

## Federer by a Whisker

by Rick Angus  
New York City

For one set there was no difference between Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic. Statistically, the numbers were identical and getting to that point was a much harder task for the Swiss King of the Courts than for his new-found hard court rival.

Serving to take a one set lead at 40-0, Novak had stunned the crowd in Arthur Ashe stadium and they felt as one, that they were watching a turning point in the history of the game. Fighting back to equalize the score at deuce, it appeared for all intents and purposes that the conventional order had been restored. Two more advantage points for Djokovic and it seemed inevitable that Federer had lost his way and his crown was about to be snatched by his youthful opponent.

All was not what it seemed! Alas Roger struggled but in the end he broke Novak in a most unexpected fashion. Instead of trying to out hit the young Serb sensation, Federer adopted his personal version of the famous Muhammed Ali rope a dope strategy to perfection.

Commentating for Australian television, the pair of John Newcombe and Fred Stolle saw what most observers overlooked. Roger began to slice the backhand deep to Novak's backhand with no pace and check out how Djokovic could generate a winning response. Many unforced errors by Novak became the likely response under pressure.

The number 3 seed lives to hit sharply angled replies to heavily top spinned ground strokes. Give him the proverbial clay court enthusiast on the other side of the net and while they can run side to side and impact the ball with heavy topspin, the slashing style and unexpected angles created by Djokovic are devastating to their chances of winning.

Federer is known to regularly take advantage of his opportunities and make his challengers pay the price for relying on their favourite kill shots. The problem is that Roger sizes up his opponents in short order and when he identifies a tendency in their approach, he devises the appropriate response.

Federer's flexibility and his willingness to change a losing strategy is what gets him to the particularly promising points in the tournament and to adopt another approach is what truly makes him better than all the rest. Even his training decisions to prepare him to compete with those players in his wake is most unconventional. Who would prepare for the likes of Rafael Nadal and Novak Djokovic by importing juniors or lowly ranked professional neophytes to practice against?

Yesterday at the Open, Roger did exactly that. Federer spent his warm-up session hitting with the newly crowned 2007 junior boys champion, a Lithuanian by the unfamiliar name of Ricardas Berankis. Fresh off his title quest, Ricardas was startled to be summoned to hit with the undisputed #1 player in the world prior to his own Championship tilt with Djokovic.

Given that earlier this summer Roger had imported both Berankis and a Florida college athlete, Jesse Levine, to Dubai for practice, his approach is to say the least, unorthodox. But just as easing up and hitting no pace threw Novak off his game when he appeared to be on an unstoppable roll, Roger's reliance on the element of surprise is wickedly effective.

Whenever Djokovic became too grooved on his killer responses to the full Federer ground strokes, Roger would change tactics and bring Novak's mind into play.

Two sets, seven set point chances at 6-5, once on his own serve with five points to take the lead and twice more on Roger's serve to even the match. What was the outcome for Novak, a two set deficit and a broken spirit.

Sometimes the unexpected is too much to contend with. With more Slam experience, maybe Djokovic will adjust better to the situation in future matches with Federer. The odds are that such meetings between these top players will become commonplace, but then what will King Roger pull out of his sleeve to stem the tide? Federer always has something hidden there which so far has provided him with ample ammunition in his successful quest, so far it has resulted in his capture of twelve Grand Slam titles.

It certainly does not appear that his foes will outsmart or outplay Roger on these grand stages until they learn to change a losing game. They will need to add variety at just the right moment in time. This is a lesson that Roger has clearly demonstrated to many a pupil and is surely the key to his continued Grand Slam success.