



“A Frenzied Fortnight”
By: Tommy Mulvoy

It was not unintentional that an hour after reading Roger Federer’s retirement letter on Instagram, I found myself hitting tennis balls with my four-year-old son, Aksel, in our driveway. I tried to keep it fun, by returning Aksel’s backhands high into the air or letting him hit his favorite “hard shots” against the wall of our apartment building, but I would be lying if I said I wasn’t also a little concerned that he still can’t hit a forehand. I tried to focus on playing with Aksel, but my mind kept returning to Federer’s announcement and replaying all the incredible matches I have seen him play over the years. I was lucky enough to witness some in person, including one match at the 2012 London Olympics and a few night matches at the U.S. Open in the early aughts, but most were viewed at home as I paced around my living room or peeked out from behind doors during stressful matches. My favorite memory, though, is the two-week master class that Federer put on to win his penultimate Grand Slam title at Wimbledon in 2017.

My decision to spend that summer studying at my graduate school’s Oxford campus certainly had something to do with studying James Joyce under the guidance of distinguished scholar Jeri Johnson. That my father had tickets for middle Saturday might also have played a role. As did the fact that my class, or “tut” as they call it at Oxford, met in the morning, prior to the start of play at Wimbledon.

Following a decade long pattern of never watching Federer's first set live, I monitored his first-round match against Alexander Dolgoplov on the Wimbledon website from inside the library. My hope was that the setting would force me to contain the screaming that usually occurs when I watch Federer's matches. During his epic 2014 U.S. Open quarter-final versus Gael Monfils, where Federer came back from two sets down and saved two match points, I was convinced I was going to receive an eviction notice from my landlord, or soon-to-be fiancée, with whom I had just moved in with, the next morning. I lost my composure a few times during the Dolgoplov match, but these outbursts were easily blamed on Joyce's perplexing prose. I had planned on heading over to the large-screen TV in my college's lounge to watch the third set, but the match ended in the second with Federer winning in a walkover. I followed the same pattern during Federer's second-round match against Dusan Lajovic, a relatively straightforward 7-6, 6-2, 6-2 win, which was only accompanied by one fit of frenzy in the library.

My wife, who was two months pregnant with Aksel, and I headed to SW19 early on middle Saturday to meet my parents and two nephews. We hoped to catch some of the action on the outer courts before going to Center Court to watch Federer play Misha Zverev. With only four seats, we planned to rotate so that everyone could watch at least one set. I wasn't comfortable with the idea of watching the first set from inside the stadium, so I told my nephews and parents to take the seats while my wife, Vicky, and I followed along from Henman Hill. Like clockwork, Fed won the first set, after which point, I moved excitedly into my seat. Somehow our seat change schedule got mixed up (it might have been that I turned off my phone), and I watched Federer comfortably win the second and third sets from inside the stadium.

For his round of 16 match against Grigor Dimitrov, I repeated my strategy from the first and second rounds, sure that it had something to do with Federer's victory. Though, for his quarter-

final match against Milos Raonic, I changed tactics and moved to the lounge after the first set hoping that this might give Federer an extra boost against the young, hard-hitting Canadian. When Raonic had the audacity to leave for a “comfort break” after getting crushed 6-2 in the second set, I threw a fit. As his break headed past the tenth minute, I got out of my seat and stalked to the TV in a manner that suggested to my classmates sitting nearby that I was going to fight Raonic when he returned to the court. I finally settled back into my seat, but when Raonic then decided to change his shoes, I stood and screamed a few obscenities at both him and the umpire who didn’t seem to care about this tactless act. Two of my peers quietly got up and exited the room.

With Federer up a break in the first set of his semi-final match against Thomas Berdych, I felt comfortable enough to leave the library and grab a coffee before heading over to the lounge to catch the rest of the match. But, when I turned on the TV a few minutes later, Federer was serving at 4-5 to stay in the set. My heart rate quickened, and I stood a few feet from the TV rocking back and forth trying to control my nerves. Two stellar service games forced a tiebreak, and after Federer won the tiebreak 7-4, I let out a whoop before settling a bit more comfortably into my seat. The second set also went to a tiebreak, but with a few words of encouragement and advice, Federer went ahead two sets to love, and shortly thereafter, closed out the match.

After a restless pre-Championship evening watching replays of Federer classics, including his 1998 match against Andre Agassi in Basel, when he was only 17, and his transformative victory against Pete Sampras in the Round of 16 at the 2001 edition of Wimbledon, I woke up at 6 a.m. on Sunday morning eager to prepare—not just for Monday’s lecture on “Aeolus,” but for Federer’s match against Marin Čilić. I read loads of pre-match commentaries and after a few

hours of work in the library trying to understand more about Leopold Bloom's visit to the *Freeman* newspaper office, headed out for a quick run to ensure that I didn't carry too much energy into the lounge, where I would finally allow myself to watch an entire match. A little after 1 p.m., I sat down to watch pre-match coverage and made it clear to a few classmates in the room, through one-word responses to their questions, that I was in no mood for chit-chat.

The first four games were quite close, and my nerves were taut, but it was nothing a few punches into the empty seat beside me couldn't alleviate. After breaking Čilić in the 5th game, I gave a big fist pump and shouted a "C'mon Rog!" which, judging from my peers' reactions, might have been a bit aggressive. Čilić's bursting blisters blunted what should have been a competitive match, but that didn't stop me from screaming and pounding the chair next to me, more out of excitement than any sense of nervousness. After Federer's final ace, I thrust both hands in the air; somewhat conscious of the others in the room, I kept my hollering to a minimum. When I turned around to give out some high-fives, I realized that I was alone.

Later in the evening, I grabbed my RF hat, which I superstitiously don't wear when watching Federer's matches and headed out to celebrate. I didn't see any other Fed fans at the bar, so I took my beer back to my dorm room to read post-match commentary and re-watch a few points. Sometime after midnight, the stress of the fortnight caught up with me and I called it a night.

The day after Federer's announcement, I awoke to freezing temperatures and the first snow of the year. The weather, it seemed, was reminding me of both the impending winter and the looming darkness that is trying to be a tennis fan without the ability to watch Roger Federer

anymore. Aksel and I didn't hit balls on Saturday, but when the sun broke through late on Sunday morning, we headed out for some "hard hits" and lobs, or "moon doggies" as he calls them. There was still no progress towards a forthcoming forehand, but with all the Federer tributes and highlights coming out, Aksel and I at least have plenty of videos to analyze on the next snowy day.