

2022: The Year in Tennis

By Daniel Ross Goodman

(A condensed version of this article appeared in the [Washington Examiner](#) on Dec. 8, 2022.)

For nearly 20 years, men's tennis has been dominated by three transcendent players—Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, and Novak Djokovic. For the past ten of these years tennis fans have been wondering when the time would come in which tennis's Big 3 would finally cede ground to a new generation. Although a few players have managed to break through and win a major title during this stretch, the Big 3's hold on the Grand Slams has been as tenacious as the grip of a grizzly bear on its prey—as of this past year's US Open, Federer, Nadal, and Djokovic had won an astounding 63 of the past 77 Slams. This year, however, the Big 3 finally became a Big 2 when Federer retired after playing his final match in London at the Laver Cup, finally opening up some room for other stars to intrude into this rarefied athletic space—if the Big 2 will let them. Nadal and Djokovic still won 3 of the season's 4 slams, and although Nadal finished the season on a slump, Djokovic concluded the year on a tear. After missing the US Open due to the United States' refusal to grant him a visa because of his continuing refusal to take the Covid-19 vaccination shots, Djokovic won tournaments in Tel Aviv and Kazakhstan, reached the finals of the Paris Masters, and won the ATP Finals in Turin, Italy, winning every single match he played of the year-end round-robin. Next year could very well become the year of the Big 1, with Djokovic the last remaining player of tennis's Golden Era still playing his best and fending off challengers from tennis's Next-Gen while a more vulnerable Nadal faces his tennis mortality. But before we jump into 2023, let's have a look back at the year that was in men's tennis of 2022.

Player of the Year: Rafael Nadal.

The aforementioned Nadal did finish the year on a concerning downward trend, losing his final four matches—the first time he had lost that many matches in a row since 2009. But the first two-thirds of the season gave us a Nadal that was as good as any iteration of the all time Spanish great we had ever seen. He won the Australian Open at the beginning of the season, joining Djokovic as the other member of the Big 3 to have won each Grand Slams at least twice. In the middle of the season he won the French Open for a mind-boggling fourteenth time. And in the latter part of the season he made the semifinals of Wimbledon before an abdominal injury deprived him of the opportunity to go for the calendar-year Grand Slam (winning all four majors in the same year). The form Nadal displayed at the French Open, which included defeating Djokovic in a scintillating quarterfinal and eviscerating Norway's Casper Ruud in the final, was frequently staggering. But the way that his body broke down toward the end of the season indicates that he may not have many such seasons left. We should celebrate this all-time great while we still can.

Breakout Player of the Year: Carlos Alcaraz.

The 36-year-old Nadal finished the season ranked no. 2 in the world. And who, you ask, finished the season ahead of him? That would be his fellow Spaniard Carlos Alcaraz, who at the age of 19 became the youngest ever men's player to become world no. 1 in the history of the ATP rankings. Last year in this column I predicted that Alcaraz, who had rocketed from outside the top-100 into the 30s, would break into the ATP top-15; at the time I remember regretting that I had not picked him to break into the top 10. As it turned out, even the latter prediction would have been far too cautious. The Spanish sensation exceeded even the grandest expectations of tennis fans last year; many of us thought he would eventually reach no. 1—we just didn't think it would happen so quickly! Yes, there should be an asterisk next to his ranking that indicates that the actual (and still) best player in the world, Novak Djokovic, had his ranking plummet due to having been deprived of being able to play the Australian Open and the US Open last year. Neither did Djokovic receive any ranking points from winning Wimbledon due to the ATP's decision to not award ranking points from the tournament in response to the All England Club's decision to bar Russian and Belarusian players from the major. Still, as they say in football, you can only play the schedule you're given, and Alcaraz did this better than just about any other player last year, winning five tournaments—including Masters 1000s in Miami and Madrid—and becoming the first teenager to win a Slam since Nadal in 2005. Perhaps most impressively, he became the first player to defeat Djokovic and Nadal back-to-back in a clay court tournament when he beat two of the three greatest players in tennis history in Madrid—and on consecutive days, no less! Federer's departure from tennis this year gave us much reason to be sad, but the meteoric rise of Alcaraz should have tennis fans thrilled about the future—and present—of the sport. As Nadal was saying even before Alcaraz won the US Open, it's no longer sufficient to say that Alcaraz will be a great player; he's *already* great.

Runner-Up Breakout Player of the Year: Holger Rune, Denmark.

Match of the Year: Tie: Australian Open final—Rafael Nadal defeating Daniil Medvedev, 2-6, 6-7(5-7), 6-4, 6-4, 7-5; U.S. Open quarterfinal—Carlos Alcaraz defeating Jannik Sinner, 6-3, 6-7(7-9), 6-7(0-7), 7-5, 6-3.

Though he has always claimed to love the tennis season's first slam, the Australian Open has handed Nadal more heartbreaking defeats than he has experienced at any other major. This year, however, Nadal finally once again got the better of the slam that has bedeviled him like none other, and in what fashion!, coming back from two sets to love down (something Nadal hadn't done since 2007) and triple-break-point down in the third set to defeat a confident and in-form Medvedev. In what was already a storybook career, Nadal's second Australian Open victory added a chapter as remarkable as any he has written thus far.

One of these heartbreaking Australian Open losses of Nadal's came in 2012, when the left-handed legend lost to Djokovic in five of the most grueling sets ever played in tennis history in a match that was also the longest major final in tennis history. This year, ten years after that Golden Era classic, we witnessed version 2.0

of that Nadal-Djokovic duel in Sinner and Alcaraz's five-setter at this year's US Open, a match that was the second longest US Open match ever and, at 2:50am, was the latest ever finish in US Open history. Fans who stayed up watching it were rewarded with astounding rallies and stunning shot-making, highlighted by Alcaraz's behind-the-back flick, a shot I had never seen on a tennis court. Most of all, though, the 5-hour 15-minute match was awe-inspiring for the level of punishing power and Olympian sprinter speed in a combination that often exceeded the power and speed displayed by Nadal and Djokovic ten years ago. It was hard not to think during that instant classic, as Patrick McEnroe and others declared, that that night we were witnessing the future of tennis—and the birth of two new stars.

Shot of the Year: Nadal's [dipping forehand crosscourt passing shot](#) to save a set point vs. Alexander Zverev in his French Open semifinal—which was preceded by an almost as spectacular backhand stab from far off the court to stay in the point.

Nick Kyrgios Moment of the Year: Finally (perhaps) reaching his tennis potential.

In the past three years I've used this space in the column to gently poke fun at Kyrgios and to also express some of our frustration as tennis fans to see one of the most talented players of this generation squander his promise through a lack of focus and inability to fully commit to the sport in the manners that are necessary to become a champion. This year, much of that at last changed. Though he once again skipped the clay court season, Kyrgios had the best Wimbledon of his life, making his first Grand Slam final and losing to Novak Djokovic—perhaps the greatest player of all time—in four sets; no shame there. Kyrgios continued that good form into the summer hard court season, where he was arguably the best player on tour from Wimbledon through the second week of the US Open, where he made his first quarterfinal at Flushing Meadows. In between those slams, he became the first man to win the Citi Open (formerly the Washington Open) singles and doubles titles in the same tournament. And, maybe most impressively, Kyrgios, with his fellow Aussie bad-boy partner Thanasi Kokkinakis, won the Australian Open doubles title. 20% of Australia, according to the country's ratings, watched the terrifically entertaining bad-boy doubles duo they began calling "Special K" in the final. Nick Kyrgios can now say something that neither Djokovic, Nadal, or Federer can say: "I am a Grand Slam doubles champion." Not bad for someone we used to worry would never amount to much more than a professional wrestling-like entertainer on the tennis court.

That said, Kyrgios's season was not without its usual medley of head-scratching, humorous, and ridiculous antics, which we'll honor with the following award:

Runner-Up Nick Kyrgios Moment of the Year: Taking a sip from a fan's beer while signing autographs after beating Britain's Liam Broady in his first round Australian Open match.

Stat of the Year: 75-25: Youngest-ever world no. 1 Carlos Alcaraz's record through his first 100 ATP matches, breaking the record previously held by Andy Roddick for the best start to a tennis career as measured through a player's first 100 matches.

Bold Prediction for 2023: Novak Djokovic will overtake Rafael Nadal for the all-time men's singles Grand Slam record.

Daniel Ross Goodman is a Washington Examiner contributing writer and the author, most recently, of Somewhere Over the Rainbow: Wonder and Religion in American Cinema.