

## Coming of Age

With a newly mature outlook and game, a fit, focused Novak Djokovic won his second Australian Open | BY ANDREW LAWRENCE

**N**ovak Djokovic gave the capacity crowd at Rod Laver Arena what it wanted: the racket from his hand, the shirt off his back, the shoes off his feet—but, sorry, not the insoles. “That’s the secret to my footwork,” he said with a wide smile.

Aside from that moment of nearly naked frivolity, Djokovic was all business after claiming his second Grand Slam singles

title at the Australian Open on Sunday. He larded a sober acceptance speech with tributes to fifth-ranked Brit Andy Murray—whom he embraced at net after a 6–4, 6–2, 6–3 demolition in the final—to the victims of recent floods in Australia and to the people of his homeland, Serbia, who “are trying every day to present our country in the best possible way.” He flashed a thumbs-up to his box, which included his uncle Goran; his longtime coach, Marian Vajda; and fellow Serbian tennis star Ana Ivanovic. Djokovic also invited the tournament’s ball kids to pose for pictures with him and the Norman Brookes Challenge Cup. He acted, well, like he had been there before.

But this postmatch celebration was light years from the displays of immaturity that marked Djokovic’s first title run in Melbourne, in 2008. His impersonations of other players (his Maria Sharapova was devastating), his love-hate relationship with the crowd (he called out Australian fans for wanting his opponent in the final, France’s exuberant Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, “to win more”) and the antics of his aggressively partisan parents and brothers (who memorably donned matching white tracksuits that spelled out his nickname, NOLE) made people both crack up and cringe.



“It’s not always easy to find your identity when you’re in the spotlight,” says Kim Clijsters, whose 3–6, 6–3, 6–3 victory over China’s Li Na in the women’s final last Saturday offered another coming-of-age story. “It’s nice to see Novak grow from a boy into a man.”

Djokovic’s growth spurt couldn’t have come at a worse time for Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal. For Federer, the defending champion in Melbourne, this Aussie Open represented a senior moment: The world No. 2 is pushing 30, he’s married with two kids, and after winning 16 majors, he has nothing more to prove; his annihilation by Djokovic in the semifinals meant he holds none of the four Grand Slam titles for the first time since 2003, and he hasn’t

made a major final in a year. The top-ranked Nadal is only 24, a year older than Djokovic and Murray, but it looks as if he’s about to endure the same kind of annus horribilis that Federer did in ’08: A virus weakened Nadal before the tournament began, and a muscle tear during his quarterfinal loss to fellow Spaniard David Ferrer prevented him from becoming the first man since Laver in 1969 to hold all four Slam titles at the same time and raised old questions about the price his brutal style of play exacts on his body.

As for Djokovic, all the old questions seem to have been answered. His game is improved, his emotions are under control, his confidence is off the charts. Tennis’s clown prince is finally ready to be one of its three kings. “Maybe [Federer and Nadal are] not as dominant as they were two, three years back,” says Djokovic, who’s clearly aiming for the top spot, and “I’m probably playing the best tennis of my life.”

Not that anyone noticed at the start of the fortnight. Nadal’s pursuit of the Rafa Slam, Federer’s bid to defend his 2010 title and Murray’s daunting performances in the first week all pushed news of Djokovic’s stellar play below the fold. Never mind that Djokovic dropped just one set through the first five rounds and, most tellingly, did not suffer any of the puzzling failures of concentration and stamina that had plagued him in the past and made him a target of criticism—particularly after he retired due to heat exhaustion in the quarterfinals of the 2009 Aussie Open.

This change was partly due to Melbourne’s unseasonably cool summer weather this year, but it’s also a credit to Djokovic’s improved conditioning. Still, he

**RUNAWAY WIN**  
Djokovic kept Murray (above, right) on the defensive throughout the championship match.

Photographs by  
**DAVID CALLOW**



struggles to keep his cool when questions about his physical and mental strength resurface. “I’m very emotional, and I’m very righteous, and I don’t like people to say things that are not right,” Djokovic says. “I’ve never retired my match or said something without any reason.”

He also had never entered a Grand Slam tournament in better form. Ben Mitchell, an 18-year-old Australian junior, practiced with all five top seeds but said Djokovic was “way more intimidating than the other guys. He has a good arrogance about him.” He wielded it like a sledgehammer against Federer, outmuscling the four-time Aussie Open champion 7–6, 7–5, 6–4 in a semifinal that was a study in what Goran called “atomic tennis.” Djokovic pulverized Federer’s weakest stroke—his backhand—with deep, howling drives, many of which Federer shanked wildly off his racket. “Nole surprised us,” Goran says. “He’s really, really focused. He wants more.”

**Clijsters wants** a different kind of more: more time at home, maybe a few more kids—definitely a more normal life. A decade ago she would have settled for more mental fortitude in big matches. But since winning the 2005 U.S. Open, then retiring to start a family, only to return to the tour in 2009, Clijsters has cemented a reputation as one clutch mother and has filled a huge leadership gap in the women’s game.

While old rivals such as Venus and Serena Williams (injuries), Sharapova (a busted serve) and Justine Henin (a second retirement) faded away and a new rival, Caroline Woz-

niacki, is the latest woman to underwhelm as the world No. 1, Clijsters, 27, collects majors as easily as she does her little daughter’s stray toys. In Melbourne she won her third hard-court major in the last four appearances, having pre-



## SERIOUS BUSINESS

Clijsters (above) and Li kept fans amused between matches, but they wore their game faces during the three-set women’s final.

viously taken the 2009 and ’10 U.S. Opens. She also helped transform the women’s draw into a version of *Last Comic Standing*. Clijsters set the tone with a humorous on-court confrontation with TV commentator and Hall of Fame doubles specialist Todd Woodbridge, chiding him in front of 15,000 at Rod Laver and millions more on live television for suggesting to another player that Clijsters might be pregnant because “she looks really grumpy and her boobs are bigger.”

That Clijsters wound up playing China’s one-woman comedy troupe, Li Na, for the championship couldn’t have been more fitting. Li is a year older than Clijsters and, like the Belgian veteran, took a lengthy sabbatical from tennis to bring

her personal life into balance. On her way to making history as China’s first Grand Slam finalist, Li held forth on everything from her husband’s snoring to her main motivation in tight matches (“prize money!”) and her shopaholism. She held her own against Clijsters in the final until Clijsters changed the trajectory and pace of her ground strokes in the second set, throwing off Li’s rhythm. (Exasperated with advice shouted to her by Chinese tennis fans during that set, Li told the chair umpire, “Can you tell the Chinese, ‘Don’t teach me to play tennis?’”) Still, there was no disrupting Li’s timing after the loss. When asked what she would do for an encore, she didn’t miss a beat: “Retire,” she said.

Clijsters was serious, however, when she talked about the end of her career. With her daughter, Jada, about to start school, Clijsters doesn’t see herself playing much past the 2012 Olympics. “We’ll see what happens after that,” she says. “Right now, I’m enjoying this moment.”

**Djokovic has** enjoyed just about every moment since he led Serbia to its first Davis Cup victory, two months ago in Belgrade. The camaraderie of that squad and its success against the world’s best teams boosted Djokovic’s confidence and national pride and renewed his appreciation for his entourage and the sacrifices it makes for his success. Few members have sacrificed as much as Vajda, who at times has had to take a backseat to outside coaching consultants (most recently former world No. 4 Todd Martin)

as Djokovic cast about for help in rebuilding his service motion. In the end Djokovic dumped the extra advisers and went back to Vajda’s original form—mastering it, he says, with a lot of practice and even more positive thinking—and added acupuncturist Igor Cetojevic to his camp to function as his sports psychologist. “It’s their effort,” Djokovic says of his team, “that makes me play my best tennis.”

It all came together in the final against Murray. After struggling to a 5–4 lead in the first 52 minutes of the match, Djokovic won a breathtaking 39-stroke rally and broke Murray for the set. Then he allowed the Scot just two points during a 5–0 run in the second set. As Djokovic prepared to serve for the championship at 5–3 in the third set, however, he was jolted by an image of the trophy that flashed on the big screen during the changeover. He took furious swigs from his water bottles and fiddled with the caps to restore his focus, and five points later he induced Murray to net a forehand on match point. After hugging his beaten foe, Djokovic stripped down to his shorts, repaired to his bench, craned his head back and let the moment wash over him.

He was careful not to go overboard in his celebration on the court—partly, he says, out of respect for Murray, who has not won a set in three Grand Slam finals—but he didn’t hold back in the locker room. Waiting for him inside was his entourage and a two-man band direct from Serbia. Their two-hour jam session provided the sound track to a raucous party that sucked in tournament staff members and sponsors. When Djokovic set his trophy on the floor and locked arms with others to dance around it, he looked for all the world like a kid again. □

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