



S W I S S

If geography is destiny, then Roger Federer was fated to be what he is—multilingual, laid-back, impossibly polite. He is, in short, Swiss. But there is nothing of the quirkiness of the cuckoo clock in Federer, no thrill like the first sight of the Alps. Except in his tennis. 🌐 The reigning Wimbledon and U.S. Open champion is from Basel, an industrial city of 450,000 split in two by the slate-gray waters of the Rhine. In the country's second-largest city, bikes are left unlocked on the streets, the gelato man in the Steinenvorstadt leaves his glass-fronted cart out overnight, and trams and cars happily



MISSED

WHAT DOES ROGER FEDERER—MAYBE THE GREATEST TENNIS PLAYER OF ALL TIME—HAVE TO DO TO GET A LITTLE HOMETOWN LOVE?



BY LINDSAY BERRA

yield to pedestrians who wander into traffic. The city juts up between France and Germany, with both borders so close that a wrong turn in either direction can lead to an unexpected encounter with passport control. Walk down the street and you'll hear French, German, Swiss-German, even corporate English. This is Roger Federer's city.

To see where he lives, hop the yellow No. 10 tram in front of Theater Basel and ride it 10 stops to Oberwil. It's where Federer shares a flat with his

whom many consider the best player of all time—thinks Federer could be the best ever. "Roger is capable of anything," Laver says. "He can achieve whatever he wants to achieve."

Why? Because the components of Federer's game come together like no one else's in the history of the sport. The forehand, the backhand, the serve, the footwork, the mental attitude. There is no weakness, no chink in his armor. He owns Wimbledon; he won there as a Junior, won both last year and the



girlfriend, Mirka Vavrinec. Somewhere. "What? Who? I don't know him," says the woman who runs the kiosk at the tram stop. (You'll need to speak a little German.) You move on to some boys on dirt bikes. They just giggle and pedal away. Three women leaving church point down the hill, away from the village center, and say, "Go that way." A man walking with his pigtailed daughter points up the hill and says, "He's up there." The women in the bakery tell you he lives very far away, you couldn't possibly walk, and would you like a ham sandwich? The men at the bus stop say he lives very close by, but they don't know where, so you head back to the tram stop, defeated, feeling as if you've just had a conversation with The straw-for-brains Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*.

There must be some mistake. Federer is a local hero. Surely, he can't go anywhere without getting mobbed, without hearing the cheers of an entire nation. At least that's the way it should be. Last season, Federer posted a 74-6 match record and won 13 consecutive finals and three Grand Slam tournaments. No man has swept all four Slam events since Rod Laver did it in 1969, and Laver—

year before. Ancient history, he says: "I need to work on my drop shots." Basel's most famous son may not think he's anything special, but he's achieved a dominance over his sport akin to that of guys such as Tiger Woods and Barry Bonds. So, someone has to be impressed. Let's try again.

Head back to the Freiestrasse, Basel's premier shopping street. It runs south through the city, starting from the bright-red, 16th-century Rathaus (town hall) in the Marketplatz. At No. 51, Kost Sport houses three stories of sporting goods. On the bottom floor, there's a skimpy display of tennis gear staffed by a woman with a blond bob. Is she a Federer fan? No. Is she a tennis fan? No. But she's in charge of the tennis section? Yes. She thinks her co-worker in the white T-shirt might be a Federer fan. He isn't. He stopped caring about tennis when he dropped it in favor of football (a.k.a. soccer) at age 12. And, like most Swiss, he also likes snowboarding, skiing and ice hockey better than tennis. He nods at a colleague with spiky hair and zippered jeans. But he's not a Federer fan either.

A goateed man wanders over from the sneaker section. I think there's someone upstairs who likes

Federer, he says, and runs to fetch her. He returns with a plump, middle-aged woman with curly brown hair and glasses. "I just love Roger Federer," she says in Swiss-German. A customer with a British mom translates, gushing more than necessary for effect. "My son's girlfriend went to school with Roger's sister." Oh, well. It'll have to do.

Keep your chin up, though. There is one place where Federer fans are bound to be. Hop back on the tram, the No. 6 this time, and get off at Allschwilerplatz. Walk a few blocks south down St. Galler-Ring, lined with cookie-cutter row houses and potted plants, until the quaint monotony gives way to a hedge-rimmed square of clay as red as the Rathaus. This is the Old Boys Tennis Club, where Roger first learned to swing a racket, and where tonight he will be playing an exhibition match against boyhood friend and rival Marco Chiudinelli. The grandstand at Old Boys holds only 1,500 people, but it has been expanded to hold 2,500 for the expected crush.

They shouldn't have bothered: the stands are only two-thirds full. Federer toys with Chiudinelli, allowing him to return a few shots in every point while the two bark good-natured insults at each other that make the "crowd" giggle. Then, whenever Roger has had enough, he hits his forehand with a bit more authority or rolls his wrist a bit farther over his backhand, and leaves Chiudinelli helpless, sliding through a puff of red dust. You expect to hear a roar from the fans—hometown greatness should be rewarded only with a standing O, right?—but what they give sounds more like a golf-clap.

"WE'VE HAD TO ADJUST TO ROGER'S GAME JUST TO BE ABLE TO COMPETE WITH HIM."

After the match, Federer is hustled to the far end of the court by the blue-blazered bunch that runs Old Boys. There, they unveil a new sign, renaming Court 1 "Roger Federer Center Court." Finally, some props. But, as usual, Federer looks a little perplexed as his achievements are read off in grocery-list fashion, as if he doesn't understand the fuss. He toes the red clay at his feet and adjusts his trademark

headband to keep his thick brown hair from falling over his eyes. Repeatedly, he thanks the blue blazers and the remainder of the crowd in Swiss-German before hustling off to the shower: "Merci, merci, merci." But it's not pronounced like it is in French. In Swiss-German—they prefer *merci* to *danke*—it sounds more like "mercy."

"The Swiss are shy people," says a journalist who writes for *Blick*, Switzerland's largest newspaper. "They get enthusiastic only if it comes to football and if they get drunk." And because Roger himself is so typically Swiss, he dismisses the endless comparisons to McEnroe, Laver and Borg. "Everyone talks about me being the best ever, and I think to myself, you cannot be the best ever at 23," he says. "It's not a goal to be the best ever. We'll never know who the best ever is. Different eras, different players, technology changes, you just cannot compare. Every great has something special, but it doesn't matter. I am not great."

But if the judgment of one's peers counts, Federer is absolutely wrong. At the Pacific Life Open in Indian Wells on March 11, the other Top 10 players on the men's tour—Marat Safin, Lleyton Hewitt, Andy Roddick, Andre Agassi, Guillermo Coria, Gaston Gaudio, Carlos Moya, David Nalbandian and Tim Henman—appeared at Federer's behest, with the proceeds benefiting victims of December's tsunami. Even a few women—Kim Clijsters, Amelie Mauresmo, Elena Dementieva—showed up to give support to the world No. 1 and his charity event. So, guys, is Federer great, or what?

Safin: "Roger brought tennis to a much higher level. We've all had to adjust to his game just to be able to compete with him."

Henman: "Roger makes it look simple, and that's the sign of a great champion in any sport."

Agassi: "Roger's play separates him from the rest."

AT THE 2004 AUSTRALIAN, FEDERER HELD SAFIN TO THREE ACES IN THE FINAL, AFTER THE RUSSIAN HAD 33 IN THE SEMIS.

That's not empty praise. Federer's forehand is the most respected shot in the game. The simple weight of it makes even the worthiest opponents flinch, but it's not only velocity that makes it deadly, it's the spin, rhythm, timing, placement and variety. It comes short or long, flat or loopy, sliced at angles usually reserved for higher math. Federer uses his serve like a pitcher who can throw four pitches for strikes. It can be a curveball or a splitter or a changeup, keeping opponents off balance, or a modest fastball that produces aces with

placement. His backhand, once thought to be a weakness, has developed into a consistent weapon, one-handed and versatile.

Federer has the footwork of a ballet dancer, but what really elevates his game is the tap-dancing he does in his head. His anticipation is uncanny. He seems to know where his opponent will be before he makes his move and picks a shot that will leave him scrambling. "Roger has a way of exposing his opponent's weaknesses and staying away from their strengths," says U.S. Davis Cup captain Patrick McEnroe. "And in a game that is all about matchups, Federer's game matches up against anyone's, because he can do everything so well. He can adapt his style of play, even change it midmatch, to take advantage of his opponent."

At last year's Australian Open, Federer's artful returns held Safin to just three aces in the final,



Federer's success has been so complete that, prior to his early June semifinal loss to a red-hot Rafael Nadal in the French, he had lost to a player in the Top 10 just once since October 2003. And when Safin managed to avenge that 2004 loss by defeating Federer in the semis of January's Australian, it took four hours 28 minutes, five sets,



He owns Wimbledon and had a 74-6 record last season, but you won't hear Federer blowing his own horn.

one tiebreaker and the battle of his life.

But if it takes sheer brilliance, absolute perfection and nearly inhuman athleticism to defeat Federer—and sometimes that isn't enough—why isn't the world, or at least his tiny part of it, showing him a little more love?

What was it that journalist said? The Swiss get excited only about football and beer. So, find a bar. Any bar. That one on the corner will do. Today is a big day, with FC Basel, the Swiss League leader, taking on its rival, FC Zurich. With kickoff minutes away, the bar is overflowing with sports fans who may have already had enough liquid inspiration to wax poetic on the biggest international sports star their country has ever produced. Heck, being a rabid FC Basel fan himself, even Federer is on the field for today's kickoff.

So, nudge your way to the bar, order up a Swiss-brewed Klosterbräu and ask your neighbor if he sees Federer on the TV screen. Who? Roger Federer. You mean the tennis player? Yes, that's him up there. What's he doing at a football game? No matter, are you a fan? Of football, yes. Of Federer, no. Try the bartender. He's French, and his name is Philippe. "Federer's been in here a few times," he says. "He just sat at the bar and ate. Nobody bothered him. I'm not sure anyone even noticed him."

Maybe it's just a Swiss thing. Maybe the good people of Basel aren't that impressed with Federer simply because Federer isn't that impressed with Federer. Maybe if Federer accomplishes his goals—a third consecutive Wimbledon, a second straight year-end No. 1 finish—he'll finally turn some heads, including his own.

Or then again, maybe not. ☹️