was rugged and avant-garde. Federer was tradition; Nadal was youth.”

No longer young for tennis, Nadal, 35, is, like Federer, injured and out of the U.S. Open. Briton Andy Murray, once part of the pro tour’s “Big Four,” plays on at 34, but is working to regain form after hip surgery. Great champions like Pete Sampras, Andy Roddick and Steffi Graf retired at 30. So Roger Federer’s long, sustained run of excellence is in its way as miraculous as the “tweener” shot he smacked between his legs off a Djokovic lob during the 2009 U.S. Open. “I never fell out of love with the sport,” he told Mr. Clarey. “Never.”

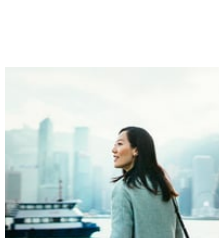
Mr. Kosner is the author of “It’s News to Me,” a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York magazine, Esquire, and the New York Daily News.

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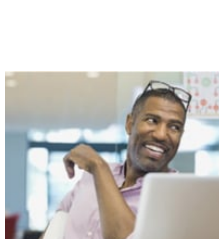
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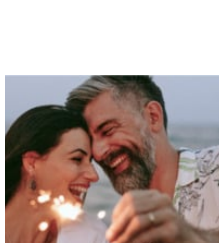
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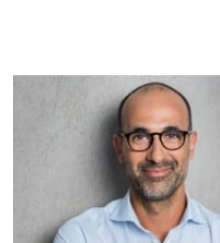
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