



SPORTS TALK

with Michael Emmett

Mayfair's own 3 times National Champion
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Dominating Days for 2 Great Athletes

It's too bad Roger Federer and Tiger Woods are not in the same sport.

If they were, we would be treated to the type of rivalry that transcends athletics. To see those two square off at the top of their game on a basketball court, in a boxing ring, or even on a wrestling mat, would be a spectacle indeed.

It would provide the type of finger-licking entertainment that brings to mind the greatest individual matchups of our sporting past — Ali vs. Frazier, Magic vs. Bird, Gretzky vs. Lemieux and my personal favorite Borg vs. McEnroe.

The debate as to whether Woods or Federer is sports' top kingpin is a lively one. There is no loser in this contest; both are arguably the best ever to play their game.

You have Eldrick Woods, the owner of 13 major golf championships, including the last major of the year in Tulsa, Oklahoma in temperatures over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Woods now just 5 shy of the all-time record held by Jack Nicklaus — a record golf historians thought would live forever. And then yesterday, Woods was spectacular firing a final round 63 en route to his 60th career title, winning the BMW Championship in Chicago (22 under par) and in the process taking another step toward the FedEx Cup Championship and 10 Million dollars.

Then you have Federer, who's just simply "betterer" than everyone else. Tennis' top dog is a Swiss Can't Miss with 12 major titles, including yesterday's impressive win over Novak Djokovic. Federer becomes the first male in 84 years to win 4 straight US Open championships. Roger fought off 7 set points in the first 2 sets yesterday and won his final 3 matches without dropping a set. Keep in mind, Federer also has 5 straight Wimbledon titles — matching Bjorn Borg's dominance more than 25 years ago. Federer is the only player in tennis's rich history to have won 3 different majors at least 3 times.

Federer's 12th Grand Slam singles title pushes him past two titans of tennis, Bjorn Borg and Rod Laver. The 26-year-old from Switzerland is now tied with Roy Emerson and only two behind Pete Sampras.

Federer won his latest Grand Slam on Sunday, a month after turning 26. Peter Sampras was one month shy of his 28th birthday when he won his 12th Slam.

Federer has now won three of the four Grand Slams, in three of the past 4 years. This is a remarkable achievement, a streak that may never be duplicated. To review: Federer as won five straight Wimbledons, four straight U.S. Opens and two straight Australian Opens winning 12 of the past 18 Slams. For context, consider Borg's 11 Grand Slams were won in an impressive span of 21 appearances. Sampras' best streak was 9-for-17.

This is not a discussion of whether golf is a sport or not. Let's agree that tennis is more taxing on the body and one has to be in peak physical condition to win majors (unless you're Pete Sampras near the end of his career or Serena Williams at this year's Australian Open).

Before I tell you my pick, let's look at what these two share in common, besides the No. 1 ranking in their respective sports.

Each is the only active player in his sport with double-digit major

championships. Both have won multiple major titles in the last two-plus years — Federer has eight, Woods has five. Federer has been machine-like having made it to the finals in the last 10 straight Grand Slams dating back to French in 2005. Woods had a similar run in 2005-06 where he finished in the top five in 7 of the 8 eight majors winning 4 of them. And, most importantly, both intimidate the opposition the way Michael Jordan did on the basketball court in the 90s.

Federer has been snubbed over the last two years by several awards committees when it comes to athlete-of-the-year recognition. He placed second to Tiger in the Associated Press' athlete of the year vote in 2006. He also finished second to Miami Heat guard Dwyane Wade for Sports Illustrated's Sportsman of the Year award. The Sporting News went with San Diego Chargers running back LaDainian Tomlinson.

Voting polls are the only competitions that relegate Federer to second-place status these days. The man is a winning machine who has captured eight of the last ten majors with a winning percentage better than 93% since the start of the 2006 season. And earlier this year, Federer broke Jimmy Connors' record of 160 consecutive weeks as the top-ranked player in men's tennis dating back to February 2, 2004. In the middle of August Federer became the 5th youngest tennis player in history to record his 50th tournament victory on the ATP Tour hammering James Blake, losing only 5 games in the final of the Masters Series event in Cincinnati.

All that said, I'm going with Tiger.

Woods has said in interviews that Federer's accomplishments in tennis far outweigh his success in golf.

I disagree. Here's why:

Federer has to beat seven opponents (in major championships) to win a tennis tournament, and at this time in history, the guys lining up against him aren't asking him to step up his game.

Like former number one, Andy Roddick, for instance. The world's fifth-ranked player is 1-14 against Federer in ATP events and won a grand total of six games in three sets when the two clashed 8 months ago at the Australian Open semifinals.

While Federer need only beat seven opponents, Woods must face an entire field of golfers each time out, in a sport that's more mentally taxing than tennis — I've played both (at a very competitive level) and golf is the more difficult of the two. There is more room for error on the tennis court, case in point, James Blake double faulted 4 times in one game in his last head-to-head match against Federer, yet still managed to hold serve. Golfers can't afford that same luxury; one bad shot can translate into missing the cut. Without question, golf is a more penal sport.

Tiger must face Vijay Singh, Ernie Els, Retief Goosen, Sergio Garcia, Padraig Harrington, Phil Mickelson, Jim Furyk and a golf course, each time out. Plus, Tiger has been better for a longer period than Federer, who emerged when he won Wimbledon in 2004.

The final point: Tiger has dominated his would-be competition without question. The only time he showed some mortality was back in 2006, when Mickelson won the Masters and Tiger missed the cut at the U.S. Open on Father's Day, while his father Earl's health continued a steady decline until his death.

While Woods has won his sport's four major titles at least two times apiece, Federer has yet to win a French Open, a title that also eluded Sampras, John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors. Rod Laver won the calendar Grand Slam twice, and for many experts on the subject, is recognized as the best of all time.

In my opinion, for Federer to be considered the best ever, he must win the French Open. There are only a handful of men who won all four majors in their career — Federer is not one of them. The 26-year old Federer has dominated tennis for the past three seasons, but is still trying to win a Grand Slam on clay.

In order to do this, he still must figure out the charismatic Rafael Nadal, who owns an 8-5 edge in their budding rivalry — most of those Nadal wins came in Europe on red clay in the last 3 years.

For those of you who believe Nadal's edge is due to his dominance on clay, I'll leave you with this: If they played a golf tournament on clay this weekend, my money would be on Tiger. ■