

PAIN & PLEASURE

BY CHRIS ODDO



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Former US Open finalist, Wimbledon and French Open semifinalist.



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US Open finalist, 21-time Grand Slam doubles winner.

Q: WHAT DOES RAFA NEED TO TAKE BACK THE TOP SPOT?

I'm sure that's a question that he and his uncle have been toiling over the last three months. Novak won both clay-court encounters in straight sets and also skipped away to two set leads in both Slam finals. Maybe more emphasis on playing aggressively early in the match and making Novak do more of the running, similar to the third set in New York would be a good play. Novak has looked very settled early in his recent matches against Rafa, way too settled if you're in the Nadal camp. He also needs to serve better than he did at the US Open. Novak is probably the best returner in the game. You need to force him to miss or shoot the ball past him.

Technically he's going to have to flatten out his shots, tactically he's going to have to not give up so much ground (meaning play closer to the baseline) and psychologically he's going to have to win a couple of matches against Djokovic.

Even though Djokovic's serve is so much improved from where it was from a few years ago, I still feel like Nadal, with his forehand, could really pressure every single second serve of Djokovic. With his conditioning, with his power, with lots of different looks – just intimidate his second serve constantly. Sometimes you just have to have a lot of patience. I think Rafa is a pretty good tennis historian, and he won't have to look too far to realize that these rivalries tend to ebb and flow. I'll be doggone if there's another year like Djokovic just had, it was a magical thing.

Q: IS IT REALISTIC TO QUESTION IF NADAL CAN REGAIN DOMINANCE?

Absolutely. You're talking about one of the fiercest competitors the game has seen. There's no question that he'll keep throwing everything at Novak to find an answer. Part of the reason why men's tennis is so fascinating at the moment is that each of the top three have taken turns of upping the ante and raising the bar when it comes to quality of tennis. Even the match-ups are fascinating. Federer prefers the Djokovic match-up. Djokovic prefers the Nadal match-up. Nadal prefers the Federer match-up. But clearly, Novak is the torchbearer, and he's earned it in remarkable fashion.

If Novak plays the way that he's played the last 12 months, there's not, in my opinion, anything that Rafa can do. I just don't see him being able to re-tool his game sufficiently because he'd have to get closer to the baseline, and he'd have to flatten out his shots and that's not his game because it takes away his margin.

Yes I think he definitely can. I think he's going to have to continue to have good health because that was the big question several years ago. I think he can because I think he has that special constitution that the all-time greats have.