



RAFA

Rafael Nadal and John Carlin

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and John Carlin

HYPERION

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Toni Nadal: his uncle and coach

Rafael Nadal: his uncle

Miguel Ángel Nadal: his uncle, and former professional
football player

Marilén Nadal: his aunt and godmother

Don Rafael Nadal: his paternal grandfather

Pedro Parera: his maternal grandfather

Juan Parera: his uncle and godfather

The Team

Carlos Costa: his agent

Rafael Maymó (“Titín”): his physical therapist

Benito Pérez Barbadillo: his communications chief

Joan Forcades: his physical trainer

Francis Roig: his second coach

Jordi Robert (“Tuts”): his Nike handler and close friend

Ángel Ruiz Cotorro: his doctor

Jofre Porta: a coach when he was young

The Friends

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THE SILENCE OF THE CENTRE COURT

The Silence, that's what strikes you when you play on Wimbledon's Centre Court. You bounce the ball soundlessly up and down on the soft turf; you toss it up to serve; you hit it and you hear the echo of your own shot. And of every shot after that. *Clack, clack; clack, clack*. The trimmed grass, the rich history, the ancient stadium, the players dressed in white, the respectful crowds, the venerable tradition—not a billboard advertisement in view—all combine to enclose and cushion you from the outside world. The feeling suits me; the cathedral hush of the Centre Court is good for my game. Because what I battle hardest to do in a tennis match is to quiet the voices in my head, to shut everything out of my mind but the contest itself and concentrate every atom of my being on the point I am playing. If I made a mistake on a previous point, forget it; should a thought of victory suggest itself, crush it.

The silence of the Centre Court is broken when a point's done, if it's been a good point—because the Wimbledon crowds can tell the difference—by a shock of noise; applause, cheers, people shouting your name. I hear them, but as if from some place far off. I don't register that there are fifteen thousand people hunched around the arena, tracking every move my opponent and I make. I am so focused I have no sense at all, as I do now reflecting back on the Wimbledon final of 2008 against Roger Federer, the biggest match of my life, that there are millions watching me around the world.

I had always dreamt of playing here at Wimbledon. My uncle Toni, who has been my coach all my life, had drummed into me from an early age that this was the biggest tournament of them all. By the time I was fourteen, I was sharing with my friends the fantasy that I'd play here one day and win. So far, though, I'd played and lost, both times against Federer—in the final here the year before, and the year before that. The defeat in 2006 had not been so hard. I went out onto the court that time just pleased and grateful that, having just turned twenty, I'd made it that far. Federer beat me pretty easily, more easily than if I'd gone out with more belief. But my defeat in 2007, which went to five sets, left me utterly destroyed. I knew I could have done better, that it was not my ability or the quality of my game that had failed me, but my head. And I wept after that loss. I cried incessantly for half an hour in the dressing room. Tears of disappointment and self-recrimination. Losing always hurts, but it hurts much more when you had your chance and threw it away. I had beaten myself as much as Federer had beaten me; I had let myself down and I hated that. I had flagged mentally, I had allowed myself to get distracted; I had veered from my game plan. So stupid, so unnecessary. So obviously, so exactly what you must not do in a big game.

My uncle Toni, the toughest of tennis coaches, is usually the last person in the world to offer me consolation; he criticizes me even when I win. It is a measure of what a wreck I must have been that he abandoned the habit of a lifetime and told me there was no reason to cry, that there would be more Wimbledon and more Wimbledon finals. I told him he didn't understand, that this had probably been my last time here, my last chance to win it. I am very, very keenly aware of how short the life of a professional athlete is, and I cannot bear the thought of squandering an opportunity that might never come again. I know I won't be happy when my career is over, and I want to make the best of it while it lasts. Every single moment counts—that's why I've always trained very hard—but some moments count for more than others, and I had let a big one pass in 2007. I'd missed an opportunity that might never come again; just two or three points here or there, had I been more focused, would have made

never come again, just two or three points here or there, had I been more focused, would have made all the difference. Because victory in tennis turns on the tiniest of margins. I'd lost the last and fifth set 6–2 against Federer, but had I just been a little more clearheaded when I was 4–2 or even 5–1 down, had I seized my four chances to break his serve early on in the set (instead of seizing up, as I did), or had I played as if this were the first set and not the last, I could have won it.

There was nothing Toni could do to ease my grief. Yet he turned out, in the end, to be right. Another chance had come my way. Here I was again, just one year later. I was determined now that I'd learn the lesson from that defeat twelve months earlier, that whatever else gave way this time, my head would not. The best sign that my head was in the right place now was the conviction, for all the nerves, that I would win.

At dinner with family and friends and team members the night before, at the house we rent when we play at Wimbledon, across the road from the All England Club, mention of the match had been off-limits. I didn't expressly prohibit them from raising the subject, but they all understood well enough that, whatever else I might have been talking about, I was already beginning to play the match in the space inside my head that, from here on in until the start of play, should remain mine alone. I cooked as I do most nights during the Wimbledon fortnight. I enjoy it, and my family thinks it's good for me. Something else to help settle my mind. That night I grilled some fish and served some pasta with shrimps. After dinner I played darts with my uncles Toni and Rafael, as if this were just another evening at home in Manacor, the town on the Spanish island of Mallorca where I have always lived. I won. Rafael claimed later that he'd let me win, so I'd be in a better frame of mind for the final, but I don't believe him. It's important for me to win, at everything. I have no sense of humor about losing.

At a quarter to one I went to bed, but I couldn't sleep. The subject we had chosen not to talk about was the only one on my mind. I watched films on TV and only dozed off at four in the morning. At nine I was up. It would have been better to have slept a few hours more, but I felt fresh, and Rafael Maymó, my physical therapist, who is always in attendance, said it made no difference—that the excitement and the adrenaline would carry me through, however long the game went on.

For breakfast I had my usual. Some cereal, orange juice, a milk chocolate drink—never coffee—another favorite from home, bread sprinkled with salt and olive oil. I'd woken up feeling good. Tennis is so much about how you feel on the day. When you get up in the morning, any ordinary morning, sometimes you feel bright and healthy and strong; other days you feel muggy and fragile. That day I felt as alert and nimble and full of energy as I ever had.

It was in that mood that at ten thirty I crossed the road for my final training session at Wimbledon Court 17, close to the Centre Court. Before I started hitting, I lay down on a bench, as I always do, and Rafael Maymó—who I nickname "Titín"—bent and stretched my knees, massaged my legs, my shoulder, and then gave special attention to my feet. (My left foot is the most vulnerable part of my body, where it hurts most often, most painfully.) The idea is to wake up the muscles and reduce the possibility of injuries. Usually I'd hit balls for an hour in the warm-up before a big match, but this time, because it was drizzling, I left it after twenty-five minutes. I started gently, as always, and gradually increased the pace until I ended up running and hitting with the same intensity as in a match. I trained with more nerves than usual that morning, but also with greater concentration. Toni was there and so was Titín, and my agent, Carlos Costa, a former professional tennis player, who was there to warm up with me. I was more quiet than usual. We all were. No jokes. No smiles. When we wrapped up, I could tell, just from a glance, that Toni was not too happy, that he felt I hadn't been hitting the ball as cleanly as I might have. He looked reproachful—I've known that look all my life—and worried. He was right that I hadn't been at my sharpest just then, but I knew something that he didn't and never could, enormously important as he had been in the whole of my tennis career: physically,

and never could, enormously important as he had been in the whole of my tennis career: physically, I felt in perfect shape, save for a pain on the sole of my left foot that I'd have to have treated before I went on court, and inside I bore the single-minded conviction that I had it in me to win. Tennis against a rival with whom you're evenly matched, or whom you have a chance of beating, is all about raising your game when it's needed. A champion plays at his best not in the opening rounds of a tournament but in the semi-finals and finals against the best opponents, and a great tennis champion plays at his best in a Grand Slam final. I had my fears—I was in a constant battle to contain my nerves—but I fought them down, and the one thought that occupied my brain was that today I'd rise to the occasion.

I was physically fit and in good form. I had played very well a month earlier at the French Open where I'd beaten Federer in the final, and I'd played some incredible games here on grass. The two last times we'd met here at Wimbledon he'd gone in as the favorite. This year I still felt I wasn't the favorite. But there was a difference. I didn't think that Federer was the favorite to win either. I put my chances at fifty-fifty.

I also knew that, most probably, the balance of poorly chosen or poorly struck shots would stand close to fifty-fifty between us by the time it was all over. That is in the nature of tennis, especially with two players as familiar with each other's game as Federer and I are. You might think that after the millions and millions of balls I've hit, I'd have the basic shots of tennis sown up, that reliably hitting a true, smooth, clean shot every time would be a piece of cake. But it isn't. Not just because every day you wake up feeling differently, but because every shot is different; every single one. From the moment the ball is in motion, it comes at you at an infinitesimal number of angles and speeds, with more topspin, or backspin, or flatter, or higher. The differences might be minute, microscopic, but so are the variations your body makes—shoulders, elbow, wrists, hips, ankles, knees—in every shot. And there are so many other factors—the weather, the surface, the rival. No ball arrives the same as another; no shot is identical. So every time you line up to hit a shot, you have to make a split-second judgment as to the trajectory and speed of the ball and then make a split-second decision as to how, how hard, and where you must try and hit the shot back. And you have to do that over and over often fifty times in a game, fifteen times in twenty seconds, in continual bursts more than two, three, four hours, and all the time you're running hard and your nerves are taut; it's when your coordination is right and the tempo is smooth that the good sensations come, that you are better able to manage the biological and mental feat of striking the ball cleanly in the middle of the racket and aiming it true, at speed and under immense mental pressure, time after time. And of one thing I have no doubt: the more you train, the better your feeling. Tennis is, more than most sports, a sport of the mind; it is the player who has those good sensations on the most days, who manages to isolate himself best from his fears and from the ups and downs in morale a match inevitably brings, who ends up being world number one. This was the goal I had set myself during my three patient years as number two to Federer, and which I knew I would be very close to reaching if I won this Wimbledon final.

When the match itself would actually begin was another question. I looked up and saw patches of blue in the sky. But it was mostly overcast, with thick, dark clouds glowering on the horizon. The game was due to start in three hours, but there was every chance it might be delayed or interrupted. I didn't let that worry me. My mind was going to be clear and focused this time, whatever happened. No distractions. I was not going to allow any room for a repeat of my failure of concentration in 2007.

We left Court 17 at about eleven-thirty and went to the locker room, the one at the All England Club that's reserved for the top seeds. It's not very big, maybe a quarter of the size of a tennis court. But the tradition of the place is what gives it its grandeur. The wood panels, the green and purple colors of Wimbledon on the walls, the carpeted floor, the knowledge that so many greats—Laver, Borg, McEnroe, Connors, Sampras—have been there. Usually it's busy in there, but now that there were just

microwave, Collins, Sampras—have been there. Usually it's busy in there, but now that there were just the two of us left in the tournament, I was alone. Federer hadn't showed up yet. I had a shower, changed, and went up a couple of flights of stairs to have lunch in the players' dining room. Again, it was unusually quiet, but this suited me. I was withdrawing deeper into myself, isolating myself from my surroundings, settling into the routines—the inflexible routines—I have before each match and that continue right up to the start of play. I ate what I always eat. Pasta—no sauce, nothing that could possibly cause indigestion—with olive oil and salt, and a straight, simple piece of fish. To drink, water. Toni and Titín were at the table with me. Toni was brooding. But that's nothing new. Titín was placid. He is the person in whose company I spend the most time and he's always placid. Again, he spoke little. I think Toni might have grumbled about the weather, but I said nothing. Even when I'm not playing a tournament, I listen more than I talk.

At one o'clock, with an hour to go before the start of play, we went back down to the locker room. An unusual thing about tennis is that even in the biggest tournaments you share a locker room with your opponent. Federer was already in there, sitting on the wooden bench where he always sits, when I came in after lunch. Because we're used to it, there was no awkwardness. None that I felt, anyway. For a little while we were going to do everything we possibly could to crush each other in the biggest match of the year, but we're friends as well as rivals. Other rivals in sports might hate each other's guts even when they're not playing against each other. We don't. We like each other. When the game starts, or is about to start, we put the friendship to one side. It's nothing personal. I do it with everybody around me, even my family. I stop being the ordinary me when a game is on. I try and become a tennis machine, even if the task is ultimately impossible. I am not a robot; perfection in tennis is impossible, and trying to scale the peak of your possibilities is where the challenge lies. During a match you are in a permanent battle to fight back your everyday vulnerabilities, bottle up your human feelings. The more bottled up they are, the greater your chances of winning, so long as you've trained as hard as you play and the gap in talent is not too wide between you and your rival. The gap in talent with Federer existed, but it was not impossibly wide. It was narrow enough, even on his favorite surface in the tournament he played best, for me to know that if I silenced the doubts and fears, and exaggerated hopes, inside my head better than he did, I could beat him. You have to cage yourself in protective armor, turn yourself into a bloodless warrior. It's a kind of self-hypnosis, a game you play, with deadly seriousness, to disguise your own weaknesses from yourself, as well as from your rival.

To joke or chatter about football with Federer in the locker room, as we might before an exhibition match, would have been a lie he would have seen through immediately and interpreted as a sign of fear. Instead, we did each other the courtesy of being honest. We shook hands, nodded, exchanged the faintest of smiles, and stepped over to our respective lockers, maybe ten paces away from each other and then each pretended the other wasn't there. Not that I really needed to pretend. I was in that locker room and I wasn't. I was retreating into some place deep inside my head, my movements increasingly programmed, automatic.

Forty-five minutes before the game was scheduled to start I took a cold shower. Freezing cold water. I do this before every match. It's the point before the point of no return; the first step in the last phase of what I call my pre-game ritual. Under the cold shower I enter a new space in which my power and resilience grow. I'm a different man when I emerge. I'm activated. I'm in "the flow," a state sports psychologists describe as a state of alert concentration in which the body moves by pure instinct, like a fish in a current. Nothing else exists but the battle ahead.

Just as well, because the next thing I had to do was not something that, in ordinary circumstances, I would accept with calm. I went downstairs to a small medical room to have my doctor give me

would accept with calm. I went downstairs to a small medical room to have my doctor give me painkilling injection in the sole of my left foot. I'd had a blister and a swelling around one of the metatarsal bones down there since the third round. That part of the foot had to be put to sleep otherwise I simply couldn't have played—the pain would have been too great.

Then it was up to the locker room again and back to my ritual. I put on my earphones and listened to music. It sharpens that sense of flow, removes me further from my surroundings. Then Titín bandaged my left foot. While he did that, I put the grips on my rackets, all six I'd be taking on court. I always do this. They come with a black pre-grip. I roll a white tape over the black one, spinning the tape around and around, working diagonally up the shaft. I don't need to think about it, I just do it. As if in a trance.

Next I lay down on a massage table and Titín wrapped a couple of straps of bandage around my legs, just below the knees. I'd had aches there too, and the straps helped prevent soreness, or eased the pain if it came.

Playing sports is a good thing for ordinary people; sport played at the professional level is not good for your health. It pushes your body to limits that human beings are not naturally equipped to handle. That's why just about every top professional athlete has been laid low by injury, sometimes a career-ending injury. There was a moment in my career when I seriously wondered whether I'd be able to continue competing at the top level. I play through pain much of the time, but I think all elite sportspeople do. All except Federer, at any rate. I've had to push and mold my body to adapt it to cope with the repetitive muscular stress that tennis forces on you, but he just seems to have been born to play the game. His physique—his DNA—seems perfectly adapted to tennis, rendering him immune to the injuries the rest of us are doomed to put up with. They tell me he doesn't train as hard as I do. I don't know if it's true, but it would figure. You get these blessed freaks of nature in other sports too. The rest of us just have to learn to live with pain, and long breaks from the game, because a foot, a shoulder, or a leg has sent a cry for help to the brain, asking it to stop. That's why I need to have so much bandaging done before a match; that's why it's such a critical part of my preparations.

After Titín had done my knees, I stood up, got dressed, went to a basin, and ran water through my hair. Then I put on my bandanna. It's another maneuver that requires no thought, but I do it slowly and carefully, tying it tightly and very deliberately behind the back of my head. There's a practical point to it: keeping my hair from falling over my eyes. But it's also another moment in the ritual, another decisive moment of no return, like the cold shower, when my sense is sharpened that very soon I'll be entering battle.

It was nearly time to go on court. The adrenaline rush, creeping up on me all day, flooded my nervous system. I was breathing hard, bursting to release energy. But I had to sit still a moment long as Titín bandaged the fingers of my left hand, my playing hand, his moves as mechanical and silent as mine when I wrap the grips around my rackets. There's nothing cosmetic about this. Without the bandages, the skin would stretch and tear during the game.

I stood up and began exercising, violently—activating my explosiveness, as Titín calls it. Toni was on hand, watching me, not saying much. I didn't know whether Federer was watching me too. I just know he's not as busy as I am in the locker room before a match. I jumped up and down, ran in short bursts from one end of the cramped space to the other—no more than six meters or so. I stopped short, rotated my neck, my shoulders, my wrists, crouched down and bent my knees. Then more jumps, more mini sprints, as if I were alone in my gym back home. Always with my earphones on, the music pumping inside my head. I went to take a pee. (I find myself taking a lot of pees—nervous pees—just before a game, sometimes five or six in that final hour.) Then I came back, swung my arms high and

around my shoulders, hard

round my shoulders, hard.

Toni gestured, I took off the earphones. He said there was a rain delay, but for no more than fifteen minutes, they thought. I wasn't fazed. I was ready for this. Rain would have the same effect on Federer as it would on me. No need to be thrown off balance. I sat down and checked my rackets, felt the balance, the weight; pulled up my socks, checked that both were exactly the same height on my calves. Toni leaned close to me. "Don't lose sight of the game plan. Do what you have to do." I was listening but I was not listening. I know at these moments what I have to do. I think my concentration is good. My endurance too. Endurance: that's a big word. Keeping going physically, never letting up, and putting up with everything that comes my way, not allowing the good or the bad—the great shots or the weak ones, the good luck or the bad—to put me off track. I have to be centered, no distractions, only what I have to do in each moment. If I have to hit the ball twenty times to Federer's backhand, I'll hit it twenty times, not nineteen. If I have to wait for the rally to stretch to ten shots or twelve or fifteen to bide my chance to hit a winner, I'll wait. There are moments when you have a chance to go for a winning drive, but you have a 70 percent chance of succeeding; you wait five shots more and your odds will have improved to 85 percent. So be alert, be patient, don't be rash.

If I go up to the net, I hit it to his backhand, not to his drive, his strongest shot. Losing your concentration means going to the net and hitting the ball to his forehand, or omitting in a rush of blood to serve to his backhand—always to his backhand—or going for a winner when it's not time. Being concentrated means keeping doing what you know you have to do, never changing your plan, unless the circumstances of a rally or of the game change exceptionally enough to warrant springing a surprise. It means discipline, it means holding back when the temptation arises to go for broke. Fighting that temptation means keeping your impatience or frustration in check.

Even if you see what seems like a chance to put the pressure on and seize the initiative, keep hitting to the backhand, because in the long run, over the course of the whole game, that is what's wisest and best. That's the plan. It's not a complicated plan. You can't even call it a tactic, it's so simple. I play the shot that's easier for me and he plays the one that's harder for him—I mean, my left-handed drive against his right-handed backhand. It's just a question of sticking to it. With Federer what you have to do is keep applying pressure to the backhand, make him play the ball high, strike with the racket up where his neck is, put him under pressure, wear him down. Probe chinks that way in his game and he loses morale. Frustrate him, drive him close to despair, if you can. And when he is striking the ball well, as he most surely will, for you won't have him in trouble the whole time, not by any means, chase down every attempted winner of his, hit it back deep, make him feel he has to win the point two, three, four, five times to get to 15–love.

That's all I was thinking, in so far as you can say I was thinking at all, as I sat there fiddling with my rackets and socks and the bandages on my fingers, music filling my head, waiting for the rain to pass. Until an official with a blazer walked in and told us it was time. I sprang up, swung my shoulders, rolled my neck from side to side, did a couple more bursts up and down the locker room.

Now I was supposed to hand over my bag to a court attendant for him to carry it to my chair. It's part of Wimbledon protocol on Final Day. It doesn't happen anywhere else. I don't like it. It's a break from my routine. I handed over my bag but took out one racket. I led the way out of the locker room clutching the racket hard, along corridors with photographs of past champions and trophies behind glass frames, down some stairs and left and out into the cool English July air and the magical green of the Centre Court.

I sat down, took off my white track suit top, and took a sip from a bottle of water. Then from a second bottle. I repeat the sequence, every time, before a match begins, and at every break between games, until a match is over. A sip from one bottle, and then from another. And then I put the top

games, until a match is over. A sip from one bottle, and then from another. And then I put the two bottles down at my feet, in front of my chair to my left, one neatly behind the other, diagonally aimed at the court. Some call it superstition, but it's not. If it were superstition, why would I keep doing the same thing over and over whether I win or lose? It's a way of placing myself in a match, ordering my surroundings to match the order I seek in my head.

Federer and the umpire were standing at the foot of the umpire's chair, waiting for the coin toss. I leapt up, stood across the net from Federer, and began to run in place, to jump energetically up and down. Federer stood still, always so much more relaxed than me, in appearance anyway.

The last part of the ritual, as important as all the preparations that went before, was to look up, scan the perimeter of the stadium, and search for my family members among the blur of the Centre Court crowd, locking their exact coordinates inside my head. At the other end of the court to my left, are my father and mother and my uncle Toni; and diagonally across from them, behind my right shoulder, my sister, three of my grandparents and my godfather and godmother, who are also my uncle and aunt, plus another uncle. I don't let them intrude on my thoughts during a match—I don't ever let myself smile during a match—but knowing they are there, as they always have been, gives me the peace of mind on which my success as a player rests. I build a wall around myself when I play, but my family is the cement that holds the wall together.

I also looked in the crowd for the members of my team, the professionals I employ. Sitting alongside my parents and Toni, Carlos Costa, my agent and great friend, was there; and Benito Pérez Barbadillo, my press chief; and Jordi Robert—I call him "Tuts"—who is my handler at Nike; and Titín, who knows me most intimately of all and is like a brother to me. I could also see, in my mind's eye, my paternal grandfather and my girlfriend, María Francisca, whom I call Mary, watching me on television back home in Manacor, and the two other members of my team who were also absent, but not for that any less critical to my success: Francis Roig, my second coach, as clever a tennis man as Toni, but more easygoing, and my smart, intense physical trainer Joan Forcades who, like Titín, ministers as much to my mind as he does to my body.

My immediate family, my extended family, and my professional team (all of whom are practical, family themselves) stand in three concentric rings around me. Not only do they cocoon me from the dangerously distracting hurly-burly that comes with money and fame, together they create the environment of affection and trust I need to allow my talent to flower. Each individual member of the group complements the other; each plays his or her role in fortifying me where I am weak, boosting me where I am strong. To imagine my good fortune and success in their absence is to imagine the impossible.

Roger won the toss. He chose to serve. I didn't mind. I like my rival to start serving at the beginning of a match. If my head is strong, if his nerves are getting to him, I know I have a good chance of breaking him. I thrive on the pressure. I don't buckle; I grow stronger on it. The closer to the precipice I am, the more elated I feel. Of course I feel nerves, and of course the adrenaline and the blood are pumping so hard I can feel them from my temples to my legs. It's an extreme state of physical alertness, but conquerable. I did conquer it. The adrenaline beat the nerves. My legs didn't give way. They felt strong, ready to run all day. I was bristling. I was locked away in my solitary tennis world, but I'd never felt more alive.

We took our positions on the baselines and started warming up. That echoing silence again: *clack; clack; clack; clack*. Somewhere in my mind I took note, not for the first time, of just how fluent and easy Roger was in his movements; how poised. I'm more of a scrapper. More defensive, scrambling, recovering, on the brink. I know that's my image; I've watched myself often enough on videos. And it's a fair reflection of how I've played most of my career—especially when Federer has been my

it's a fair reflection of how I've played most of my career—especially when Federer has been my rival. But the good sensations remained. My preparations had worked well. The emotions that would assail and overwhelm me if I hadn't performed my ritual, if I hadn't systematically willed myself into shedding the stage fright the Centre Court would ordinarily induce, were under control, if not altogether gone. The wall I'd built around myself stood solid and tall. I'd achieved the right balance between tension and control, between nerves and the conviction I could win. And I was striking the ball hard and true: the ground strokes, the volleys, the smashes, and then the serves with which I wrapped up the sparring session before the real battle began. I went back to my chair, towed my arms, my face, sipped from each of my two bottles of water. I had a flashback to this stage in last year's final, just before play started. I said to myself one more time that I was ready to accept whatever problems came my way and that I would overcome them. Because winning this match was the dream of my life and I'd never been closer to reaching it and I might not have another chance again. Something else might fail me, my knee or my foot, my backhand or my serve, but my head would not. I might feel fear, the nerves might get the better of me at some point, but over the long haul my head, this time, was not going to let me down.

“Clark Kent and Superman”

The Rafa Nadal the world saw as he stormed onto the Centre Court lawn for the start of the 2008 Wimbledon final was a warrior, eyes glazed in murderous concentration, clutching his racket like a Viking his axe. A glance at Federer revealed a striking contrast in styles: the younger player in a sleeveless shirt and pirate's pantaloons, the older one in a cream, gold-embossed cardigan and classic Fred Perry shirt; one playing the part of the street-fighting underdog, the other suave and effortlessly superior.

If Nadal, veined biceps bulging, was a picture of elemental brute force, Federer—lean and lithe, fifteen years older at twenty-seven—was all natural grace. If Nadal, who had just turned twenty-two, was the head-down assassin, Federer was the aristocrat who strolled on court waving airily to the multitudes as if he owned Wimbledon, as if he were welcoming guests to a private garden party.

Federer's absent-minded, almost supercilious demeanor during the pre-match warm-up had hinted at the game's billing as a clash of titans; Nadal's thunderous intensity was a grunting caricature of a PlayStation action hero. Nadal hits his forehands as if he were firing a rifle. He cocks an imaginary gun, eyes the target, and pulls the trigger. With Federer—whose name means “trader in feathers” in old German—there is no sense of pause, no visible mechanism. He is all unforced liquidity. Nadal (the name means “Christmas” in Catalan or Mallorcan, a word with altogether more exuberant associations than “feather trader”), was the super fit, self-built sportsman of the modern era; Federer belonged to a type one might have seen in the 1920s, when tennis was an upper-crust pastime, a gentlemen's spirited exercise following afternoon tea.

That was what the world saw. What Federer saw was a snarling young pretender who threatened to usurp his tennis kingdom, stop his quest for a record of six consecutive Wimbledon victories, and displace him from the position he had held for four years as world number one. The effect Nadal had on Federer in the locker room before the match began had to be intimidating, otherwise, in the view of Francis Roig, Nadal's second coach, “Federer would have had to be made of stone.”

“It's the moment he gets up from the message table, after Marmé has finished putting on his

It's the moment he gets up from the massage table, after Maymó has finished putting on his bandages, that he becomes scary for his rivals," says Roig, himself a former tennis professional. "The simple action of wrapping on his bandanna is so frighteningly intense; his eyes, far away, seem to see nothing that's around him. Then, suddenly, he'll breathe deep and kick into life, pumping his legs up and down and then, as if oblivious to the fact that his rival is just a few paces away across the room, he'll let out a cry of 'Vamos! Vamos!' ['Let's go! Let's go!']. There's something animal about it. The other player may be thinking his own thoughts but he won't be able to help casting him a wary sideways glance—I've seen it again and again—and he'll be thinking, 'Oh, my God! This is Nadal who fights for every point as if it were his last. Today I'm going to have to be at the very top of my game, I'm going to have to have the day of my life. And not to win, just to have a chance.' "

The performance is all the more dramatic in Roig's eyes for the chasm that separates Nadal the competitor "with that extra something real champions have" from Nadal the private man. "You know that a part of him is wracked by nerves, you know that in everyday life he is an ordinary guy—an unfailingly decent and nice guy—who can be unsure of himself and full of anxieties, but you see him there in the locker room and suddenly he is transforming himself before your very eyes into a conqueror."

But the Rafael his family saw emerge from the locker room onto the Centre Court was neither a conqueror nor an axe-wielding gladiator, nor a fighting bull. They were terrified for him. They knew he was brilliant and they knew he was brave and, while they would never let on, they were a little bit in awe of him, but what they were seeing now, as the contest was about to begin, was something altogether more humanly fragile.

Rafael Maymó is Nadal's shadow, his most intimate companion on the grindingly long global tennis circuit. Trim, neat, towered over by his six-foot-one friend and employer, the thirty-three-year-old Maymó is a discreet, shrewd, serene Mallorcan from Nadal's hometown of Manacor. Since he started working as Nadal's physical therapist in September 2006, the two have developed a relationship that is practically telepathic. They barely need to talk to understand each other, but Maymó—or Titín, a nickname Nadal affectionately calls him, though the nickname has no meaning—has learned to tell when the mood is ripe for him to speak up, when to lend an ear. His role is not unlike that of a groom with a purebred racehorse. He rubs Nadal's muscles, tapes his joints, soothes his electric temperament. Maymó is Nadal's horse whisperer.

Maymó attends to Nadal's needs of the moment, psychological as well as physical, but he knows his limitations: he sees that these end where the family begins, for they are the pillar that sustains Nadal as a person and as an athlete. "You cannot stress too much the significance of the family on his life," Maymó says. "Or how united he and they are. Each of Rafa's triumphs is indivisibly a triumph of the whole family. The parents, the sister, the uncles, the aunt, the grandparents: they act on the principle of one for all and all for one. They savor his victories and suffer his defeats. They are like a part of his body, as if they were an extension of Rafa's arm."

So many of them show up so often at Nadal's matches, Maymó says, because they understand he is not 100 percent fully functional without them. "It's not a duty. They need to be there. They see no other choice in the matter. But they also feel that his chances of success will increase if, when he looks up at the crowds before a match begins, he sees them there. That is why when he wins a big victory, his instinct is to jump up into the stands to embrace them; or if any are back home watching on TV, the first thing he does back in the locker room is phone them."

His father, Sebastián Nadal, endured the most nerve-shredding experience of his life at the Centre Court on the day of the 2008 Wimbledon final. An image of what happened after the 2007 final, also against Federer, gnawed at Sebastián, as it did at the rest of the Nadal family. They all know he

against Federer, glowered at Sebastián, as it did at the rest of the Nadal family. They all knew how Rafael had reacted after that five-set loss. Sebastián had described to them the scene in the Wimbledon locker room: Rafael sitting on the floor of the shower for half an hour, a picture of despair, the water that pounded his head blending with the tears that rolled down his cheeks.

“I was so afraid of another defeat—not for me, but for Rafael,” said Sebastián, a big man who in his working life is a steady, calm entrepreneur. “I had that picture of him destroyed, utterly sunk, after the 2007 final, nailed inside my head and I did not want to have to see it again. And I thought, if he loses what can I do—what can I possibly do—to make it less traumatic for him? That was the game of Rafael’s life; that was the biggest day. I had a terrible time. I’ve never suffered so much.”

All those closest to Nadal shared Sebastián’s suffering that day; all saw the soft, vulnerable core hidden beneath the hard warrior shell.

Nadal’s sister, Maribel, a lanky and good-humored college student, five years younger than he, is amused by the gap between the perception the public has of her brother and her own knowledge of him. An unusually overprotective big brother, who calls her or texts ten times a day, wherever in the world he might be, he gets into a terrible flap, she says, at the slightest suggestion that she might be falling ill. “One time when he was way in Australia my doctor ordered me to have some tests done—nothing too serious—but in all the messages I exchanged with Rafael that was the one thing I didn’t mention. It would freak him out; it would risk throwing him completely off his game,” says Maribel, whose pride in her brother’s achievements does not blind her to “the truth,” expressed with teasing affection, that he is “a bit of a scaredy cat.”

Nadal’s mother, Ana María Parera, does not disagree. “He’s on top in the tennis world but, deep down, he is a super-sensitive human being full of fears and insecurities that people who don’t know him would scarcely imagine,” she says. “He doesn’t like the dark, for example, and he prefers to sleep with the light, or the TV, on. He is not comfortable with thunder and lightning either. When he was a child he’d hide under a cushion when that happened and, even now, when there’s a storm and you need to go outside to fetch something, he won’t let you. And then there are his eating habits, his loathing of cheese and tomato, and of ham, the national dish of Spain. I’m not as mad about ham myself as most people seem to be, but cheese? It is a bit peculiar.”

A fussy eater, he is also fussy behind the wheel of a car. Nadal enjoys driving, but maybe more in the make-believe world of his PlayStation, a constant companion when he is on tour, than in a real car. “He’s a prudent driver,” his mother says. “He accelerates, brakes, accelerates, brakes, and he is awfully careful about overtaking, however powerful his car might be.”

Maribel, his sister, is more blunt than his mother. She describes Rafael as “a terrible driver.” And she finds it funny too that, while loving the sea, he is also afraid of it. “He’s always talking about buying himself a boat. He loves fishing and Jet Skiing, but he won’t Jet Ski, nor will he swim, unless he can see the sand at the bottom. Nor will he ever dive off a high rock into the sea, as his friends do all the time.”

But all these foibles are nothing compared to his most persistent anxiety: that something bad might happen to his family. Not only does he panic at the merest suggestion of ill health in the family, he is forever fretting that an accident may befall them. “I like to light up the fireplace almost every night,” says his mother, at whose large, modern seafront home he still lives, in a wing of the house with his own bedroom, sitting room, and bathroom. “If he goes out, he’ll remind me before leaving to put out the fire before I go to sleep. And then he’ll phone three times from whatever restaurant or bar he is in to make sure I’ve done so. If I take the car to drive to Palma, only an hour away, he’ll beg me, always to drive slowly and carefully.”

Ana María, a wise and strong Mediterranean matriarch, never ceases to be amazed by the

Aida Maria, a wise and strong Mediterranean matriarch, never ceases to be amazed by the incoherence between how brave he is on the tennis court and how fear-ridden off it. “He is a straightforward kind of person, at first sight,” she says, “and also a very good person, but he is also full of ambiguities. If you know what he is like deep down, there are things about him that don’t quite square.”

That is why he has to arm himself with courage in the buildup to a big game, why he does what he does inside the locker room, willing himself into a personality change, bottling up his inherent fears and the nerves of the moment before releasing the gladiator within.

To the anonymous multitudes the man who emerged from the locker room onto the Centre Court for the start of the Wimbledon 2008 final was Superman; to his intimates, he was also Clark Kent. One was quite as real as the other; it might even be that one depended on the other. Benito Pérez Barbadillo, his press chief since December 2006, is as convinced that Nadal’s insecurities are the fuel of his competitive fire as he is that his family offers him the core of affection and support necessary to keep them in check. Pérez worked in the tennis world for ten years, as an official at the Association of Tennis Professionals before becoming Nadal’s press chief, and has known, in some cases very well, most of the top players of this period. Nadal, he believes, is different from the rest, as a player and as a man. “That unique mental strength and self-confidence and warrior spirit is the reverse side of the insecurity that drives him,” he says. All his fears—be they of the dark, of thunderstorms, of the sea, or of the disastrous disruption of his family life—obey a compelling need. “He is a person who needs to be in control of everything,” Pérez says, “but since this is impossible, he invests all he has in controlling the one part of his life over which he has most command, Rafa the tennis player.”

CHAPTER 2

THE DYNAMIC DUO

The First Point is always important, more so in a Wimbledon final. I'd felt good, I'd had those good sensations all morning; now I had to prove it to myself on court. Federer got in a good first serve wide to my backhand. I clawed the return back, better than he expected, deeper. He was preparing himself to move in behind that serve, using the forward momentum of the body to add power to his shot; but my return wrong-footed him, obliged him to shuffle back a couple of steps and hit the ball uncomfortably high on his forehand, on the back foot, limiting him to the power of his arm alone. It was a better return than I might have reasonably expected to a deep and difficult serve, one that immediately got him thinking, adjusting.

Break that easy rhythm of his, push him to the edge—that's what I have to do against Federer always. That's what Toni said right back the very first time I played him, in Miami, five years earlier. "You're not going to beat him on talent, on the brilliance of your shot-making. He'll always be more able to make a winner out of nothing than you. So you have to press him all the time, force him to play at the very limit of his abilities." Even though I won that first match of ours in Miami 6–3, 6–3, Toni was right. His serve is better than mine, his volley too; his forehand is probably more decisive than mine, his sliced backhand definitely is, and his positioning on the court is better too. There was a reason why he had been world number one for the previous five years and I had been number two for the previous three. Besides, Federer had won Wimbledon the last five years in a row. He practically owned the place. I knew I had to beat him mentally if I was to win. The strategy with Federer is never to let up, to try and wear him down from the first point to the last.

Federer struck that awkward first return of mine well to my backhand, and I tried to hit the ball back to his—applying the game plan right from the beginning—but he played around it, took it on the forehand. But now I had the initiative, I was in the center of the court, he'd had to push out wide. Then his forehand to my backhand, but he did not hit it too deep, allowing me to steer the ball straight and deep down the line, with no chance this time for him to play around the backhand. Federer angled the ball diagonally across to my forehand and I saw my chance to go for the winner. With him expecting to receive again on his backhand, I whipped the ball toward his forehand corner. The ball dropped just inside the baseline and spun, high and wide, beyond his reach.

A first point like that gives you confidence. You're feeling in tune with the surface, you feel you're controlling the ball and not that it is controlling you. On that point I had control of the ball in every one of the seven shots I hit. That gives you peace of mind. The nerves are working for you, not against you. It's what you need at the start of a Wimbledon final.

A funny thing about Wimbledon: despite the grandeur of the place and the weight of expectations it generates, of all tournaments it is the one where I am able to recreate the calmest sense of home. Instead of staying in some vast hotel suite—some of the places where they put me up make me laugh—they can be so needlessly extravagant—I live in a rented house across the road from the All England Club. A normal house, nothing fancy, but big enough—three floors—for my family, my team, and my friends to stay or come round for dinner. It gives this tournament a whole different feel from all the others. Instead of each of us being isolated in our hotel rooms we have a space we can all share, instead of having to drive through traffic to the courts in an official car, a two-minute walk and you're there. Being in a house also means we have to do our own food shopping. When I can, I go to the local

there. Being in a house also means we have to do our own food shopping. When I can, I go to the local supermarket to buy a few of the things that I eat far too much of, like Nutella chocolate, or potato chips, or olives. I am not a model of healthy eating, not for a professional athlete anyway. I eat like normal people do. If I feel like something, I'll have it. I'm especially mad about olives. In and of themselves they're OK, not like chocolate or chips. But my problem is the quantities I eat. My mother often reminds me of the time when, as a small child, I hid inside a cupboard and devoured a huge jar of olives, so many I vomited and was sick for days. The experience might have changed my attitude toward olives, but it didn't and never has. I crave olives and I'm not happy when I find myself somewhere where they are hard to find.

I found them in Wimbledon but I had to be careful over the timing of my trips to buy them. If I went when the supermarket was crowded I ran the risk of being mobbed for autographs. This is an occupational hazard that I accept and I try to take it with good grace. I can't say "no" to people who ask me for my signature, even to the rude ones who just stick a piece of paper in front of me and don't even say "please." I'll sign for them too, but what they won't get from me is a smile. So going to the supermarket in Wimbledon, while an enjoyable distraction from the tension of competition, does have its pressures. The only place where I can go shopping in peace—where I can do anything like a normal person—is my home town of Manacor.

The one soothing similarity between Wimbledon and Manacor is that house we all stay in and the pleasure of that short stroll to the courts, which reminds me of when I started playing tennis, at the age of four. We lived in an apartment opposite the town's tennis club, and I'd cross the road and train with my uncle Toni, the resident coach.

The clubhouse is what you'd expect in a town of barely forty thousand people. Medium-sized and dominated by a large restaurant with a terrace overhanging the courts, all clay. One day I joined in with a group of half a dozen children Toni was teaching. I liked it right from the start. I was already crazy about football, playing on the streets with my friends every spare moment my parents let me and anything that involved a ball was going to be fun. I liked football best. I liked being part of a team. Toni says that at first I found tennis boring. But being in a group helped, and it's what made possible everything that followed. If it had just been me and my uncle it would have been too suffocating. It wasn't till I was thirteen, when I knew my future was in tennis, that he began training me on my own.

Toni was tough on me right from the start, tougher than on the other children. He demanded a lot of me, pressured me hard. He'd use rough language, he'd shout a lot, he'd frighten me—especially when the other boys didn't turn up and it was just the two of us. If I saw I'd be alone with him when I arrived for training, I'd get a sinking feeling in my stomach. Miguel Ángel Munar, still today one of my best friends, would come there two or three times a week; me, four or five times. We'd play between one fifteen and two thirty, during our lunch break from school. And sometimes after school too, when I didn't have football practice. Miguel Ángel reminds me sometimes how Toni, if he saw my head was wandering, would belt the ball hard at me, not to hit me, but to scare me, to startle me into attention. At that age, as Miguel Ángel says, all our heads wandered, but mine was the one that was allowed to wander least. It was always me too that he got to pick up the balls, or more balls than the others, at the end of the training session; and it was me who had to sweep the courts when we were done for the day. Anyone who might have expected any favoritism on his part was mistaken. Quite the opposite. Miguel Ángel says he bluntly discriminated against me, knowing he could not have gotten away with it with him and the other boys but with me he could, because I was his nephew.

On the other hand, he always encouraged me to think for myself on the tennis court. I've seen reports in the news media saying that Toni forced me to play left handed, and that he did this because

reports in the news media saying that Toni forced me to play left-handed, and that he did this because it would make me harder to play against. Well, it's not true. It's a story the newspapers have made up. The truth is that I began playing when I was very small, and because I wasn't strong enough to hit the ball over the net, I'd hold the racket with both hands, on the forehand as well as the backhand. The one day my uncle said, "There are no professional players who play with two hands and we're not going to be the first ones, so you've got to change." So I did, and what came naturally to me was to play left-handed. Why, I can't tell. Because I write with my right hand, and when I play basketball or golf—or darts—I play right-handed too. But in football I play with my left; my left foot is much stronger than my right. People say this gives me an advantage on the double-handed backhand, and that may be right. Having more feeling, more control on both hands than the majority of players, helps to work in my favor, especially on cross-court shots, where a little extra strength helps. But this was definitely not something that Toni, in a moment of genius, thought up. It's dumb to imagine that he might have been able to force me to play in a way that did not come naturally to me.

But, yes, Toni was hard on me. My mother remembers that as a small child sometimes I'd come home from training crying. She'd try to get me to tell her what the matter was, but I preferred to keep quiet. Once I confessed to her that Toni had a habit of calling me a "mummy's boy," which pained her, but I begged her not to say anything to Toni, because that would only have made matters worse.

Toni never let up. Once I started playing competitive games, when I was seven, it got tougher. On a very hot day I went to a match without my bottle of water. I'd forgotten it back home. He could have gone and bought me one, but he didn't. So that I'd learn to take responsibility, he said. Why didn't I rebel? Because I enjoyed tennis, and enjoyed it all the more once I started winning, and because I was an obedient and docile child. My mother says I was too easy to manipulate. Maybe, but if I hadn't loved playing the game, I wouldn't have put up with my uncle. And I loved him too, as I still do and always will. I trusted him, and so I knew deep down that he was doing what he thought was best for me.

I trusted him to the point that, for several years, I believed the tall stories he would tell me about his sporting prowess, winning the Tour de France, for instance, or starring as a football player in Italy. I trusted him so implicitly when I was little that I even came to believe he had supernatural powers. It wasn't till I was nine years old that I stopped thinking he was a magician capable, among other things, of making himself invisible. During family get-togethers my father and grandfather would play along with him on this, pretend to me that they couldn't see him. So I came to believe that I could see him but other people couldn't. Toni even convinced me he had the power to make rain.

One day when I was seven, I was playing in a match against a boy of twelve. We didn't rate our chances very highly, so Toni told me before the game that if I went down 0–5, he'd bring on the rain, so the game would have to be called off. Well, as I saw it at the time, he lost faith too soon. Because the rain started falling when I was down 0–3. Then I won the next two games and suddenly I felt confident about my chances. So I went up to my uncle during the changeover at 2–3 and I said, "I think you can stop the rain now. I reckon I can beat this guy." A couple of games later the rain stopped, and in the end I lost 7–5. But two more years had to pass before I stopped believing my uncle was a rainmaker.

So there was fun and magic in my relationship with Toni, even if the prevailing mood when we were trained was stony and severe. And we had plenty of success. If he hadn't made me play without water that day, if he hadn't singled me out for especially harsh treatment when I was in that group of little kids learning the game, if I hadn't cried as I did at the injustice and abuse he heaped on me, maybe I would not be the player I am today. He always stressed the importance of endurance. "Endure, put up with whatever comes your way, learn to overcome weakness and pain, push yourself to breaking poi-

with whatever comes your way, learn to overcome weakness and pain, push yourself to breaking points, but never cave in. If you don't learn that lesson, you'll never succeed as an elite athlete": that was what he taught me.

Often I'd struggle to contain my rage. "Why is it me and not the other boys who have to sweep the court after training?" I'd ask myself. "Why do I have to pick up more balls than the other? Why do he scream at me that way when I hit the ball out?" But I learned to internalize that anger too, not to fret at the injustice, to accept it and get on with it. Yes, he might have gone too far, but it's worked very well for me. All that tension in every single coaching session, right from the very start, has allowed me today to face up to the difficult moments in a match with more self-control than might otherwise have been the case. Toni did a lot to build that fighting character people say they see in me on court.

But my values as a person and my way of being, which ultimately is what underlines my game, come from my father and mother. It's true that Toni has insisted I have to behave well on court, set an example, never throw a racket to the floor in anger, something I have never, ever done. But—and this is the point—if I had been brought up differently at home, I might not have paid him any attention. My parents always imposed a lot of discipline on me. They were very proper about things like table manners—"Don't talk with your mouth full!" "Sit up straight!"—about the need to be courteous and polite to everybody—say "good morning" and "good afternoon" to people we meet, shake hands with everybody. Both my parents and, for that matter, my uncle Toni have always said that, never mind the tennis, their biggest desire was that I should grow up to be "good people." My mother says that if I were not, if I behaved like a spoiled brat, she would still love me, but she'd be too embarrassed to travel halfway around the world to watch me play. They drummed into me the importance of treating everybody with respect from an early age. Whenever our team lost a football match, my father insisted that I had to go up to the players of the rival team afterward and congratulate them. I had to say to each one of them something like "Well done, champ. Very well played." I didn't like it. I felt miserable when we lost, and my face must have showed that my heart wasn't in the words I was saying. But I knew I'd get into trouble if I didn't do as my father said, so I did it. And the habit stayed with me. It comes naturally to me to praise an opponent after he's beaten me, or even if I've won, if I deserves it.

For all the discipline, I had an amazingly happy and warm family life as a child, and maybe that's why I was able to put up with the harsh treatment I received from Toni. One balanced the other out because above all what my parents gave me was an incredible feeling of security. My father, Sebastián, is the oldest of my grandparents' five children and I was the first grandchild. This meant that I was fussed over by my three uncles and my aunt, who had no children of their own then, as well as by my grandparents, right from my very first days. They tell me that I was the family mascot, the "favorite toy." My father says that when I was only fifteen days old, he and my mother would leave me to stay overnight at my grandparents', where my uncles and my aunt still lived. When I was a baby and then later when I was a child of two and three, they'd take me with them to the bar where they met their friends, chatted, and played cards or billiards or Ping Pong. Mixing in adult company became the most natural thing in the world for me. I have unforgettably warm memories of those times. My aunt Marilén, who is also my godmother, would take me to the beach in Porto Cristo, just ten minutes away from Manacor, which is inland, and I'd lie on her tummy, dozing in the sun. With my uncles I'd play football in the corridor of the apartment, or down in the garage. One of my uncles, Miguel Ángel, was a professional footballer. He played for Mallorca, and later for Barcelona and for Spain. When I was very small, they'd take me along to the stadium to watch him play. For all the haranguing I got from Toni, I am not one of those athletes whose life stories are all about overcoming dark beginnings.

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