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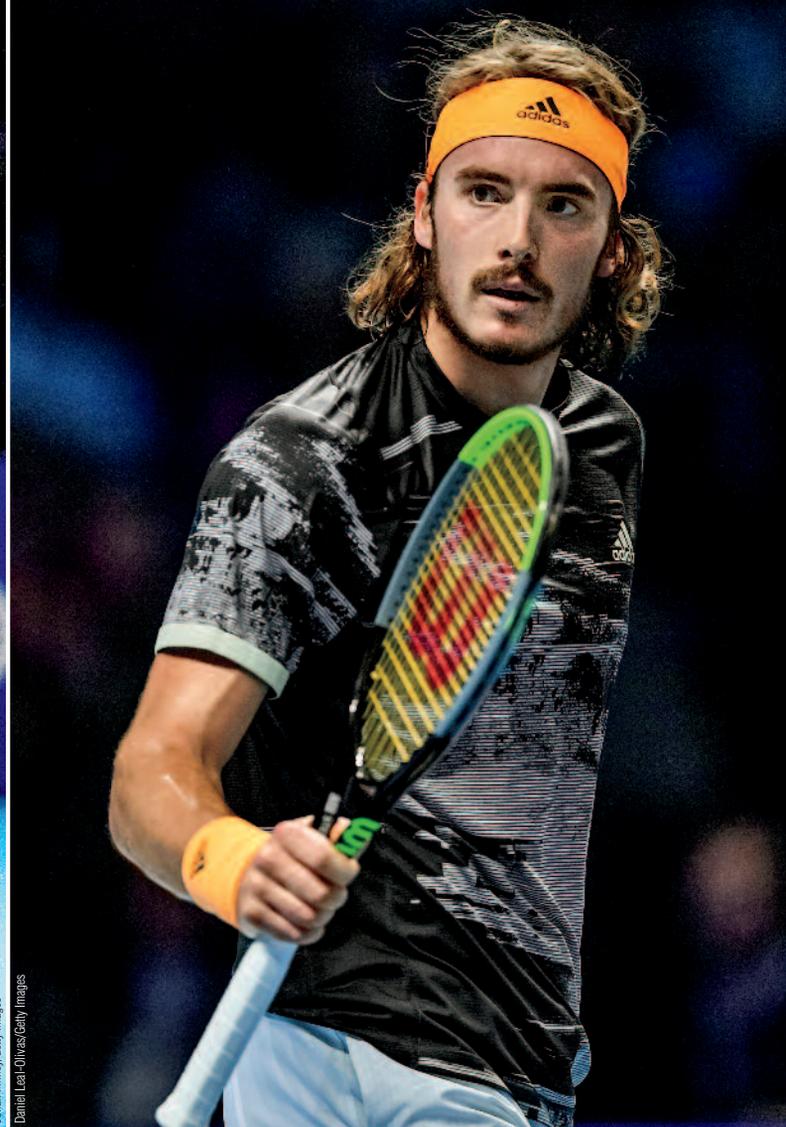
Challengers are fortifying their attack on the three kings of men's tennis, but exactly who rules the game is up for grabs.

**BY ANDREW LAWRENCE**

Rafael Nadal is a creature of many habits. He never steps on court for a match without a racquet in hand. In between points, he takes great care not to step on any of the boundary lines. During changeovers, he fiddles with his water bottles like a ham radio operator hunting for extraterrestrial frequencies. And he can't seem to uncork a serve until he's wedgie-free. For the "Web M.D.-lusional" among us, these tics might warrant a special diagnosis—OCD, at least. For Nadal, though, it's all mere pretext for maybe the most endearing of his many habits—his habit of giving victory speeches.

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Rafael Nadal (left) earned his fifth year-end No. 1 ranking in 2019, matching Roger Federer (right) and Novak Djokovic in that feat. With the 2019 US Open crown, Nadal also began 2020 just one major singles championship behind Federer's record total of 20.



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Last year's ATP Finals was the site for yet another routine performance for the Spaniard. After surviving a tense clash against the Greek upstart Stefanos Tsitsipas, Nadal gripped The O2 arena public address microphone on court and acknowledged his fans, his team and the tour before sinking his incisors into a giant chalice. Throughout, he exuded the thoughtfulness, humility and class that he always does on stages like this. No one seemed to mind that his moment of self-indulgence had come in the round-robin stage of the tournament, not the championship. His victory had sealed the year-end No. 1 ranking, a colossal achievement few saw coming—not even him, despite his great powers of anticipation. “Honestly, after all the things I went through in my career in terms of injuries, I never thought that at the age of 33½ I would have this trophy in my hands again,” he said.

Just as impressive: 32-year-old Novak Djokovic and 38-year-old Roger Federer finished right after Nadal on the rankings board, marking the eighth time in 13 seasons they were confirmed as the world's best tennis players. Ordinarily, that distinction—which, among other things, factors a staggering eighth Grand Slam lockout for the group (with Djokovic and Nadal splitting every other 2019 title)—would have been observers convinced of the Big 3's dominion over men's tennis stretching into a third decade. But heading into this season, more than few went on record to pronounce 2020 as, perhaps, the beginning of the end for the game's strongest monopoly. Again. In fact, even those at the very top

**Novak Djokovic (left) has outpaced Roger Federer, winning 15 majors to five during the past decade. Meanwhile, Stefanos Tsitsipas (right) shook up tour hierarchy by taking the 2019 ATP Finals.**

entertained this discussion. “Does it feel like this year might be the best year yet?” Federer wondered at the 2019 ATP Finals. “Possibly.”

The speculation, as much as it has recurred every single year for the past decade, isn't entirely unfounded this time. Really. Beyond the Big 3, five of the seven other players who began 2020 in the Top 10 are under the age of 30 (up from just three in 2018). The old man in that group is Dominic Thiem, a 26-year-old Austrian and two-time French Open finalist who is slowly expanding his game beyond the *terre battue*. “His dedication and professionalism and hard work ethics is fantastic,” Djokovic gushed. Thiem began the year at No. 4.

Behind Thiem was Daniil Medvedev, the Russian whose breathtaking run of six consecutive finals appearances included berths in the championship match of three straight Masters 1000 events and an arch turn as the 2019 US Open's smirking bracket buster.

Alexander Zverev, the German wunderkind who rallied from a poor first-half start in 2019 to make it back to the ATP Finals as defending champion, and Matteo Berrettini, a US Open semifinalist whose round-robin win over Thiem in the ATP Finals marked the first-ever victory by an Italian at the tournament, also carry the banner for the twentysomething group chipping away at the Big 3's Grand Slam fortress.

But the biggest threat in this group of challengers could well be the aforementioned Tsitsipas. A poised all-court player who tempers an aggressive serve and forehand with a dead gorgeous one-handed



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backhand, Tsitsipas raised his game after a breakthrough 2018 season that saw him reach the fourth round at Wimbledon and claim titles at Stockholm and the Next Gen ATP Finals on the way to being named the tour's most improved player. In 2019, he was a semifinalist at the Australian Open, reached the fourth round at Roland Garros and added three titles to his résumé, the last one coming in the year-end ATP Finals at the expense of Thiem—who, three years earlier, had drawn Tsitsipas (then a top-ranked junior) as a hitting partner for the tournament. "I believe I'm really close on being crowned a Grand Slam champion," Tsitsipas said in the afterglow of his best win to date. "I know these are strong words that I say, but I do feel like I belong there."

Of course feeling a sense of belonging is one thing. Displacing the Big 3 is quite another. Before those all-court overlords came along, multiplayer monopolies in the men's game ebbed and flowed. Rod Laver, Ken Rosewall and John Newcombe loomed largest at the dawn of the Open Era. Björn Borg, Jimmy Connors and Guillermo Vilas ruled the '70s. By the '80s Vilas was out and John McEnroe was in. Then the fearsome foursome of Mats Wilander, Ivan Lendl, Stefan Edberg and Boris Becker came along midway through the decade and established a new world order. By the '90s the United States emerged as a global superpower behind Pete Sampras, Andre Agassi and Jim Courier.

On average these all-time rivals would own the game for seven

**Daniil Medvedev (left), the 2019 US Open runner-up, and Dominic Thiem (right), a two-time French Open finalist, began 2020 among the leading contenders to claim their first Grand Slam titles this season.**

years—a decade, tops—before conceding to a greedier generation. But today's court kings have proven to be a remarkably obstinate bunch. From the time Djokovic kicked off the Big 3 epoch with a maiden major championship at the 2008 Australian Open—at which time Federer already had 12 majors and Nadal, 3—up to the 2020 season, there were just four first-time men's Grand Slam singles winners (compared with

17 in the women's game and 26 on the PGA Tour over that same span). At the end of 2019, as Nadal joined Federer and Djokovic in the five-timers wing of the year-end No. 1 club, three major finalists—Tomas Berdych, David Ferrer and Marcos Baghdatis—called time on their estimable careers, after enduring years of

heartache and disappointment at the hands of the Big 3.

That the Big 3 keep dominating past age 30, while managing family responsibilities and a slew of multimillion dollar side hustles, is as much a testament to their shrewd load management—17 ATP events each for 2019 were the fewest played among Top 10 players—as the urgency with which they evolve their games to stay ahead of their challengers.

There's something to be said for experience, too. For all of the inroads these young guns have made against the old guard in three-setters last year—Thiem weathered Federer in the Indian Wells final, Medvedev toppled Djokovic in the Cincinnati semis, Tsitsipas knocked out Nadal in the Madrid semis—there still appears to be no getting around the Big 3's uncanny knack for coasting through the first week of



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majors and for drawing on vast reserves to get them through marathon five-setters in later rounds.

What's more, two of the four men who have taken majors off of the Big 3—Stan Wawrinka and Andy Murray—are showing signs of life again after suffering career-threatening knee and hip injuries, respectively. Wawrinka climbed back into the Top 16 after going walkabout for more than a year and a half, while Murray, a former world No. 1 who was contemplating retirement at points, won his first title in two seasons last fall at Antwerp, after falling out of the Top 800. Even if they don't fully reprise their monopoly busting form, Murray and Wawrinka are among those who could very well stunt this next generation's success anyway.

In addition to those two big shots, the new kids will have their share of battles to pick from elsewhere in the Top 50. On one side, there are cagey veterans such as 33-year-old Gael Monfils, who had one of the best seasons of his career in 2019, and Grigor Dimitrov, who appears ascendant after a 2019 plunge to No. 78 in the world. On the other, there are more rising stars from Generation Next, like 19-year-old Felix Auger-Aliassime of Canada, who reached finals in three ATP events last year, and Australia's Alex de Minaur, who collected his first three titles in 2019. "Other players' chances increase not because we're getting worse," Federer noted, "but because they're getting better, I believe."

And then, of course, if Tsitsipas & Co. are lucky enough to make it

through that gauntlet, they'll likely still have to outwit some member of the Big 3, whether the Maestro himself, a living legend and fresh face of Swiss currency (Federer has his own coin now) who looks as fresh and fit as ever and had about as good a 2019 as he could have without bagging a major; or Djokovic, the youngest and fiercest member of the Big 3, who still plays as if he has something to prove; or Nadal, who trailed a then top-ranked Djokovic by 3,395 rankings points in late April and considered shutting down for the season to rest a nagging knee injury before rallying to the top of the table. (For an encore Nadal led Spain to a sixth Davis Cup title on home soil.) Or, even worse: The new kids have to contend with two of the Big 3.

All the while the race for tennis immortality draws ever tighter, with Djokovic and Nadal having gained serious ground on the relatively static Federer, whose lead once seemed insurmountable, at 20 majors. And given the intensity and stakes of this particular fight, well, who knows when either one of these ageless alphas will let up?

"For us young guys, it's all about time," Tsitsipas said in London. "We'll have to beat them or wait for them."

It could be a while, kiddo. Old habits are so hard to break, after all. ●

**Andy Murray (left) and Stan Wawrinka (right), the only men to claim multiple majors alongside the Big 3, were resurgent in 2019, which makes them threats to the new generation of contenders, too.**

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