

The 100 best male singles players of the Open Era

Voo de Mar

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PREFACE

This is the second part of my project to display "the best male singles players of the Open Era". In the first part (*...from Phil Dent to Jannik Sinner...*), I explained why I chose players born in the year 1950 and onwards. I was selecting players without any specific criteria and emerged more than 300 players. My idea was to extract the best 100 of them, and put them to the second part making a hypertext. Actually the biographies in both parts are almost identical, the biggest difference is connected to the fact that here you have automatic access to hundreds of my statistical pictures, you have to simply click on the links.

How did I extract "the best 100 players"? I've made the following assumptions:

- # Top 10 players,
- # who have won a few main-level titles and
- # reached a major quarterfinal at least.

I had written down about 120 players, then I eliminated ~20 of them. It turned out that among the chosen ones, there was Tomas Smid whose highest ranking had been no. 11. I've decided to include him because he helped Czechoslovakia in capturing the Davis Cup '80 title, winning a vital rubber.. I have absolutely no problem if you think that some omitted players deserve more to be included here. It's not a list I'd die for, an element of intuition has been involved in the creation, I don't want to be a prisoner of strict mathematical criteria. Among 100 players, there are 17 men who are still active - they are highlighted with a **different color**. The multiple Grand Slam champions are highlighted with **blue** (their surnames), I may consider them as the best 11 players in the realm of the best 100, "The Titans of the Game".

Voo de Mar, May 3rd 2021

AGASSI, Andre (USA, 1970)

1.

A prodigy, he was just 4 years-old when was hitting the ball with the top players in the world at the time: Ilie Nastase, Harold Solomon & teenage Bjorn Borg. His father (Emanoul Aghassian, former professional boxer who represented Iran at the Olympics in 1948 and 1952) put the balls already to his cradle. Aghassian described his three older children as "guinea pigs" in the development of the methods he used to mold Andre into a world-class player. The young Agassi was the most exciting player to watch in the late 80s, he was so good at the age of 18 (six titles of 1988) that many could perceive him as the best player in history. His baseline shots off both wings were furious, he brought a big novelty to the tour, no-one before him had been able to play so aggressively standing inside the court, longer balls flying towards him made no problem due to his awesome coordination, he could be labelled as the most offensive baseliner ever. The year 1989 meant a setback though; instead of winning his first majors, Agassi dropped in the ATP ranking, and some imperfections were visible in his tennis:

- landing on right leg after the serve
- very chaotic game-style (low % of first serves in, unprepared attacks to the net, receiving 2nd serves going backwards, too much energy in the first two hours)
- front-runner; he was winning many matches easily, but once he had a worse day, he was discouraged, reluctant to change anything in his tactics, reluctant to fight... he was giving an impression "I want to win on my terms: if I cannot, I prefer to lose instead of winning ugly". I have no doubt that Agassi is the second best player of the 90s (behind Pete Sampras) and arguably a Top 5 Open Era player among those who have retired, mainly given his longevity - he's a multiple Grand Slam champion, but looking backwards there are two different options of his career quite possible:

- 1) he could indeed become the best in history (at least for the time he finished his career)
- 2) he could have achieved much less if hadn't found inside himself the will to seek new solutions, and start again

The setbacks of the year 1989 meant nothing comparing to that what happened to Agassi in 1993 (he dropped to No. 31) and in 1997 (he dropped to No. 141 - appeared in Challengers for the first time since his teenage years which must have been quite humiliating for someone who just two years before became the best player in the world!) Agassi virtually reached the tennis pinnacle for the first time at the end of 1990 - in impressive style he [conquered 'Masters'](#), in the last two matches defeating the two best guys at the time, then he won the opening rubber of the Davis Cup final (vs Richard Fromberg in five sets) and the USA defeated Australia already on Saturday. There was no question that Agassi with improved serve would be destined to win his maiden Grand Slam title, it was not meant to be though. It was not so easy, also because of Agassi's schedule - in the first few years of his career, he was avoiding trips to Australia (skipped the event in the years 1988-94!) and Great Britain (skipped Wimbledon in the years 1988-90). Paradoxically, his first major triumph came on the surface Agassi was afraid of, after a lesson he got from Henri Leconte at Wimbledon '87. In 1991 he signaled that he mastered his ground-strokes from the baseline, almost advancing to the semifinal (dramatic, [strange defeat to David Wheaton](#)). The following year he defeated the grass-court elite in his last three matches, first [Boris Becker](#) & [John McEnroe](#) - former multiple champions of the event, then the

future champ - [Goran Ivanisevic](#), even though the Croat seemed unstoppable, serving better than anyone in the past, during the fortnight. Two separate years of Agassi's career that deserve special mention are 1995 & 1999. In 1995, his second coach (Brad Gilbert replaced Nick Bollettieri) finished own career, fully focusing on his first of three "Andrews" (Andy Roddick, Andy Murray), and finally Sampras - after the years of his total domination (1993-94) - had a serious rival. Their exciting rivalry of the mid 90s began in [Paris' 94](#) and lasted until [the US Open '95 final](#) when Agassi was a slight favorite, but lost in four sets and that defeat pushed him away from finishing the year on the top. In 1999, triumphing at Roland Garros in amazingly dramatic circumstances as far as the entire event is concerned, Agassi became the first fully Open Era player to win all four majors! The others to win all Slams in a career were Fred Perry, Don Budge, Roy Emerson and Rod Laver. Budge and Laver (twice) did it in the same year. Laver came down to the court to present the trophy to Agassi. *"To be assigned a place with some of the game's greatest players is an honor I'll have the rest of my life."* Agassi said in tears, *"I never dreamed I'd ever be back here after so many years, I'm so proud. I'll never forget this, I'll never forget this. I'm very blessed."* There are two blocks in Agassi's splendid career distinguished by his hair or the lack of it: 1986-94 when he was long-haired and chaotic in almost everything he was doing on court, and 1995-2006 (under Darren Cahill, who had replaced Gilbert, when Agassi became the oldest player ever to be ranked no. 1 in May 2003) when he was bald and merciless in enforcing tactical assumptions; regardless of two-faced Agassi, he was always admired all over the world, at times a very controversial figure (defaulted twice, should have been defaulted a few times more).

Biggest titles (8 majors):

Wimbledon [1992](#), Australian Open [1995](#), [2000](#), [2001](#) and [2003](#);

US Open [1994](#) and [1999](#); Roland Garros [1999](#)

Olympics (Atlanta [1996](#))

Masters (Frankfurt [1990](#))

Biggest lost finals (7 majors):

US Open [1990](#), [1995](#), [2002](#), [2005](#); Roland Garros [1990](#), [1991](#); Wimbledon [1999](#)

ANDERSON, Kevin (South Africa)

5.

When I saw Anderson for the first time (third round of Miami '08), I absolutely didn't expect he'd be a two-time Grand Slam Finalist. I watched his match against Igor Andrejev being curious "Who's this guy who ousted Novak Djokovic a round before?" I remember I was a bit disappointed because I noticed that despite two-meter height, Anderson's serve was very average. In a long three-setter (Andrejev won 6-4, 6-7, 6-4) Anderson fired just two aces. I thought "How is it possible?" Really strange twelve years later with the knowledge that the South African giant has many times delivered more than 30 aces. Anderson made amazing progress in the previous decade, I'd call him one of those few guys who squeezed career like a

lemon. He has improved each and every department of his game. Over the years he was very reserved in showing emotions, possibly he figured out that it's something he could improve too, increasing his chances of winning important matches. During the US Open '17 he was exceptionally emotional, showing fist-pumps in every game he was obtaining points. Perhaps it helped him to overcome difficult obstacles in quarterfinal and semifinal as he faced opponents in more or less 50/50 matches, so the pressure was big. I assume his positive, affirmative attitude helped him a lot in defeating them (Sam Querrey, Pablo Carreno) to reach the maiden major final. He was already 31, without any big title. It seemed like a career-fulfillment, meanwhile in the following season Anderson moved one step further. During the more prestigious Wimbledon, he did something no-one had done before him, and very likely no-one will do in the future - won two titanic deciding 5th sets in back-to-back matches. First he saved a match point before prevailing 13-11 the deciding set against Roger Federer, then in one of the longest matches in history, survived against John Isner after 6 hours 36 minutes 26-24 in the decider! That victory actually placed him as no. 2 in history of South African tennis, only behind Johan Kriek, but in front of Kevin Curren & Wayne Ferreira. It's a matter of discussion, especially comparing Anderson & Curren... Trivia: Anderson lost all twelve matches he played against Tomas Berdych (!) and only three of them were concluded in deciding sets.

Biggest lost finals (2 majors): [US Open 2017](#) and [Wimbledon 2018](#)

BECKER, Boris (Germany, 1967)

1.

As a young child, he played football and tennis with equal passion. Becker decided to devote to the racquet sport at the age of 12 training in his hometown, a small town near Munich. In the years 1982-84 he won West German titles in the junior category. When he won his first German championships defeating boys three years older, he was only 15, but he didn't look that much. He was generally considered to be an adult! Boris matured at a dizzying pace - both physically and mentally. In 1984, the only 16-year-old Becker was ready to play with professionals. He quickly signed a lucrative contract with "Adidas", it was dealt with by experts - Gunther Bosch and the manager Ion Tiriac, although it was close that Wojtek Fibak would become Boris' tutor. We didn't have to wait long for the effects. The 16-year-old Boris, on May 14, 1984, won his first "Grand Prix" tournament. Hand in hand with... a 15 years older Fibak, they conquered the doubles event in Munich. A few months later the teenager reached the 1/4 finals of the Australian Open. He trained very intensively (from 4 to 5 hours a day): squats, push-ups, running at various distances and serving. He spent less time on the other shots because he had received them as a gift from 'fate'. In 1985 came the first big victory in singles - Queens Club. This tournament preceded Wimbledon, in which hardly anyone was betting on Becker. However, this young (only 17 years and 7 months) boy, playing athletic, uncompromising tennis, diving, winning "unwinnable" points, became the youngest champion in the tournament history. He showed not only great skills, but also great mental resilience - in the third round vs [Joakim Nystrom](#) he trailed 4:5* (30-all) in the 5th set to win it 9-7! The teenager impressed with his strong serve, an accurate forehand, excellent coverage of the net and winning the so-called

"big points". Despite numerous ailments, Becker remained at the forefront for the following ten years. He won the biggest events and was the main author of the German successes in the Davis Cup competitions. He once said about the game of tennis: *"5-10 years ago it was played differently. Vilas, Wilander - it was a different game, from the back of the court. I think that a good tennis player proposing constant volleys will beat an opponent who plays from the baseline"* - indeed, good tactics on the turn of the 80s & 90s, especially against players born in the 50s, who had begun their careers using wooden racquets, but not always efficient on clay courts. Becker never won a tournament in singles on the dirt, which is the biggest blow in his stellar career. He was thrice a semi-finalist at Roland Garros courts and a six-time runner-up of smaller events, but he did not claim a title. Even when he had a match (Monte Carlo '95 and a lost final to Thomas Muster [6-4, 7-5, 1-6, 6-7, 0-6](#)). Clay turned out to be the curse of the German. These failures were largely caused by his weight. Becker seemed to be too heavy to smoothly move on clay courts, his powerful serve wasn't as effective as on other surfaces. He went down in history as one of the greatest tennis champions nonetheless. An extremely spectacular player, admired and well welcomed all over the world. Playing at the highest level, he stayed in touch with the best guys of the world for twelve years (1985-96)! He was the co-author of many great meetings: with Ivan Lendl, Stefan Edberg, Andre Agassi, Pete Sampras and the McEnroe brothers. Especially his duels against Edberg for a long time electrified the audience - they played 35 matches (25-10 for Becker), competing for the status of the world's leader in the years 1989-91 when the best one of the 80s (Lendl) was ageing. Boris was a specialist of fast surfaces (especially grass & carpet), where his offensive style based on strong serving, great net coverage and risky flat strokes off both wings, paid dividends. There was one problem in Becker's game - he was a slow starter; quite often he was losing the opening set which made the thing complicated, but his will to win was tremendous, thus his loads of wins in the "best of five" matches from behind. Becker was a very slow-pace server too, which is counter-intuitive given his inclination to get the points quickly. *"Boris had no technique in his youth, but he had an amazing fighting spirit. By all means he tried to get the ball to the other side"* - said Boris Breskwar, his first coach. Becker had many coaches in general. After Breskwar, he was looked after by: Gunther Bosch, Bob Brett, Tomas Smid, Gunther Bresnik, Eric Jelen, Nick Bolletieri and finally Mike DePalmer, Jr. from August 1995 until the end of his career.

Biggest titles (6 majors):

Wimbledon [1985](#), [1986](#) & [1989](#); US Open [1989](#); Australian Open [1991](#) & [1996](#)

Davis Cup [1988](#) & [1989](#)

Masters [1988](#), [1992](#), [1995](#)

Biggest lost finals (4 majors):

Wimbledon [1988](#), [1990](#), [1991](#) & [1995](#)

Masters [1985](#), [1986](#), [1989](#), [1994](#), [1996](#)

BERDYCH, Tomas (Czechia, 1985)

4.

Stan Wawrinka achieved more or less what I expected from Berdych. Quite revealing is their Australian Open '14 semifinal, Wawrinka beat Berdych in a tight four-setter ([6-3](#), [6-7](#), [7-6](#), [7-6](#)) winning just one more point in the entire contest, then he outplayed an injured Rafael Nadal in the final and afterwards collected another two major titles. Would Berdych have done the same if he had been more lucky in the tie-breaks against the Swiss? In my opinion the Czech had all the ingredients not only to win a few majors, but also to become No. 1 in the world at some point of his career. At the end of 2005, when Roger Federer & Nadal already established themselves as tennis kings for the years to come, Berdych triumphed in [Paris-Bercy](#), having defeated only top players, so it seemed that a bright future was ahead of him: big serve, effortless flat & quick strokes off both sides, good volley technique, cool under pressure (after the US Open '06 he had a stunning 9-0 record in five-setters; at the time had defeated both, Federer & Nadal after tight matches). It's really difficult to explain what happened to him in the next few years that he didn't become at least a solid Top 5 player; the place which "should have been" his, took Novak Djokovic & Andy Murray away from him in the late 00s. He needed to play a lot to finally reach his first (and only) major final - Wimbledon 2010. In that final he easily lost to Nadal - the Spaniard and the Serb turned to be Berdych's nightmarish opponents, he finished his career with two terrible H2H records: 4-20 (from 3:1!) and 3-25 respectively against them. Inability to defeat Nadal & Djokovic for many years, it's a main explanation why he didn't win another Masters 1K title or didn't reach another major final. I've got two ideas why Berdych couldn't manage it:

- 1) as a well established Top 10 player he invented himself as a "second Borg", he was always trying to be so cool, no matter how bad things were going, in my opinion he needed to show much more emotions to be involved in psychological battles against guys like Nadal & Djokovic;
- 2) over the years in the Davis Cup ties, Berdych was very successful in doubles, especially along with Radek Stepanek, and what's really interesting, Berdych collected an impressive 21-2 record, playing serve-and-volley on a regular basis. It's beyond me why at times he didn't use this game-style playing big matches in singles

By the way, in 2013 Berdych partnered Lukas Rosol (b. 1985) to win the longest doubles match in history; the Czechs defeated Stan Wawrinka/Marco Chiudinelli [6-4](#), [5-7](#), [6-4](#), [6-7](#), [24-22](#) after 7 hours 1 minute! If I have to point out the biggest underachiever among the best players born in the 80s, I have no doubts - it's Berdych. Admittedly he made up for many disappointments with back-to-back Davis Cup titles, but he couldn't be really fulfilled because he didn't win a clincher in the finals; he was a slight favorite to beat David Ferrer in front of the home crowd on a fast indoor court... lost in straights. Trivia: from the beginning of his career to the end of 2014 he was always playing with a baseball cap, regardless of indoors or outdoors and the length of his hair which were very long in the first years on the tour.

Biggest title: Davis Cup 2012, 2013

Biggest lost final (1 major): Wimbledon [2010](#)

BJORKMAN, Jonas (Sweden, 1972)

4.

Bjorkman was a heir of two different schools of Swedish tennis: one represented by a bunch of players inspired by Bjorn Borg, who were using two-handed backhands having based their tactics around baseline game, and the other one represented only by Stefan Edberg, so the serve-and-volley style. Bjorkman was trying to combine these two schools (similarly to Anders Jarryd in the preceding decade) even though his volley skills were nowhere close to Edberg's, and his forehand was nowhere near to the power of three Magnuses (Larsson, Norman & Gustafsson) who played more or less at the same time. In his first few years on the tour he established himself as one of the best doubles players partnering Jan Apell (b. 1969). The constant attacking the net in doubles and improving the return skills in doubles, he successfully transferred into his singles career in 1997. At the age of 25, as a serve-and-volley player following only his first serve, he enjoyed a great season from the beginning (title in Auckland) to the end (Davis Cup triumph with him as a leader in singles and doubles, p/Nicklas Kulti). The magic gone after Australian Open '98, but until the end of his career ten years later, Bjorkman was a permanent Top 100 guy, who was able to surprise from time to time in big tournaments (Wimbledon semifinal for instance at the age of 34), taking advantage of his huge experience, especially in 'best of five' matches. In the 90s he was the only player - along with Guy Forget - who participated in Masters events in both, singles (semifinalist '97) & doubles (champion '94). He was very good at imitating other players, there was a time when Eurosport was regularly showing a video in which he was imitating John McEnroe, Emilio Sanchez & Edberg among others. In his post-playing career, he joined forces with former Swedish ATP pros Thomas Johansson and Simon Aspelin to set up the club league for amateur players.

Biggest title: [Davis Cup 1997](#)

BLAKE, James (USA, 1979)

4.

The son of an English mother... Blake with his fancy gamestyle & dreadlocks, brought some freshness to the tour at the beginning of the new Century, expectations were high... From the beginning obviously not the same level, anyway he and Andy Roddick were supposed to replace Andre Agassi & Pete Sampras as two main forces of the US tennis - indeed it happened, however, much below that what could be foreseen, in both cases. The years 2002-2003 were crucial in Blake's career, defined him as someone extremely talented (perhaps one of the fastest forehands in history, taking into account not only the speed of the ball he hit, but also the reaction to the shot of the opponent), but mentally unstable, simply too weak at tight moments to win the biggest events. At different points in his career, Blake had a 0-7 record in deciding 3rd set tie-breaks and 0-9 in five-setters before erasing his demons in those situations. I was wondering many times "how is it possible to have such negative records when you have so many tools in your repertoire?" Here are my conclusions:

- Blake, similarly to the early version of Agassi, was a front-runner, he was playing in very fast pace & couldn't keep concentration for a longer period of time (two hours maximum?); if a system "no-ad and champions tie-break" had been applied during his times he would have been one of the best players in history (?)

- his backhand; it was a pretty good shot overall, nonetheless his weakest... at situations like 5-all or 6-all in deciding sets he was missing much more backhands, he knew that & quite often was trying to run around his backhand too much with additional risk of hitting the forehand

- too proud to show emotions when still long way to go... I mean in those forming ATP years he won a couple of sets saving match points, but those were second sets; certainly he didn't know how to be involved in a psychological battle, how to shift the momentum, what to do to lead 2:0 for instance at the beginning of the decider being one point from a straight set defeat... enough said, he won his first main-leven match from an MP down in his 138th tournament!

- too conservative with his second serve, I mean if you want to win the most important points with your serve, you have to either hit your second serve with similar speed to your first one or if you generally play from the back of the court, sometimes you need to try kick-serve and run to the net.

A wasted talent? Not exactly, thanks to the Davis Cup win over Mikhail Youzhny in the 2007 final. It was an opening rubber, but crucial for the rest of the weekend (USA defeated Russian already on Saturday). The following year he was one point away from a Silver medal at least, but wasted a triple match point against Fernando Gonzalez, who was his exceptionally difficult opponent (Blake lost to Gonzalez also a [Davis Cup five-setter](#) two years before). The Beijing loss must have been extremely painful, especially taking into consideration the fact, Blake had overcome in the quarterfinal Roger Federer, avenging eight previous defeats

Biggest title: [Davis Cup 2007](#)

BORG, Bjorn (Sweden)

1.

The first superstar of modern tennis. I use the word 'modern', even though Borg played his entire career with a wooden racquet (Dunlop), because during his years on the top, tennis became a worldwide sport while Borg was signing advertising contracts. When I think about the 70s, two names come to my mind immediately: Jimmy Connors & Borg - these two guys defined the decade not only as the most successful players, but also the two playing in a different way than the great champions from the previous decades. They were the first great champions who were using double handed backhands and as opposed to the previous tennis icons, both Borg & Connors weren't natural serve-and-volley players, albeit both were applying that game-style on grass, especially behind the first serves. Connors played the entire decade of the 70s, the four years younger Borg made his debut in 1971, but already in 1973 when he was only a 17-year-old boy, he was recognized as a potential future world's best player. He came to prominence at majors, reaching the fourth round in Paris and quarterfinal London debuting in both events; not only the fact he was able to win three (four) consecutive matches on two different surfaces was impressive, also the way in which he did it - at Roland Garros he

ousted five years older Dick Stockton in the third round 3-1, surviving the 4th set in an 11/9 tie-break; at Wimbledon he won the longest tie-break in history as he defeated Premjit Lall 20/18 in round one. It's amazing that almost 50 years later the record hasn't been overcome (on the main-level in singles)... given the set was concluded 9-8 (not classical '7-6' because at Wimbledon the tie-breaks at 6-all were introduced in 1979), I praise it a bit more than all other '20/18' tie-breaks. Borg won rounds 3 & 4 at Wimbledon '73 in five-setters, and only two games separated him from another 5-set win when he came back against Roger Taylor from *1:5 (15/40) in the decider! So it was quite obvious that the boy not only possessed a great game, his mentality was also great. Over the years, when he became the best player in the world, he was always giving an impression that his opponents had to play their best tennis to finish him, a moment of hesitation leading to tight situation was favouring the Swede - he was winning majority of five-setters (27-6 record) as well as deciding third set tie-breaks (12-4 record before withdrawing). He was known as "Ice-Man", never showing any emotion, regardless of the situation - he could have a bad day being on the verge of defeat, he could lose a game serving for the match, he was acting always in the same way like the past was meaningless, he was focused only on the future, only on winning the match point, sooner or later. Admittedly he finished only two seasons as the best player in the world (1979-80), but actually between Summer of 1977 and Summer of 1981, no-one could match him in terms of winning the most important events - in those years he won four times Roland Garros and four times Wimbledon, in the years 1978-80 he achieved something absolutely unprecedented triumphing in both majors, moreover he won 'Masters' 1979-80 (didn't play in 1978). It was the time when gradually more and more players were applying diversified tactics, so in theory that feat seemed more unlikely than in the previous decades. Borg somehow could be unbeaten within six weeks displaying two completely different game-styles: in Paris he was outplaying all opponents from the back of the court with staggering patience and perseverance while in London, he was playing like all other players on grass, so serve-and-volley, albeit as opposed to his first professional years, he developed more complex grass-court game-style, and it was natural for him to charge the net behind the first serve, but behind the 2nd serve he was usually staying back believing in his pinpoint accurate passing-shots. During those phenomenal years, there was only one career flaw - Borg never won the US Open: he lost as many as four finals in New York within six years, even when the tournament was held on clay - it was a faster clay than in Europe or South America, anyway it was still clay, so Borg was supposed to beat his arch-rival Connors in 1976, but it was a time when the American was usually beating his four years younger opponent... also two years later Borg was a slight favorite facing Connors in the final, the Swede had an aura of invincibility, no-one defeated him when the Swede entered the court in 49 consecutive matches (in the meantime Borg was eliminated from two events because of injury, he gave walkovers), he had under his belt the first of three back-to-back major titles, yet Connors played arguably the best match in his life and stunned the Swede in three-sets! At the end of the 70s it seemed Borg would completely dominate the first half of the 80s, but two great champions appeared on the scene - Ivan Lendl & John McEnroe. The Czechoslovak defeated the Swede twice in eight meetings, the second time was very valuable - [five sets in Basel](#), but it was McEnroe, who perhaps, not intentionally contributed to a sudden twist in Borg's career. In retrospect, twelve months between US Opens of 1980 and 1981 may be considered as the most important period for the entire decade. One year after their epic

five-setter with the most celebrated tie-break in history when Borg triumphed at Wimbledon for the fifth straight time, he faced McEnroe in the final again - that time perhaps American played better than anytime before or later, and survived a tight four-setter snapping Borg's 41 match-winning streak. It was their second consecutive major final behind the US Open '80 won by McEnroe, who in New York had outlasted Borg snapping his 12 match-winning streak as far as five-setters are concerned. The US Open '81 final meant Borg's fourth and last final loss in New York, McEnroe was better again, that time decisively. Did the American steal Borg's soul, snapping his records and taking away from him the position of the best player in the world? Three consecutive defeats to McEnroe within four majors must have hurt Borg a lot, nevertheless, following the US Open '81 loss, Borg won his 66th title, the last one, at the age of only 25. The rest of Borg's career is more bizarre than any other career. One month after the Geneva title, Borg sensationally lost 3-6, 1-6 to Tim Gullikson. The shocking scoreline, yet Borg was still young and hundreds of his wins potentially ahead of him, it seemed that all he needed was to rest for a few months, and began his title defence at Masters '81 in January 1982... it was not meant to be. With the loss to Gullikson, Borg initiated the lingering end marked by a 14 match losing streak, and 16 defeats in 19 matches. In short: in 1982 Borg plays just one event, wins two matches then is destroyed by another youngster who would soon become a Grand Slam champion - Yannick Noah. One year break, Monte Carlo again, that time one win, then loss to another young French guy - 19 y.o. Henri Leconte, but after a dramatic match (6-4, 5-7, 6-7). Before the event, Borg announced it would be the last tournament in his career. *"I tried my best and everything, and now it's over," Borg said. "I feel good. When I wake up in the morning now, I know I don't have to go out and practice for four or five hours."* Borg changed his mind, and decided to get 'wild card' one year later in Stuttgart, funny that he faced Leconte again, but that time the Frenchman gave him no chance dropping just four games in 49 minutes. *"I didn't expect that he would play so strongly," said Borg. "After being at 3-all in the first set, I thought I still had my chance, but then my lack of match practice began to show. I lacked aggression. It was really tough for me to match him, and he has the stuff to be No. 1 in the world, if he can perform consistently."* In the years 1985-90 Borg was 'frozen', he didn't show up in exhibition events, he didn't take a position of a Swedish team captain which would give him another success because he had plenty of followers in Sweden and the Scandinavian country was the main tennis force in those years. All of a sudden, in April '91 Borg made his third Monte Carlo comeback - [lost quickly](#) to Jordi Arrese. His defeat was rather expected, especially that he decided to play with his old-wooden racquet in the time when all professional players were already using the graphite ones. Between the Arrese loss, and the loss in Moscow '93, which ultimately finished his tormented career twenty years after sensational first full main-level season, the 37-year-old Borg experienced 12 consecutive defeats. It was sad, the man who in his prime didn't lose three successive matches, wasn't able to win even a set - in 1992 he lost eight times, always in straight-setters, even when the draw was beneficial like it happened in Los Angeles as he faced Chris Pridham [112], a man who collected just 54 wins in his career and had the best times of his career behind (no. 78 in 1988). That ended hopes for a first official match between Connors (39 y.o.) and Borg (36 y.o) in eleven years - they hadn't played each other since the U.S. Open semifinals in 1981. *"It would have been nice to play him, we would have had a lot of fun," Connors said. "He seems to be playing better. He'll be around."* Connors defeated Pridham 2-6, 6-3, 6-4, Borg improved indeed. In 1993 he played his

ultimately last three events, losing 1-2 on each occasion. Quite balanced defeats to Jaime Oncins and Joao Cunha-Silva surprised; against Oncins, Borg showed even to some degree his old self winning the first set after 24 consecutive sets lost (!) saving a match point in a tie-break, but the last Borg's defeat was a stunner. In Moscow he faced Alexander Volkov, a Top 20 player while Borg had at the time ranking 1148. Something like 3-4 games for the legendary Swede could be expected, instead of this, Borg almost won! Volkov survived in front of the home crowd 4-6, 6-3, 7-6 saving a match point in the deciding tie-break. Despite the loss, Borg was satisfied, he said it would be his last match, and indeed - it was, finally... In May 1993 Borg relinquished his desire to play the Grand Slams again. But he had found a new way to enjoy tennis - by joining the senior circuit. "Senior" meant people over 35 years old, and the new "Nuveen Tour", created by Jimmy Connors, was attracting large crowds. Borg happily revived his rivalry with both Connors and McEnroe, and the threesome attracted hordes of fans nostalgic for tennis stars of the 1970s and '80s. Trivia:: in the years 1982-83 Borg played just two main-level events (both in Monte Carlo), but he was regularly participating in exhibition matches against Connors losing eight times, winning just once. Moreover Borg took part in a few exhibition events and even won one, quite prestigious because he defeated in back-to-back matches three quality opponents (Vitas Gerulaitis, Lendl & McEnroe) in Sydney, in a format when everyone faced each other in the "best of five" matches.

Biggest titles (11 majors):

Roland Garros 1974, 1975, [1978](#), [1979](#), [1980](#), [1981](#)

Wimbledon [1976](#), [1977](#), [1978](#), [1979](#), [1980](#)

Davis Cup [1975](#)

Masters [1979](#), [1980](#)

Biggest lost finals (5 majors):

Wimbledon 1981

US Open [1976](#), [1978](#), [1980](#), [1981](#)

BRUGUERA, Sergi (Spain)

3.

Full name: Sergi Bruguera Torner... The Spanish tennis waited eighteen years for another major title (Manuel Orantes won the US Open 1975). In the meantime the best Spanish players Jose Higuera & Emilio Sanchez reached the top 10, but they were never considered as serious contenders to triumph at Slams, Bruguera wasn't considered either. Admittedly the Catalan showed up as a teenager, in Hamburg 1989 he almost defeated a nineteen years older Jimmy Connors (5-7, 6-3, 5-7), and already a week later he avenged that defeat crushing the 38-year-old legend 6-1, 6-1 in Rome. *"It is the very best result of my career,"* said Bruguera, *"I am super happy. It's a wonderful feeling. I always dreamed of playing and beating Connors. He was No. 1 for so long and when I was a child he was my idol."* That scoreline clearly suggested big potential as well as Bruguera's sensation straight-set first round win over top seed Stefan Edberg in the French Open '90. Bruguera was struggling with consistency though, in Monte

Carlo '91 he claimed his first big title, but at Roland Garros the same year he left the event already after two rounds (injury), the following year an ageing Ivan Lendl destroyed him in the opener. In 1993 he was finally consistent in the clay-court tournaments after five straight defeats (two very painful vs the Netherlands in the Davis Cup first round): quarterfinal in Estoril, final in Barcelona, title in Monte Carlo, final in Madrid, quarterfinal in Rome & three matches won at World Team Cup led him to the second major in the year. So before Roland Garros '93 he had lost four tournament-matches on clay, but only to quality opponents. In Paris his potential exploded, he reached the final in style characteristic for the great Bjorn Borg at the turn of 70s/80s, including a triple bagel over the former quarterfinalist Thierry Champion! That easy route certainly helped him in the final - Bruguera had spent 5.5 hours fewer than the double-defending champion Jim Courier. Bruguera snapped Courier's 20-match winning streak at Roland Garros after a four-hour battle. When he quite comfortably defended his title in 1994, it seemed he'd rule in Paris the entire decade. There was absolutely nothing impressive in Bruguera's tennis though, just patience and heavy top-spins off both wings. He's a tall man, but his serve (especially the second one) usually worked as an introduction to a rally (average 1st serve around 150 km/h when the guys of his height were serving 30 km/h faster), his volley skills just average. I'd say that another Spanish top dog Juan Carlos Ferrero was "Bruguera 2.0", Rafael Nadal? - "Bruguera 4.0", even Alex Corretja who never won a major, in my opinion had more to offer than Bruguera. Yet the Catalan somehow found a golden formula of efficiency in the mid 90s. Well, I'd say that from a point of view of his tennis weaponry, he's the weakest double champion at Slams. He was constructing the majority of his points 3-4 meters behind the baseline, hitting the ball with moderate top-spin pace 2-3 meters over the net with an attitude "I'll play one more ball over the net more than you, and if you are not so patient, I'll pass you". His passing-shots (off both wings) were his only asset. His records against the best serve-and-volleyers of the 90s speak for themselves - he defeated several times them all, even though his returns couldn't hurt them, especially from the forehand slice (he was using the slice a lot just to keep the ball in play). Ultimately the best records Bruguera created against Patrick Rafter (6-2, a win even on grass!) and Pete Sampras (3-2) as far as attacking players are concerned. Among Bruguera's 14 titles there's only one claimed on a surface other than clay; it happened on hardcourts in [Bordeaux '93](#), in the final against "lucky loser" Diego Nargiso (b. 1970, very talented Italian junior, who failed as a pro), for whom it was a career-best result. I have to admit Bruguera tried to adjust his clay-court game to other surfaces, and he reached the final stages of big events on hard and carpet, nonetheless, apart from Roland Garros, he never played a major quarterfinal... In 1995, as a double defending champion, he lost in the semis, rather unexpectedly to Michael Chang, and afterwards he was never the same. Enough said, that after 1994 he never won another title, playing professional tennis until 2002. I don't know how to explain it, maybe with his technical/tactical limitations he needed to play all the time with maximum of his physical and mental reserves, and being aware of that as a teenager he was dreaming - like all distinctive clay-courtiers - to triumph one day in Paris, at age of 23 he already had two French Open titles under his belt. It could contribute to the decrease of his dedication & motivation. Anyway, in the times of his steady downhill, everything clicked for him thrice, up to the big finals: he lost them in straight sets at the Olympics in Atlanta '96, [Key Biscayne '97](#) and Roland Garros '97. In the aftermath of his third Parisian final, he was just a casual player until retirement. At Roland Garros '98 after a shocking (mainly by its scoreline)

defeat to Hernan Gummy (b. 1972), Bruguera said: *"Currently nothing goes my way, on and off the court."*

Biggest titles (2 majors): Roland Garros [1993](#) and [1994](#)

Biggest lost finals (1 major): Olympics [1996](#) and Roland Garros [1997](#)

CASH, Pat (Australia, 1965)

4.

A player with the best resume among those who haven't won 300 matches at the main-level. Tennis potentially lost many excellent matches in the 90s due to Cash's sudden downfall. He's a player of the Stefan Edberg/Boris Becker generation, similarly to the Nordic blondes, he established himself as an elite player in the mid 80s before he turned 20. Just like Edberg & Becker, Cash's attitude was very offensive, he had neither Becker's forehand, nor Edberg's backhand, but he was a warrior, he felt the game very well and in the initial phase of his career he was comparably successful to the multiple Grand Slam champions. He was just 23 in 1988 when he had played three major finals (Edberg and two years younger Becker had played three as well) and led Australia to two Davis Cup triumphs (1983 & 1986) in both editions gathering the most "points" for his team and winning the clinchers. Taking into account Cash's respectable H2Hs against Ivan Lendl & Mats Wilander, I suppose he'd play competitive Grand Slam matches against not only Pete Sampras, but against Michael Chang, Andre Agassi & Jim Courier too, being a real value of the early 90s everywhere except clay-courts. His relatively poor ground-strokes made him no threat on the red surface. I'd say that from technical point of view the only aspect of his game in which he exceeded Edberg/Becker was the lob, the very helpful stroke on faster surfaces, but actually meaningless on clay. Wimbledon '88, and surprised (in terms of the scoreline above all) [loss to Becker](#), ended Cash's great times on the circuit. For another nine years he was mainly associated with injuries (knee, achilles tendon) and better or worse attempts to recreate his career. In 1993 he didn't play at all, in each of these seasons in parentheses (1989, 1994, 1995-97) he played just a few tournaments. In his disastrous 90s, he notched just one impressive win, it occurred in Dubai '95 when he stunned in the first round (2-6, 6-4, 6-4) Thomas Muster, in the best season of the Austrian. After retirement he coached top players (Mark Philippoussis & Greg Rusedski) and was regularly playing in the Champions Tour not being able to win any of them.

Biggest title (1 major): Wimbledon [1987](#), Davis Cup 1983 and [1986](#)

Biggest lost finals (2 majors): Australian Open [1987](#) and [1988](#)

CHANG, Michael (USA, 1972)

2.

Chang's father was born in Taiwan. He went to the United States in 1966, six years later Michael was born, a younger brother of Carl (b. 1969) who was a successful junior. When Carl

realised that Michael was better than him, he decided to finish his university (San Dieguito High School in Encinitas) becoming a coach of his younger brother. Carl was awarded 'wildcards' in a few ATP events, once he even advanced to the main-event after qualifying rounds, but finished his career with a 0-5 record (4-20 in doubles, playing 17 out of 20 tournaments with brother, which meant to help Michael in improving his volley skills)... Back to Michael - he was a prodigy. Despite very modest height, he was able to beat much taller boys from higher age groups (more or less at the same time Franco Davin was Chang's counterpart in South America). As a 13 year-old boy (looking younger than his age indicated) he was winning events for 16 year-old boys! There were three things that made him an exceptional teenager: sturdy legs, high tennis IQ, and what's the most important - unbelievable fighting spirit. The young Chang was the best example of the 'never say die' attitude. Every point, every game, every set were precious to him, he could play from first to last point of the match at 100% of physical & mental dedication. He was 15 when claimed his first Challenger title. It was his debut at this level, but he already had played four events at the main-level! At the US Open '87, he became the youngest player at 15 years, 6 months to win a main draw match in history of the event (d. veteran Paul McNamee). *"When things around me get to be too much," said Chang, "my parents take me away. We relax or go fishing, take my mind off everything."* One year later, Chang captured his first Tour title, in San Francisco at 16 years, 7 months. *"I just hope that a lot of young kids who can relate to me because of my age will look up to me. I hope that I will never be conceited and will remain humble because nobody is going to like you if you give them a hard time."* stated Chang after defeating Johan Kriek in the final. French Open '89. Many 18-year-old boys participated in the junior event, i.a. Nicolas Pereira, who lost in the final, but Chang at the age of 17 years 3 months was seeded with no. 15 in the main-draw. He advanced to the fourth round (reached that stage at US Open '88) when was supposed to play on Centre Court in Paris for the first time, against the three-time champion, and unquestionably the best player of the decade - [Ivan Lendl](#). As expected, Chang lost the first two sets, but the three-time French Open champion needed to play his best. Instead of losing the 3rd set easier, and getting words of consolation for brave display, Chang produced one of the most memorable comebacks in tennis history, using all the tools in the box, including underarm serve and waiting for Lendl's serve standing close to the service line! Chang won another three matches and became the youngest Grand Slam champion in history. And there was a huge twist - he not only never captured another major playing for the following 14 years, he also didn't win any of the biggest titles (from prestigious or financial point of view). How was it possible given the fact Chang improved a lot as a tennis player over the years? I think there are two important things that may explain this phenomenon:

- Chang used a chance that he won his lone major just before a shift in men's tennis when a bunch of big seervers appeared on the tennis map, with Pete Sampras as the leading force (before Sampras fully developed his serve, he was regularly losing to Chang; first in juniors, then in the first few years on the Tour)
- he lost his greatest assets over the years: speed, steely determination and inclination to improvise

He lost it all, considerably improving his serve, the rise of his average aces per match was significant: 1991 - 1.9 aces; 1992 - 2.7; 1993 - 3.1; 1994 - 4.3; 1995 - 6.0 and 1996 - 8.4. In those years Chang played six big finals (Grand Slam Cup in years 1991-92 lost to big serving

David Wheaton & Michael Stich respectively, Masters '95 and Aussie Open '96 lost to Boris Becker, finally US Open '96 to Sampras - arguably the most important match in Chang's career because if he had won it, he would have become the best player in the world). The only opponent who didn't overwhelm him with a powerful serve was Thomas Muster when they faced each other in the final at French Open '95. It was a year when the Austrian repeated winning of "lost sets" time and time again. He did it also in the opener against Chang, and it proved to be crucial. It doesn't mean that Chang couldn't deal with big serving guys, simply in a "best of five" format it was somehow more difficult for him. Nevertheless, Chang collected seven Mercedes Super 9 titles, all on hardcourts outdoors, in North America. Indian Wells was his beloved event, he triumphed there thrice ([1992](#), [1996](#), [1997](#)). Many players reach their peaks around the age of 25. For Chang, that age meant a downhill. US Open '97 it's the last event when Chang was considered as a Slam title contender. Chang lost in the semifinal in straight sets to [Patrick Rafter](#), not a big server, but at times a big one, and it was one of those days when the Australian didn't need to deliver his brilliance at the net, the serve settled the matter. After retirement, Chang withdrew from attention for several years, then came back as a coach of a fellow Asian player - Kei Nishikori. With the Japanese as his pupil, Chang experienced a similar fate to his career in the 90s: they were cooperating in the years 2014-19, Chang helped Nishikori to become an elite player, but the Japanese lost all his biggest finals - 1 Slam and 4 Masters 1K.

Biggest title (1 major): Roland Garros [1989](#), Davis Cup 1990

Biggest lost finals (3 majors):

Roland Garros [1995](#), Australian Open [1996](#), US Open [1996](#)
Masters [1995](#); Grand Slam Cup [1991](#) and [1992](#)

CHESNOKOV, Andrei (Russia, 1966)

9.

Some sort of a specialist to play his best tennis on bigger occasions. He played 15 main-level finals (won seven of them) and 5 of his last 7 occurred at Masters Series events ('Mercedes Super 9' at the time). I'm not sure how to explain it, perhaps the financial issue. He was simply more motivated when he'd earn more money which wasn't very easy because he began his career being guided by the communist regime of the Soviet Union. Some statements of Chesnokov from the 80s were quite bizarre. For instance, playing in the [Antwerp '88 final](#) (exhibition status) he sprained his ankle against John McEnroe in the 2nd set of the 'best of five' final. Given the surface and the quality of the opponent, Chesnokov had no chance, but he continued, even winning five games limping. *"I said I cannot play anymore,"* but he said, *"You must."* Chesnokov refused to say who pressured him: *"It is my secret."* The following year he achieved his career-best French Open semifinal after ousting the defending champion Mats [Wilander in straight sets](#). *"I want to keep my secret about prize money,"* Chesnokov said, *"I will take some, maybe not \$73,000. Maybe a little less. Maybe \$72,000. Maybe I'll buy a ticket to the United States before going back to Moscow."* In 2019 at the courts near Lake Garda in Italy, I had a conversation with a guy who introduced himself as a former Soviet player. He was born

in the 60s, and told me that was playing with Chesnokov in Russia (then the Soviet Union) in the 80s, and they both, Chesnokov & Alexander Volkov, weren't even in the Top 5 in the country. But somehow it was Chesnokov first, who left the huge country participating in tournaments all over the world, before Mikhail Gorbachev's famous "perestroika" and "glasnost". Volkov & Andrei Cherkasov followed suit afterwards. In 1985, being completely unknown, Chesnokov made a trip to Paris, went through the qualifying rounds and stunned the Top 10 player, Eliot Teltscher in the second round before losing to Heintz Gunthardt in the third round after one of the longest matches of the 80s in Paris (lasted 4 hours 40 minutes). *"Before this tournament I thought they (the international touring pros) were so strong,"* Chesnokov said. *"But now I realize they can be beaten."* Chesnokov, a physical education student at a special Moscow sports institute, was ranked 307th in the world on the ATP computer. *"In the beginning I was not very confident. But little by little in the first set, I began to feel loose and that I could play my game,"* Chesnokov said through an interpreter. *"I felt I was moving well and I was in charge."* Trivia: Chesnokov was a Davis Cup hero. In 1987 (Soviet Union vs the Netherlands) he had defeated Michiel Schapers (24-22, 1-6, 6-2, 6-2) in a 4-set marathon with the longest Open Era set in singles (almost three hours) before the Isner-Mahut decider at Wimbledon 2010. In 1995 (Russia vs Germany) Chesnokov established a record of the most [match points saved](#) (9) in the 5th set as he survived a big-serving Michael Stich.

Biggest lost final: Davis Cup [1995](#)

CILIC, Marin (Croatia, 1988)

4.

Just like nine years older compatriot Ivan Ljubicic, Cilic was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in the same city where Ivan Dodig (b. 1985) was born as well. Since 1981, Medugorje has become a popular site of Catholic pilgrimage due to Međugorska Gospa, an alleged series of apparitions of the Virgin Mary to six local children. I couldn't call Cilic's career "miraculous". He was consequently realizing his potential and the fulfillment came at US Open '14 when Cilic raised a major trophy for the only time in his career. *"This is all hard work in these last several years, and especially this last year,"* he said during the trophy ceremony looking at Goran Ivanisevic, the best Croatian tennis player, who helped Cilic as a coach during the years 2013-16. *"My team has brought something special to me, especially Goran. We're working really hard, but most important from all the things he brought to me was enjoying tennis and always having fun, and I think I enjoyed my best tennis over here and played the best ever in my life."* There were a few youngsters who appeared on the big stage in the mid 00s and showed skills allowing them to expect they would challenge the Roger Federer/Rafael Nadal supremacy. The careers of born in 1987 (Novak Djokovic & Andy Murray) have been intertwined for a dozen of years as well as the careers of one year younger and distinctively taller players (Marin Cilic & five days older Juan M. Del Potro); the first two reached much higher levels, no doubt about it. Cilic & Del Potro became the Grand Slam champions too. Comparing Cilic & Del Potro by the most basic numbers I'd say the Croat has enjoyed a better

career thanks to better health, but the first few years didn't indicate it'd be like this. Very telling is their [US Open quarterfinal of 2009](#). Del Potro won it in four sets, took the title and became a serious threat for the newly created Big 4 at the time, Cilic needed to wait many years for his glory. It happened five years after Del Potro's triumph in New York. When Del Potro was struggling with injuries, Cilic reached his tennis maturity, and established himself as a Top 10 player for five years, playing another two major finals (both lost to Federer). Cilic game-style never impressed me, he doesn't possess Del Potro's powerful forehand, but he's been more stable off both wings, especially compared to Del Potro's older version when he adopted his backhand slice to his style due to problems with left wrist. The Croat improved his serve and the net game with years, it allowed him to triumph in New York (especially his serve down the T was working very well then), always mentally a bit unstable, you couldn't count on him in tight situations, but the good thing has been his ability to forget wasted chances, to be focused on that what lies ahead, thus he won many matches 2-1 or 3-2 he should have won 2-0 or 3-1. One of the most experienced players in five-setters of all-time, I can imagine he may win the most five-setters in the Open Era. The next few years he should be steadily dropping in the ranking, but will be still good enough to compete at majors, defeating newmakers and peers.

Biggest titles (1 major): US Open [2014](#), Davis Cup [2018](#)

Biggest lost finals (2 majors): Wimbledon [2017](#), Australian Open [2018](#); Davis Cup [2016](#)

CLERC, Jose-Luis (Argentina, 1958)

4.

The final in the Spanish capital, but two Argentinians play against each other. They both speak Spanish, so the title will stay at home to some degree. Guillermo Vilas wins sets 2 and 3 without any problems against Jose-Luis Clerc, and leads 4:1 in the 4th set having a breakpoint, mini-match point in my personal terminology. An ace off the second serve! However, the linesman says the ball was out, thus the referee announces "Game to Vilas, he leads 5:1" (at the times the chair-umpires didn't bother to check the mark on clay!). Clerc ferociously questions this decision. Who knows what Vilas is thinking, maybe that his lead is big enough to give the point away, especially that he'd won all six previous meetings against Clerc, maybe he feels some sort of compassion for his Davis Cup teammate? Anyway he concedes the point to Clerc, and starts playing poorly, in turn Clerc comes back to his standard, very solid clay-court game. Ultimately Clerc wins the match 6-3, 1-6, 1-6, 6-4, 6-2. They say philosophically, yet quite simply "This... is tennis!" Vilas should have known better than anyone that leading two-sets-to-one and 4:1 on clay didn't mean automatic victory; five years before he'd lost an unbelievable match to Manuel Orantes in the US Open semifinal despite match points at 5:0 in the 4th set! Well, some people cannot learn from their own mistakes... When Vilas began to achieve his first very good results in the early 70s, Julian Ganzabal (b. 1946) was a local star of the Argentinian courts, but he couldn't emulate his charm at the international level, thus Vilas had to wait a couple of years for the appearance of six years younger Clerc, to seriously think about winning the Davis Cup title. They led the Argentinian team to the final in 1981, but had to face the genius of John McEnroe, who destroyed Vilas on day one, then backed up by Peter

Fleming defeated Clerc/Vilas after almost five hours 11-9 in the 5th set (Vilas was serving at 7:6), and finally outplayed Clerc in five sets after 4 hours 8 minutes, having lost to the Argentinian four out of their five previous meetings. Clerc based his game-style on heavy top-spins off both sides, nevertheless he knew how to attack the net to obtain the points with gentle volleys, his serve couldn't be considered as a weakness. Without any doubts he belongs to a narrow group of players who should have advanced to one Grand Slam final at least. Clerc was half-way there - he had a match point against a young Ivan Lendl in the French Open semifinal '81 to lose it 6-3, 4-6, 6-4, 6-7(7), 2-6. That bitter loss didn't drag him down, on the contrary - it motivated him to the harder work, and he notched an impressive streak of 28 wins, including two over Lendl in the American finals. Even though hardcourts weren't his favorite surface, he was considered as a US Open '81 final contender due to his astonishing form. Already the second round of the tournament showed that he was running out of gas, barely surviving in the fifth set tie-break (Tim Wilkison). In the third round he was so tired that bageled him in the middle sets another inferior opponent - Mel Purcell. Too much for the ambitious Clerc, in the fourth round he lost in straights to Bruce Manson (b. 1956) for whom the last 16 was already the career-best achievement. In 1982, Clerc advanced to the semifinals in Paris again, and once again lost as a favorite to a younger & less experienced player, 17 y.o. Mats Wilander. That time it didn't help a situation similar to earlier mentioned when Vilas conceded a point at the crucial moment of the Madrid '80 final. Wilander did the same, and he did it on match point! It followed Clerc's forehand winner which was called 'out' by the linesman with automatic approval of the chair-umpire. When you look at it from today's perspective you can say the situation was really bizarre - because Wilander said the ball was good and it was beyond his reach, Clerc should have won the point to get back to 'deuce'. They repeated the point though, and the Argentinian made a backhand error. Did he forget what exactly he'd played on the match point before its repetition? Three times lucky didn't work in Clerc's case. One year later he was eliminated, actually humiliated already in the second round by Fernando Luna [69], who never won an ATP tournament, and after defeating Clerc, he reached the fourth round which is his career-highlight. Following that shocker, Clerc experienced downhill, suffering chronic problems with his backbone. He was only 27 when decided to quit. He made his comeback four years later, but after a series of defeats on beloved clay (the last one 3-6, 1-6 to an unknown Christer Allgardh of Sweden), he understood that the best years irretrievably went away. He enjoyed a very nice, suddenly interrupted career; on the other hand this career couldn't exist at all. As a 15-year-old boy he fell from a balcony; the first diagnosis was that he would be paralyzed. He slowly recovered and five years later played his first Grand Slam tournaments. Trivia: in his first major match - Paris '78 - he destroyed 6-3, 6-0, 6-3 Lendl, for whom it was a debut at the main-level...

Biggest lost final: Davis Cup 1981

CONNORS, Jimmy (USA, 1952)

1.

Connors has a special place in the history of tennis as a remarkably long-lived champion. The American won his first title in 1972 (Queens Club) and the last one 17 years later (Tel Aviv), actually nothing unusual comparing to other great champions like Andre Agassi, Roger Federer & Rafael Nadal, but in terms of achieving valuable results in the span of more than twenty years, Connors is still ahead of them. In his first professional year (1970) he was able to win two consecutive matches, as well as 25 years (!) later when he reached a quarterfinal in Halle. Connors' regular career was extended over the years 1970-1992 (with an exception in 1990 when he played just three events). In the final years of his career (1993-96) he was irregularly appearing, sticking to the American events, but in 1995 he decided to make a trip to Halle, and he reached there his last quarterfinal, losing 6-7, 3-6, to the eventual champion Marc Rosset. Afterwards he played only two more matches, but in the last one (Atlanta '96), at the age of almost 44 he was able to steal a set from Richey Reneberg. *"The way I was taught to play tennis is the way he plays,"* Reneberg said. *"Anytime you play against Connors, it's fun. He deserves to have the crowd behind him. I couldn't make much of an impression on him tonight. I thought he volleyed well."* Being asked about other challenges, Connors replied: *"A lot depends on timing and the places I feel quite comfortable with. I'll have to see how the scheduling goes."* Apparently it didn't go very well because Connors never played another ATP event, nevertheless he was playing for another few years on the senior circuit. What's the most staggering in terms of Connors' longevity, it's the way he was playing. Despite being a left-handed player, which at least in theory allows to get more cheap points attacking backhand of right-handed opponents, Connors was obtaining fewer points behind the serve than any other great champion of the Open Era. He had to work hard on the majority of points during his matches, so the number of rallies he was involved in, is actually mind blowing (as a great receiver he was putting constant pressure on the servers, forcing them to work hard on obtaining points too). How the hell someone who had to run so much during his matches, could keep the body in such a great shape to win five-setters for more than 20 years (his first won five-setter comes from the US Open '70, the last one from the same event 21 years later when he stunned everyone reaching the semifinal following two epic five-set wins over much younger compatriots: [Patrick McEnroe](#) & [Aaron Krickstein](#)). Very temperamental "Jimbo", was exciting the spectators all over the world for two full decades. In those years he experienced an amazing technological shift; when he began his career, they guys born in the 30s like Ken Rosewall & Rod Laver were still there, trying to win the biggest events with their wooden rackets and old-fashioned styles... when he was close to the finishing line, he had to deal with youngster born in the 70s, who were displaying a modern tennis, so over the years he was involved in interesting matches against the masters of wooden, aluminium and finally graphite rackets; in spite of keeping the same style based on flat shots, baseline rallies & frequent attacks to the net, Connors was able to find himself in constantly changing circumstances. The two decades (70s & 80s) were marked by his fascinating rivalries against other legends of the sport: Bjorn Borg, John McEnroe & Ivan Lendl. Connors played 23, 34 and 35 matches against them respectively, losing the rivalries in each case, but against them all he won the major finals, even twice against Borg & Lendl. Connors played arguably the best match of his life in the US

Open '78 final. Borg, who was chasing his third different major title (Australian Open wasn't prestigious then), had been unbeaten in 49 consecutive matches, yet Connors, inspired by the home-crowd, dismantled the great Swede. Observing Connors' matches I particularly like the way he moves on the court making a transition from defense to offense. His on-court awareness was second to none, the ability to attack the net almost always when the opponent played a slower ball landing on the boxes; this style required great eye-hand coordination, and in my opinion it's a main secret of Connors holding so many times despite not obtaining too many points behind the serve (rarely 20%). Especially as a server, Connors was unique in terms of making an advantage constructing the points wisely: first very precise serve (often more than 70% of 1st serve in), moving the opponent in a direction, then usually pushing him to another direction and forcing to run a long distance with his penetrating smooth shots off both wings (Connors' backhand was more reliable).

Biggest titles (8 majors):

Australian Open 1974

Wimbledon [1974](#), [1982](#)

US Open [1974](#), [1976](#), [1978](#), [1982](#), [1983](#)

Masters [1977](#)

Biggest lost finals (7 majors):

Australian Open [1975](#)

Wimbledon [1975](#), [1977](#), [1978](#), [1984](#)

US Open [1975](#), [1977](#)

Davis Cup 1984

CORRETJA, Alex (Spain, 1974)

2.

He was growing up in "La Salut" - the best club of Barcelona where previously trained i.a. Manuel Orantes & Juan Aguilera. Also two older brothers played tennis, but they weren't as passionate about this as Alex. The brother Ivan even won the national championships at the age of 14, but serious car injury caused the amputation of his leg. Alex won the Orange Bowl 16s title in 1990 and a year later turned to the professional circuit reaching a semifinal in his Challenger debut (Sevilla). In 1992 he notched valuable wins over very experienced older compatriots (Sergio Casal & Emilio Sanchez) in his first ATP events. Later that year he played his first ATP final (Guaraja) where lost to Carsten Arriens of Germany (b. 1969, his only mai-level final). The years 1993-94 stabilized him as a dangerous clay-courter who could be unpredictable on hardcourts too (in 1994 he defeated Jim Courier & Stefan Edberg in Indianapolis). The years 1995-96 brought disappointment, especially on clay - Corretja defeated a virtually unbeatable on that surface Thomas Muster in Gstaad '95 only to lose in the following round to Jakob Hlasek, who was talking about his upcoming retirement. The turning point in Corretja's career came at the US Open 1996 - he not only reached his [first major quarterfinal](#), he had a match point in an astonishingly tight encounter against Pete Sampras! Each of them won 188 points, each struck 25 aces. It was a huge boost of confidence for the Spaniard, he

realized that all the hard work put into the serve improvement, paid off. Even though the '97 season Corretja began with seven consecutive defeats (including accidental Challenger appearance, the only one between 1994 & 2003), he enjoyed a very successful year putting himself into the Top 5 on clay-courts. The year 1998 was the best in his career by a country mile. He had won four titles (two on clay, two on hard) when arrived in Lyon to begin the indoor season with a humiliating 1-12 record for a player of his status - Corretja captured the title, withstanding a match point in the 2nd set vs Tommy Haas in the final. It was carpet-indoors, that title guaranteed him participation at "Masters" (Hanover) held hard-indoors. Corretja, already with the first indoor title under his belt, felt very well, he took advantage of quite lucky "round robin" circumstances - Andre Agassi's retirement & Marcelo Rios' withdrawal. Sampras seemed to be unstoppable, but Corretja found a way to make a sweet revenge for the New York loss - he saved three match points to win 4-6, 6-3, 7-6 - in my opinion the most valuable victory in his career. The final vs Carlos Moya (a few months earlier they met in the French Open final) was wide open to different scenarios taking into account various aspects, but focusing on their H2H, the younger Spaniard was a heavy favorite - Moya had won all their three '98 meetings in straight sets, and was on his way to add another one as he easily grabbed the first two sets and created two mini-match point at 5-all - Corretja fought them off and came back from a 1:3* (30/40) deficit in the decider to survive the four-hour battle. That triumph unexpectedly opened for Corretja a possibility to become the best player in the world at the Australian Open '99. He needed the semifinal, yet he was already beaten in the second round by an average Christian Ruud. Similar opportunities didn't come again, but Corretja kept a high level on all surfaces for another few years. His movement and big topspins off both wings were his main assets. Of course he could win Roland Garros, it didn't happen (at least quarterfinals five years in a row), but I think that magnificent triumph in Hanover compensates for the Parisian setbacks. Trivia: Corretja in the late 90s introduced an untypical shot to the tour, namely running to his backhand side, he was able to play the ball with the forehand area of his racquet with a sudden flick of the wrist. After retirement, Corretja coached Andy Murray (2008-11) and the Spanish Davis Cup team (2012-13).

Biggest titles: Masters [1998](#), Davis Cup [2000](#)

Biggest lost finals: Roland Garros [1998](#) and [2001](#)

COSTA, Albert (Spain, 1975)

6.

The Spanish tennis enjoyed the appearance of four very good young players in the mid 90s (Alex Corretja, Felix Mantilla, Albert(o) Costa & Carlos Moya). I have to admit I expected the best things from Costa at the time, but changed my mind watching Moya at the Aussie Open '97 - two years later he became the no. 1 in the world and in retrospect, I have no doubts he had the best career. Costa seemed to me as a multiple French Open champion. I based that opinion on his three 5-setters against Thomas Muster, almost unbeatable on clay in the years

1995-1996. Costa almost stunned Muster in Paris '95 in four sets (having defeated two-time champion Jim Courier in round 4), then defeated him in the [Kitzbuhel final](#) the same year, and lost a 5-setter in the Monte Carlo '96 final, leading 2-1 like in all their three five-setters. So Costa was my main favorite to raise the trophy in Paris each edition in the late 90s, yet he didn't even play one quarterfinal in those years! His early defeats in the years 1996-97 (to Francisco Clavet & Mark Woodforde) were shocking; another two years he was ousted by Marcelo Rios, so he could say about the unfortunate draw. In the early 00s Costa lost his clay-court charm, he wasn't among favorites in the first three editions of the new millenium, in 2000 he should have reached the semifinal anyway (lost in the quarters to a clay-court journeyman Franco Squillari having defeated him in their three previous meetings), in 2001 he suffered a dramatic 5-set loss already in the first round to Julien Boutter (b. 1974), a dangerous Frenchman, being able to play inspired tennis at times. Finally in the year 2002, Costa fulfilled his Parisian destiny. His route to the title is more impressive looking back, the first two scalps (Richard Gasquet & Nikolay Davydenko) were obtained against inexperienced young players (Gasquet was a kid actually, debuting in Paris). In the quarterfinal Costa had a reverse luck comparing to his quarterfinal vs Muster seven years before - then he was two games away from a 4-set win, in 2002 he was two games away from a 4-set defeat to Guillermo Canas; five points to be more precise, the Spaniard trailed *2:4 (15/40) in that set, but survived 7-5, 3-6, 6-7, 6-4, 6-0 after an almost 4-hour clash. In the final against Juan Carlo Ferrero, a different type of luck was on Costa's side again - the rain fell in 3rd game of the match, the break lasted only 25 minutes, perhaps the younger Spaniard expected longer break and he completely lost his feeling of the court losing eleven straight games after the resumption - he needed those games to be warmed up well again, too late. Another two sets delivered what could be expected from the beginning, JCF won a set, another one Costa, and in the conclusion it meant 6-1, 6-0 4-6, 6-3 for the veteran (Costa's 202nd main-level event). I'm not sure how to explain Costa's inability to play good tennis indoors - he'd lost 17 consecutive matches under the roof in the years 1996-99 before defeating Hicham Arazi in Stuttgart. Very surprising stats because Costa had good volley technique & good reflex, he didn't need extensive swings to hit the ball off both wings. Already as a young player he reached a final on fast hard-court in [Dubai '96](#), the same year in the Wimbledon's first round he eliminated Michael Chang, obviously not a grass-court player, but at the time Chang was in great shape and two years before had even played his lone Wimbledon quarterfinal. In 1997 Costa played on hardcourts two very good big events (quarters at [Aussie Open](#) & semis at Cincy) losing to Pete Sampras on both occasions. Nevertheless, Costa just like Mantilla, will be remembered as a clay-courter; they didn't make a progress like Corretja in 1998 when he became equally dangerous on hard as on clay. Among Costa's 21 main-level finals, there's only one on a different surface than clay - the earlier mentioned event in the United Arab Emirates.

Biggest title (1 major): Davis Cup 2000 and Roland Garros [2002](#)

COURIER, Jim (USA)

1.

Courier grew up in Dae City, very small town (population of 6.5 thousand) and was introduced to tennis by Emma Spencer, a great aunt who ran "Dreamworld Tennis Club" in Sanford. *"Tennis was a fun thing to do with my family and I didn't dream too far in the future in the early days,"* Courier said. *"We watched some tennis on television, but it wasn't something that I had an early idea of pursuing as a profession. I wasn't one of those kids pretending to hit a shot to 'Win Wimbledon' on the wall like you hear about."* At the age of 14, Courier moved to Nick Bellettieri's academy, and became one of the most promising boys there, along with his roommate Andre Agassi, and one year older David Wheaton. Even though Courier was a great junior player (won Orange Bowl twice: under 16 in 1986 & under 18 in 1987), the media attention at the turn of the 80s and 90s was focused on three other amazing US teenagers: Agassi, Michael Chang & Pete Sampras - Courier's doubles partner. The man from Florida was no. 4 among those youngsters when the year 1990 was finished, but the beginning of the 90s belonged to him. Courier was the best player in the world, actually for more than two years while his ranking reflected it by 58 weeks on the top at four different periods of the years 1992-93. Courier's rise to the top initiated a combo [Indian Wells](#)-Key Biscayne in March of '91. The American won back-to-back titles, then shockingly lost two matches in his Davis Cup debut against Mexico, the USA team won the tie 3-2 anyway, and for another 13 ties the Americans never lost with Courier as a team member (he would lose another two rubbers in the 1995 final against Russia), until 1999 when they were beaten by the Australians. Courier became the youngest player (aged 22) to reach finals of all four majors, and the first man since Rod Laver in 1969, to reach the finals of the Australian, French and Wimbledon in the same season; the feat was not matched until 2006 by Roger Federer. There were two main factors that contributed to Courier's ascendancy: his top-spin forehand and great physical preparation. He was like a mental hammer for his opponents, he could hurt them consequently with his forehand over a longer period of time during a match; either from the back of the court wearing them down, or passing them - Stefan Edberg, the ranking leader of the years 1990-91, suffered four major defeats to Courier at three different venues (always in four sets), in the years 1992-93, even at Wimbledon where it seemed Courier's returns and passing-shots wouldn't be as efficient as on slower surfaces, meanwhile Courier defeated Edberg in those 4-setters everywhere in similarly convincing style. 1992 was Courier's year, he reached the top advancing to the San Francisco final. *"I was stressed out about it,"* recalled Courier in his semifinal against Derrick Rostagno. *"I was very aware of the situation. I just wanted to get there for one week. Derrick was a tricky, dangerous fast-court player and I had to grind my way through that match to get to No. 1. I was battling Derrick as well as the ranking and it was as much of a relief as it was a thrill to win the last point and get to the top of the rankings mountain."* But already the first two weeks on the top, showed some weakness, I mean his inability to win matches in very dramatic circumstances. On one hand he was cool & collected like Bjorn Borg, pretending that nothing would distract his focus, on the other hand something was missing in his game, something which is very difficult to describe, but Courier's MP-up defeats in back-to-back events to Boris Becker ([Brussels](#)) and Goran Ivanisevic (Stuttgart) were very telling. Nevertheless, Courier was able to avoid the tightest scenarios on clay in 1992, and

after winning two Asian titles on hard, Rome & French Open (for the second straight year), he was perceived as a title contender at Wimbledon - was ousted by a qualifier Andrei Olhovskiy (b. 1966) losing his 25-match winning streak. It was a huge blow for his morale, especially that other baseliner Agassi, won the title. That year conditions were favorable, the edition being relatively poor in rain, slowing the game down. In the second part of the season Courier was struggling with his form (shocking loss to the eventual champion Marc Rosset at the Olympics in Barcelona on clay; Courier was a huge favorite to get the golden medal), but the end of it was successful (final in Masters, Davis Cup triumph - Courier won the clincher) and the year 1993 kicked off just like a year before, with an Australian Open title after another final victory over Edberg. Courier advanced to the Wimbledon '93 final which he lost to Sampras, and was never the same afterwards. Borg and Wilander were burn out as 24-year-olds, Courier being one year younger, and to a lesser extent. In 1994 Courier reached two major semifinals, but he didn't win a title that year (only two finals in average events) and dropped outside the Top 10. The following year marked some sort of Courier's resurgence, but his former doubles partner Sampras, who overthrew him, was already beyond reach. Between Hong Kong '93 and Rome '97, they met ten times and Sampras left the court nine times as a victor. The following decade would bring something similar in Federer's confrontations against Lleyton Hewitt & Andy Roddick; there are examples when a more gifted player simply has all the answers against a very tough opponent who tries everything, only to fail, even when the score is tight. In the second half of the 90s, Courier turned into a very solid, yet predictable player. Actually after Roland Garros '94 when lost his status of the King of Clay after a defeat to Sergi Bruguera, he was never considered as a major threat, to the end of career he was claiming titles only in tournaments corresponding with today's ATP 500 & ATP 250. He decided to quit at the beginning of 2000 when he turned 30. In the years 2010-18 he served as a captain of the Davis Cup team for America. Courier had led his country with a modest 10-8 record during his captaincy (two semifinals). Trivia: Courier lost his first five meetings against Andrei Chesnokov, 4-6 in the end (four of those defeats when Courier was within a few points from winning).

Biggest titles (4 majors): Roland Garros [1991](#) and [1992](#), Australian Open [1992](#) and [1993](#)
Davis Cup 1992

Biggest lost finals (3 finals): US Open [1991](#), Roland Garros [1993](#), Wimbledon [1993](#)
Masters [1991](#) and [1992](#)

CURREN, Kevin (South Africa)

5.

Who said that at the turn of 70s and 80s playing doubles would prevent from achieving good results in doubles? After the transition from wooden to metal rackets the game became more physically demanding, but still allowed to play regularly good events in doubles & singles at the same time. Curren and Steve Denton met at the university of Texas, and began playing together as doubles partners, but after some time they improved their singles skills and belonged to the doubles elite, each of them reached two major singles finals; Denton's case is different though, and I wrote about this in his biography in the "... from Dent to Sinner..." book.

Both were serving great, Top 5 servers in the first half of the 80s. Obviously great serve, especially the second one is extremely important in doubles, but it helps a lot in singles too, when a player doesn't possess distinctive skills as a receiver; then he is supposed to play many tie-breaks and a lot depends how he deals with tight situations. They both were dealing well. In the fourth round of Wimbledon '83 Curren stunned Jimmy Connors thanks to his great service. He fired 32 aces and kept his composure in the 4th set tie-break because his chances in the potential five-setter could decrease significantly. Until the quarterfinal against Tim Mayotte, Curren didn't drop his serve. What Roscoe Tanner had done for tennis in terms of serving in the 70s, Curren did in the following decade, actually reaching another level - he helped to imagine what the 90s would bring to tennis as far as the serve was concerned. Before Wimbledon '83 the best servers couldn't hold 50 times in a row (Curren held 80), also serving more than 30 aces was an unknown territory - Curren did it, and what was more impressive against the undoubtedly best receiver at the time. Curren's best moments came at Wimbledon '85. That year not only his serve, but his return worked perfectly as well. In back-to-back matches he destroyed [John McEnroe](#) (1 hour 49 minutes) and [Jimmy Connors](#) (1 hour 32 minutes) - the two most successful players at Wimbledon at the time among the active guys. Curren was a favorite in the final against 17-year-old Boris Becker, but the young West German was serving much faster than McEnroe & Connors, and Curren's return came back to its normal. The South African (three months before he had become a naturalized American citizen) served well, but just like in his Australian Open '84 final, inability to win a tie-break at one set apiece was decisive. Since retiring from the tour, Curren served as a captain of the South Africa Davis Cup team.

Biggest lost finals: Australian Open [1984](#) and Wimbledon [1985](#)

DAVYDENKO, Nikolay (Russia, 1981)

3.

Stumbling upon his own legs, signs of frustration when nothing serious happened, lack of confidence to take a "challenge" when TV spectators know it was worth of that, regular average speed that cannot hurt anyone, finally double-handed volleys - at times hit from a comfortable position to play a normal overhead (!)... you would see those frames of Davydenko's career to ponder: "How it's possible that this guy was a solid Top 5 player for several years, multiple Grand Slam semifinalist?". The short answer can be contained in Juan Martin del Potro's comment after his loss to Davydenko in the 'Masters' 2009 final - *"He plays like PlayStation."* If you extract those frames, you don't see the whole picture - a man-machine. Davydenko once said he was a fan of the great Polish ski-jumper Adam Malysz, who used to explain his great successes on the ski jumping hill in a simple way: *"I'm focused on myself, to make a good jump."* In tennis you interact with your opponent, so it's obviously tough to be focused on yourself all the time, but I suppose it was something Davydenko tried to do throughout his career. The game-plan was basic: run fast being close to the baseline and hit the ball off both wings as soon as it bounces off the floor. This tactic was very efficient, even against a guy like Rafael Nadal, who had less time for reaction facing Davydenko. It didn't work against Roger

Federer though. The Swiss maestro with his “slice & dice” plan B, could outmaneuver the Russian machine, and he did it on a regular basis. Davydenko reached 4 quarterfinals and 4 semifinals at majors as many as five times being eliminated by Federer. It was never easy, but a very clever tactician like Federer knew how to play the most important points in those matches. The 5-all scenario was repeated several times, always with the same conclusion. Davydenko can say "If I hadn't met Federer so many times, I would have been a Grand Slam champion". The sweet revenge finally came in [London '09](#). Davydenko was on fire and self-confident, having a fantastic 18-5 record in tie-breaks as he faced Federer in the semifinal. Perhaps it helped him not panic too much at 4:5 (0/30) in the 3rd set, and he beat his worst foe 6-2, 4-6, 7-5 despite twelve consecutive defeats (it ended at 2-19 from Davydenko's perspective).

Biggest titles: Masters [2009](#) and Davis Cup 2006

DEL POTRO, Juan Martin (Argentina, 1988) 4.

One of the strangest careers among players born in the 80s. If Del Potro comes back to the circuit in 2021, it'll be his third comeback after a long break: he didn't play almost the entire 2010 (just three events that year), then he was sidelined in the years 2014-15 (just six events in two seasons). His third long break lasts since June '19 when he withdrew from the second round match at Queens Club. The first two breaks were caused by his chronic left wrist injury, the third break because he fractured his kneecap. It's a shame that his career has been tormented by injuries because when he was away from the tour for the first time (January 2010) he was fresh after winning at the US Open and playing a 'Masters' final in the first London edition, he had already beaten Roger Federer (twice) & Rafael Nadal (thrice) so at the time it wasn't so sure that something like "Big 4" would be known for several years, it could be "Big 5" or maybe "Big 4" in a different configuration because Del Potro could have won several times in important events against Novak Djokovic & Andy Murray, and the careers of one year older players could go in a different direction... Del Potro was considered as a potential threat since the beginning of his career with his lethal ground-strokes and amazing movement for a two-metre tall guy. Del Potro wasn't very tall as a young teenager though, his height suddenly increased when he began playing professional events, and he didn't adjust his gamestyle to his height in terms of the serve. As opposed to other guys of his size who rely on two-shot combo (serve & forehand), Del Potro established himself as a player with one of the most ferocious forehand (a solid serve at most). The year 2008 meant a breakthrough - Del Potro, who was losing tight matches often, matured, cut his pony-tail, became more focused, more reserved in showing emotions, and his potential exploded in Summer when he notched a 23-match winning streak (collecteding four titles and advancing to his [first major quarterfinal](#)). Despite that improvement, he was still defeated by the best players in the world. Another breakthrough came at Miami '09 - prior to that tournament, Del Potro had records: 0-4 vs Federer & Nadal, 0-2 vs Djokovic & Murray with a record in sets just 2-28! Then he stunned in the quarterfinal Nadal 6-4, 3-6, 7-6 trailing 0:3 in the decider with two breaks. That victory had double

significance, not only did he finally defeat one of the best players in the world, he also did it in dramatic circumstances; it was the second of ten consecutive matches won when the deciding third set tie-break was required. *"I had two dreams this week,"* said Del Potro looking at Federer, after claiming his first (then it seemed unlikely it would be the last) major title. *"One was to win the US Open and the other one is to be like Roger. One is done, but I need to improve a lot to be like you. You fought until the final point. You are a great champion. I'm very happy to be here with this crown, with these people, on this court. This will be in my mind forever."* Nine months earlier, Federer humiliated Del Potro in the Australian Open quarterfinal (6-3, 6-0, 6-0).

Biggest titles (1 major): US Open [2009](#), Davis Cup [2016](#)

Biggest lost finals (1 major): US Open [2018](#), Masters [2009](#); Olympics ([Rio 2016](#))

DIBBS, Eddie (USA, 1951)

5.

He was afraid of playing on grass, you couldn't see him at Wimbledon or Australian Open (grass in the 70s). But on the slower surfaces he knew how to collect point after point to win matches in not impressive style. He didn't care that people often said about him that he didn't play spectacular tennis, some of the fans simply said he was boring to watch. Most of all he was patient, patience it's a virtue highly required in tennis, maybe in all human activities. He could keep the ball in play with his backhand all the time, running to everything, because of that he got a nickname 'Fast Eddie'. Dibbs, Solomon, Barazzutti, Higuera, Gildemeister - those guys born in the 50s were the most patient & one-dimensional among those who reached the final stages of the biggest events. Of course patient baseliners like Bjorn Borg and Guillermo Vilas were much better, but these two could change their game styles to be successful with attacking attitudes on fast courts. In the Houston '80 semifinal, Dibbs was trailing to the powerfully serving Bill Scanlon 2-6, 0:3 when began using dropshots almost at every rally to wear his opponent down, then passing him mercilessly to get six straight games; he repeated the same tactics as he trailed 2:4 to win four games in a row (they faced each other three times and Dibbs always won 6-4 in the deciding 3rd set). Dibbs made some noise around himself as he triumphed in Hamburg '73, he liked those heavy courts winning the event again in 1973 and 1976. He was always good in Paris, he eliminated Wojtek Fibak thrice (always in the third round), leaving the good Pole without any French Open quarterfinal. He was always fighting to the end, 70% of deciding sets won speaks by itself; other interesting example of internal US affairs - the first round of the US Open vs Bob Lutz with whom was always easily winning or losing; no chance for 2.5 sets, saves a double match point at 3:5 in the 3rd to win 5-7, 2-6, 7-5, 6-0, 6-2.

DIMITROV, Grigor (Bulgaria, 1991)

3.

February 2009: Dimitrov was proclaimed "new Federer". The 18-year-old Bulgarian [478] as 'wild card' defeated Tomas Berdych [23] in the Rotterdam first round, and in the second round he played 2.5 hour match against Rafael Nadal, who finished the previous season as the best player in the world. There were many similarities between Dimitrov and Federer: both Wimbledon junior champions (Federer '98, Dimitrov '08), both with natural talent to effortlessly play all basic strokes, both using Wilsons (Dimitrov's service motion looked like an unashamed copy of Federer's serve), finally the Rotterdam connection - actually people began talking about Federer as a huge talent after he reached (in his fifth main-level event) the quarterfinal in the Netherlands '99 where he lost in three sets to the best player at the time - Yevgeny Kafelnikov, while Dimitrov notched in Rotterdam his barely second main-level event. Both Federer and Dimitrov, despite showing great potential needed some time to make a transition from Challengers to the ATP tour, but the first few years of Dimitrov's career clearly indicated he wouldn't achieve even a small percentage of Federer's successes. There were two things that separated them: serve and backhand. Dimitrov wasn't able to hold so comfortably, and his inclination to keep the ball in play with backhand slice was huge - backhand slice it's an efficient shot as long as you face impatient offensive baseliners, the guys like Juan Martin del Potro, Marin Cilic or Tomas Berdych. The Bulgarian has beaten each of them a few times, but holds a negative record overall. Dimitrov was regularly losing to the Big 4 guys, also notched a 1-5 H2H vs David Ferrer, who was among Top 5 players at the time when Dimitrov was improving his tennis. With years he stepped out of Federer's shadow, developing his own style, changing his technique a bit and displaying amazing flexibility (the only department in which I praise him more). The 2014 season allowed to expect that at least to some degree he'd fulfill his talent - he won three titles on three different surfaces ([hard](#), clay, [grass](#)) and reached the Wimbledon semifinal where played a [very balanced four-setter](#) against the eventual champion Djokovic (Dimitrov defeated Murray twice in those events). This what could be perceived as Dimitrov's destiny in 2015, happened two years later, in 2017. He began and finished that year with titles. In the meantime won his lone Masters 1K title ([Cincinnati](#)). In both his biggest titles to date (Cincy & London-Masters), Dimitrov enjoyed favorable draws, he escaped from facing the Big 4 guys. It was an open period in men's tennis considering the 10s decade because after Wimbledon '17, the guys who dominated the entire 2016 season (Murray, Djokovic) were spent and pulled out for several months. In London, in his only appearance among the best eight players of the season, Dimitrov avoided matches against his toughest opponents (Nadal, Federer - he had 1-16 record combined against them) thanks to his final opponent, David Goffin who ousted them both. Lucky triumph, but let's say "deserved" through the prism of his indubitable talent and showmanship. That title reminded me of Manuel Orantes' Masters triumph in Houston '76 - the best three players at the time (Bjorn Borg, Ilie Nastase and Jimmy Connors withdrew). Djokovic & Murray were sidelined when Dimitrov enjoyed his biggest success, Nadal played just one match before withdrawing from the event due to injury.

Biggest title: Masters [2017](#)

DJOKOVIC, Novak (Serbia, 1987)

1.

Roger Federer owns Wimbledon (8 titles), Rafael Nadal owns Roland Garros (13 titles), Djokovic owns Australian Open (9 titles). Regardless of the end of their unique rivalry, it's almost certain that the record of most wins in those particular majors are reserved for each of them. US Open is undecided: Federer leads with 5 over Nadal's 4 and Djokovic's 3, but five times in New York did also triumph Jimmy Connors & Pete Sampras. I could follow Djokovic's amazing journey in Australia from its very beginning, but didn't do that. I remember that I was disappointed that in the first round of the 2005 event, Marat Safin - one of the best players at the time - was supposed to play at night session against a 17-year-old Serb, who hadn't been known even as an outstanding junior. I thought "it doesn't make sense to watch this potentially one-sided match", and the scoreline confirmed it, Safin won 6-0, 6-2, 6-1. The Russian, who finished the event as a champion said about Djokovic: *"The guy tried everything. I just told him he's going to be a great player."* Did Safin think that the Serb would be really great after giving him such a lesson? Djokovic kept improving, but I didn't think he would be great until the American Indian Wells-Miami combo of the year 2007 when he was approaching the 20th year of his life. He came to the United States from Dubai where he lost in three sets to Federer, and had a 0-4 record against the Swiss at the time, but for the first time in their four matches, Federer needed to be focused from start to finish. Djokovic reached the [Indian Wells final](#), then he triumphed in [Miami](#). What's very important is the fact he won 11 matches in those two events not dropping a set. Already in the first two years of his career on the Tour, I noticed that he was dealing well with pressure situations [for instance, at Wimbledon '05 he won two five-setters withstanding five match points in total, first as he defeated Wesley Moodie (b. 1979) in a qualifying round being a point to lose the match in four sets, then in the second round as he ousted Guillermo Garcia-Lopez facing a match point in the 3rd set]. Later that year, at the US Open he [survived a battle](#) against another gifted youngster, Gael Monfils, despite huge problems with breathing and cramping. Those initial years indicated that the will to win was tremendous, hypochondria is secondary (over the years, especially in his youth, Djokovic was many times accused on exaggerating his physical problems as well as bouncing the ball too many times before the serve) because you never knows what goes through players mind and psychological confrontation is a part of the game, thus until the moment the opponent retires, the player without injury symptoms should be fully aware that lapse of concentration may cost him leaving the court as a loser. So when Djokovic was able to win back-to-back matches with relative ease, I knew how lethal he would be in the future having already proved in the past his mental resistance when the things didn't go his way. I remember his victory in Miami over Rafael Nadal (6-3, 6-4). Nadal had defeated Djokovic 6-2, 7-5 at Indian Wells (their second meaning), thus the Miami win told me another important thing about Djokovic - he analyzes the game and was open-minded to try different things. In Miami he was more aggressive from the baseline, and during that win over Nadal, I guess I realized for the first time, how cleanly he can hit the ball in all directions, also from quite uncomfortable positions on the court. *"When you play a final nothing is easy,"* said Djokovic after the final victory over Guillermo Canas. *"I played unbelievable tennis in Indian Wells and here. It was the best tennis of my life. I didn't lose a set."*

I'm always comparing myself to the best players in the world because that is what I want to be one day." After that win I thought that Djokovic would be the second best Slavic speaker in the Open Era, assuming that he was on his way to be compared with Ivan Lendl. Today when I'm writing it, I know that Djokovic could be almost certain that he would achieve more than Lendl when he was already 25 (the year 2012). When the season 2009 was over, it wasn't certain that Djokovic would create the Big 3 along with Federer & Nadal. At the time he was more in the mix with Andy Murray and Juan M. Del Potro. Djokovic had won one major and Masters then (both titles from 2008), Del Potro one major, while Murray had won just one Masters 1K title fewer than Djokovic (4 to 5, one year younger Del Potro had won none). Djokovic's rise to the pantheon of the greatest players in history, arguably should be counted since the Davis Cup '10 final when Serbia defeated France, and Djokovic convincingly defeated two French players, beginning his awesome series of wins - the Serb was unbeaten in 43 matches in a row (46 adding three Hopman Cup matches) before he lost [the French Open semifinal](#) to Federer after a dramatic four-set contest. There were seven titles, including six in big events in which the best players participated, two different surfaces (hard and clay). There was no doubt, Djokovic was on his way to reach no. 1 in the world, especially that during the streak, he had defeated Nadal four times and Federer twice. The coronation came at Wimbledon, after the [semifinal victory](#) over Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, one of Djokovic's toughest opponents in the early years (the Frenchman led 5:2 in their H2H before the Wimbledon match which rewrote their rivalry completely). Appetite comes with eating - for a few years Djokovic was dreaming about reaching no. 1 and claiming the most prestigious title (Wimbledon), once he achieved both within a few days, he didn't want to stop being fully aware that all records of Federer and Nadal were in his grasp. The decade of 00s belonged to Federer (he finished five seasons as the best player in the world), as far as the decade of the 10s is concerned, I have to say, Djokovic was the best with being on the top of the ranking five times as well (in this stats Djokovic is better than the Swiss because he began another decade, the 20s, as the best player for the sixth time). Nadal should be considered as the second best player of the 00s (one season finished as No. 1) and 10s (four seasons finished as No. 1). This surreal rivalry between three players is ongoing, Federer and Nadal have won 20 major titles, Djokovic has 18. The Grand Slam events are the most important, so we can compare different data to prove that Federer, Nadal or Djokovic is the best player in history. From my point of view, the statement is legitimate only when they all have finished their careers, and one of them is a leader in this most important category. If you ask me "who's going to finish with the most titles" I may reply "Djokovic", but it's nothing new, already a few years ago, when the difference between them in conquering major titles was bigger, I thought that the Serb had the best cards to finish as the greatest. Nadal seems to be currently limited to winning only in Paris, Federer, if adds another major title (I don't believe in it), looking realistically may do this only at Wimbledon, Djokovic, who is six years younger than Federer and one year younger than Nadal, plays a type of tennis allowing to expect him triumphing everywhere (in Paris rather only if Nadal isn't the last opponent; at Roland Garros they have played eight times against each other, Nadal leads 7:1, including 4:0 in finals). Also one extremely important thing pondering about chances of winning Slams, it's Djokovic's unique on court mentality, in my opinion the most extraordinary in the entire Open Era. Djokovic has defeated in five-setters all the best guys born in the 80s he played against, when they were in their prime. He is the only man to have defeated a player four times in

five-set matches, and he did it against both best Swiss players (4-1 vs Wawrinka, 4-0 vs Federer)! It's almost beyond comprehension that three of those four wins against Federer, he manufactured facing match points (twice as a receiver!). Already in 2012 Djokovic stepped onto the territory no-one had explored before him... Australian Open, the last two rounds: 7-5 in the 5th set against Andy Murray ([almost 5-hour match](#)), then 7-5 in the 5th against Nadal (almost 6-hour match - the longest final in history). Both Murray and Nadal had great five-set records at the time, 12-5 and 15-3 respectively. In the years 2009-16, Murray won 15 out of 17 five-setters, both defeats when Djokovic was standing on the other side of the net... Djokovic's ability to win "lost matches" is uncanny as well as his ability to win matches when he sniffs the finishing line (he didn't lose a match wasting MP for nine years before he experienced it against Marin Cilic at [Queens Club '18](#)). Having seen so many matches of the Serb over the years, some of them 2-3 times, I noticed that one aspect of his brain processing is unmatched, namely his ability to switch from a total concentration to total relaxation which shouldn't be confused with recklessness. Two examples: [US Open '11 semifinal](#) vs Federer, [Shanghai '12 final](#) vs Murray. In both those matches, Djokovic erased match points and defeated very demanding opponents, giving an impression that he accepted defeat, that simply wanted to enjoy the atmosphere of a great match remaining on the court a bit longer. If I have to indicate a match that turned him into a 5-set monster, it'd be his sensational defeat to Jurgen Melzer in [Paris '10](#). Djokovic jumped to a 6-3, 6-2, 2:0 lead against a player who had defeated in their previous two matches, who never played a major quarterfinal. Djokovic should have won that match, but after a four-hour battle he was eliminated by the Austrian, who was in trouble at the end of sets 4 and 5. I guess Djokovic realized then that he overheated, he understood that it's better to be physically/mentally well prepared at 4-all in the 5th set instead of keeping a very high level of concentration from start to finish, being focused on winning 3-0. After that loss, he found a great balance between high concentration from the beginning and controlling the final outcome, keeping in mind the biggest truism in tennis "the last point of the match is the most important". The other very important thing when two players of similar skills face each other is a calculated risk. Djokovic has mastered it, he likes to deliver his second serve with the speed of the 1st serve, but he chooses right situations, I have never seen him hitting the second serve with full force when he faced a match point - then he goes for his most successful solutions, these are different depending on the opponent though. I've noticed that against his three most challenging opponents he's been applying different strategies: against Federer he's glued to the baseline, convinced that at crucial moments the Swiss will attack the net, so better to wait from the back to hurt him with passing-shots, against Murray he's keen to attack the net often, against Nadal he's more focused on accurate baseline shots than against anyone knowing that the Spaniard must be finished 2-3 times during a rally, so there's no room on improvisation, he knows that the ball will come back to his side after a great shot, and another one or two more will be required to finish the point. In Head-to-Heads, Djokovic leads 25:11 against Murray, 27:23 vs Federer and 29:27 vs Nadal. Mind-blowing number of matches against them all, enough time to figure out what to do in order to avoid repeating bitter defeats (US Open '12 to Murray, French Open '11 to Federer, ['09 Madrid](#) to Nadal). I cannot exclude the possibility that Djokovic will finally start losing matches being close to win them with noticeable frequency, but for now he's the best example of how to deal with tense moments in all configurations you can imagine.

Biggest titles (18 majors):

Australian Open [2008](#), [2011](#), [2012](#), [2013](#), [2015](#), [2016](#), [2019](#), [2020](#), [2021](#)

Roland Garros [2016](#)

Wimbledon [2011](#), [2014](#), [2015](#), [2018](#), [2019](#)

US Open [2011](#), [2015](#), [2018](#)

Masters [2008](#), [2012](#), [2013](#), [2014](#), [2015](#)

Davis Cup 2010

Biggest lost finals (10 majors):

Roland Garros [2012](#), [2014](#), [2015](#), [2020](#)

Wimbledon [2013](#)

US Open [2007](#), [2010](#), [2012](#), [2013](#), [2016](#)

EDBERG, Stefan (Sweden, 1966)

1.

Among the European countries, Sweden was the strongest for two decades (80s & 90s). The decade of the 80s was incomparably better, but the decade of the 90s was great too, especially compared to the downhill of the 21s century. In the 80s the strength of tennis in Sweden had faces of Bjorn Borg (played just 1980-81), Mats Wilander, Henrik Sundstrom, Anders Jarryd, Joakim Nystrom, Jonas Svensson & Kent Carlsson; in the 90s of Thomas Enqvist, Magnus Larsson, Magnus Gustafsson, Jonas Bjorman, Magnus Norman & Thomas Johansson. Edberg combined both generations (Davis Cup triumphs in the span of ten years) as a transitional player who belonged to the elite for the entire second half of the 80s and the first half of the 90s, and he was the only one displaying a serve-and-volley style on a regular basis, on every surface. An excellent junior, he won all four Grand Slam junior titles in 1983 to become the only player to achieve the "Junior Grand Slam" of the Open Era. His professional career could never occur though, because during the US Open '83, Edberg's serve accidentally caused the death of linesman Dick Wertheim. It was a traumatic experience, Edberg was in depression thinking about quitting tennis, but thankfully he understood it was a terrible accident, and he shouldn't have blamed himself. The first big success came already in Edberg's first full year on the tour, in doubles. He helped Sweden to defeat USA in the Davis Cup '84 final, partnering Jarryd. In the mid 80s Edberg established himself as a great singles & doubles player, winning majors in both competitions, taking away from McEnroe, not only a status of the best singles & doubles player, but also the best serve-and-volleyer. In singles, Edberg had won two Australian Open titles on grass (the last two editions on that surface), but he realized that he needed to improve his game in order to overcome at the top the best player of the 80s - Ivan Lendl. There was one big problem - Edberg's forehand. He was hitting all strokes with a classical continental grip, playing like that in the 80s (all the more in the 90s) was rather unique; Edberg's backhand was great, but with the continental grip you cannot play fast top-spin balls off the forehand. As a S/V player, Edberg developed (with the help of his British coach, Tony Pickard) a complex game; in the 80s he corrected his service motion a bit and decreased the speed of the first serve in order to keep a very high percentage. Edberg's rush to the net was very natural, he wanted to be as

close to the net as possible and there were troubles with his foot faults; once he finally mastered his feet movement, he was able to play the approaching volley being closer to the net than any other player. As a receiver, Edberg was fully aware of his limitations: he was using his forehand only as a shot allowing to keep the ball in play, but he also mastered his passing-shots off the weaker wing using wisely angles, so to some degree in Edberg's forehand I see a difference between his results juxtaposing the times when more athletic guys, playing with bigger spins appeared on the tennis scene with the times of more classical game-styles. Edberg was struggling a lot with Jim Courier for instance because the American wasn't eager to attack the net not being well prepared, so passing him wasn't easy, on the other hand Courier was hitting the ball with plenty of top-spin which caused Edberg's troubles to keep the ball in play before approaching shots. Nevertheless, when Edberg was in his best physical shape (the years 1989-91) he could deliver amazing tennis not hurting his opponents with the weaker side. His footwork was simply outstanding, and he was taking advantage of it playing cheap-and-charge often. Edberg was close to triumph even at Roland Garros, in 1989 he advanced to the final, and wasted plenty of opportunities to beat Michael Chang in four sets, something he paradoxically did in 1996 on the same court when his reflex wasn't the same while Chang greatly improved as a player, and was in his prime... The end of the 80s marked Edberg's rivalries with Lend, Wilander, but mainly with Boris Becker. Edberg's rivalry with the (West) German is peculiarly interesting because Becker won as many as 25 out of their 35 matches, yet Edberg was better in their most important meetings (2-1 in Wimbledon finals, 1-0 in Masters finals & 1-0 at [Roland Garros](#) - Becker wasn't as close to reaching the final in Paris as in 1989 when lost a five-setter to the Swede). Edberg's decline happened quite abruptly, in 1994. At the beginning of the year he lost the Grand Slam [semifinal in Australia](#), he still wasn't a veteran (28) by the standards then, and it'd be very difficult not to expect him in a few more semifinals at majors in the future. However, between Roland Garros '94 and US Open '96, Edberg didn't even reach the quarterfinal, usually losing in the second rounds. It was a huge blow for someone who was regularly advancing to the quarterfinals.

Biggest titles (6 majors):

Australian Open [1985](#) and [1987](#), Wimbledon [1988](#) and [1990](#), US Open [1991](#) and [1992](#)
Masters [1989](#)
Davis Cup [1984](#) and [1994](#)

Biggest lost finals (5 majors):

Roland Garros [1989](#), Wimbledon [1989](#), Australian Open [1990](#), [1992](#) and [1993](#)

ENQVIST, Thomas (Sweden, 1974)

4.

Magnus Norman once said that Enqvist could have been the best in the world if he'd been playing on the tour just like during practise sessions. I have no idea what was happening at Enqvist's sessions, anyway I can imagine him as the best player with serious modification of the tennis rules. I mean the Swede could be much more efficient if service boxes were designated only for the serve, so players couldn't attack the net and use dropshots. He was clumsy playing

volleys and overheads, he also didn't belong to the fastest guys, so without chasing dropshots and being aware that opponents won't attack the net either (forcing him to run from corner to corner), he would be in his comfort zone all the time. Except clay courts, during the baseline rallies usually he was better than anyone, spreading fast, flat strokes all over the place off both wings, similarly to Andre Agassi, attacking the ball always on the rise, but Enqvist as a bigger and stronger guy was able to do that in much more impressive style (!), especially on the hardcourts and indoors. They faced each other ten times with a 5-all outcome; Agassi stated: *"He has good serve & lethal groundstrokes. He is good mentally, and knows how to play under pressure."* He was supposed to be the successor of Bjorn Borg, Mats Wilander & Stefan Edberg. Became the best junior in the world as a 17 year-old boy. The following year he jumped from No. 229 to 63. The quick progress was halted by a serious injury of both knees which almost ended his career in 1994. In 1995 he collected five titles and lost a [dramatic semifinal](#) at Masters (to Boris Becker). Injuries reminded about themselves. Enqvist was waiting for something huge and it almost happened at the Australian Open '99. He was in terrific form in Australia winning 14 consecutive matches (counting an exhibition event at Kooyong), but in the Melbourne final, his peer Yevgeny Kafelnikov - with the help of his coach Larry Stefanki - found an antidote. The Russian won it 4-6, 6-0, 6-3, 7-6 having gathered nine straight games in the process which was ridiculous given Enqvist's performances in the previous rounds... I think Enqvist is the only guy I've seen, who didn't bounce the ball at all before his first and second serve (sometimes he did just one lazy bounce before the first serve) - both serves were fast & flat like his groundstrokes. Exceptionally fast pace of play, many aces & double faults, plenty of winners & unforced errors, Enqvist only once played a match that went beyond four hours... it occurred in the Davis Cup final 1996 as he defeated Cedric Pioline 3-6, 6-7, 6-4, 6-4, 9-7 being two points away from defeat at *6:7 in the final set. It could have been the sweetest victory of his career if Nicklas Kulti had converted one of his three match points in the deciding rubber against Arnaud Boetsch. Enqvist got his name after cross-country skier Thomas Magnusson who won three medals at the FIS Nordic World Ski Championships, including gold in the 30 km.

Biggest lost final (1 major): Australian Open [1999](#); Davis Cup 1996

FEDERER, Roger (Switzerland, 1981)

1.

He has recently made his long-awaited return to tennis following double knee surgery in Doha (lost in the quarterfinal). This year he will turn 40, I thought that his last year's semifinal defeat to Novak Djokovic at Australian Open would be his last official appearance. Federer left nothing in the tank after the opener which he lost leading 4:1* (40/0). He had defeated John Millman and Tennys Sandgren in amazing five-setters, being on the verge of defeat. Federer made the hearts of his fans beating again, but players of this kind, he was usually defeating 3-0 at Slams. A few weeks after Djokovic's loss, Federer played (and won) an exhibition match against Rafael Nadal in Cape Town (Federer's mother comes from South Africa), then came pandemic and Federer wouldn't play for six months even if he wanted. Wouldn't be a fitting end of his stellar career to play the last two matches against his two arch rivals? I wonder what he can count on,

does he believe he may bewitch at Wimbledon one more time? They both, Federer and Nadal have won 20 majors. I assume that keeping the tied-record would be a driving force of the comeback, but let's face the reality. Nadal is five years younger, Djokovic (17 major titles) six years younger - their styles of play have been always more demanding, but they also have been denying paradigms of tennis longevity. If Federer can realistically think about defeating them, he is theoretically able to do this only at Wimbledon, but he cannot face them earlier than in the quarterfinals (this year) while in the past few years, a bunch of young and hungry wolves stormed the tennis scene. From perspective of tennis fans, Federer's comeback is a blessing, I think that he's the most beloved tennis player ever, but he risks frequent defeats and dropping in the ranking, how long he can enjoy participating in ATP events when he'll be losing in second rounds to players he could have defeated "6-2 6-4" in his best years? In modern tennis, there was only one guy who was able to be competitive in the 40th year of living - Jimmy Connors, it's tough to compare his times. On the one hand Federer has been one of the finest servers who touched the racquet, it allows to imagine him holding easily; on the other hand how his keen may react when he will be forced to be involved in baseline rallies as a receiver against big hitters who know how to change the direction of the ball. I wish him all the best, but don't believe that he's going to win the biggest events again; a few years he proved me wrong, it was the year 2017, the almost 36 year-old Federer came from a knee injury after a six-month break, and won the Australian Open! That year he also triumphed at Wimbledon, it was a year when Djokovic and Andy Murray (the best players of 2016) suffered injuries, and Federer like many years in the past, was competing with Nadal in the race for the title of the best player of the season. Federer began to play with lower frequency, wisely choosing his events. Australian Open '17 meant Federer's last title to date - remarkable achievement, within five majors he collected another three titles even though he didn't win any in the years 2013-17. It's a great example that everything is possible, but the times were different, as I already mentioned, Federer hadn't such a strong opposition of players a dozen years younger like he will be facing this season. No matter what would happen this year, Federer has guaranteed a place in history as one of three greatest players, in the minds of many the greatest, a goat, and I understand it given his style of play and friendly personality. Looking back, it was tough to predict how tremendously Federer's career would develop. It was the year 1998 when Federer played his first ATP tournaments, the number three was special because Federer faced Andre Agassi in the first round of Basel. Federer was shown on Eurosport for the first time, and journalists had an opportunity to write about the teenager as one of the biggest prospects in tennis (he had won Wimbledon and Orange Bowl that year). The first full year on the tour (1999) wasn't easy though. Federer was intertwining flashes of brilliance with annoying nonchalance, in the mid-season he suffered an 8-match losing streak. Federer's peer Lleyton Hewitt drew more attention, in the years 2000-01 one year older Marat Safin and Juan C. Ferrero were ranked higher, in 2001 Federer had defeated at Wimbledon the 7-time Wimbledon Pete Sampras in a memorable five-setter, it seemed like a handing over the baton, but the following year when Federer was perceived for the first time as a potential Grand Slam champion, he lost the first round at Wimbledon to three years younger Mario Ancic, in straight sets, in the first match of the Croat on a big court fully packed! In 2001 Federer claimed his maiden title, in a main-level event no. 48, no other great champion waited so long to raise a trophy. The 20-year-old Federer was happy the burden dropped off his shoulders, but in his age Bjorn Borg was a triple

Grand Slam champion, Ivan Lendl had 8 titles and led Czechoslovakia to the Davis Cup triumph, while Sampras didn't need to worry about money anymore, claiming a Grand Slam Cup title (received a check for 2 million dollars, having won his maiden Slam by the way). Saying that Federer would be for the 00s someone like Borg, Lendl and Sampras in the previous decades, didn't make sense, but time showed that he has overcome them all, significantly. Federer won his first two really big titles at age of 22 (Wimbledon, Masters), but in my opinion, the key to astonishing achievements was his performance in Australian Open '04 when he advanced to no. 1 the world for the first time (and didn't lose this position for more than four years when Nadal overthrown him after an epic Wimbledon final (237 weeks on the top - it's a record). The event in Melbourne '04 was so important because Federer showed his new face of a clever tactician... The end of the 90s it was a time when serve-and-volley was still a dominant game-style, Federer grew up (just like me) admiring Boris Becker and Stefan Edberg, he stylized his tennis on these two great players, but he didn't possess Edberg's finesse and Becker's power, Federer's serve was very good, but not lethal like in Sampras' case. The young Federer reminded me the most of Tim Henman (Federer's toughest rival, beside Hewitt, in the first few years on the tour), the permanent aspirant to the Wimbledon title. Admittedly Federer had his first Wimbledon crown at the age of 22 which placed him in all-time hierarchy over Henman, but at the time I wasn't convinced that he would win many more given that talent of Andy Roddick exploded that year and Ferrero looked like a "king of clay" for the entire decade, finally Federer's acquaintance from the junior times, David Nalbandian was playing better and better, defeating Federer in their first five professional meetings! Returning to Federer's new face in Melbourne - he reinvented himself during the fortnight. From an offensive player, who was supposed to play serve-and-volley regularly on grass and indoors, and applying attacking game on hardcourts frequently, Federer turned into a baseliner. He wasn't particularly interested in frequent attacks to the net, and the effect was thundering, Federer defeated in back-to-back matches in four-setters his toughest opponents of the young generation: Hewitt (H2H 2:7) and Nalbandian (H2H 1:5). Federer rewrote the script because he realized that men's tennis was transforming itself into a baseline game in which those who hit the ball very well off both sides will have more arguments to defeat players who rely more on serve and volley. The Australian Open '04 catapulted Federer to a new level, the trophy raised in Melbourne it was the Holy Grail - Federer became convinced that thinking about himself as another Edberg/Becker was like running into a brick wall. But being inspired by them was priceless, the new Federer simply found the great balance between his defensive and offensive attitudes, he could modify his game depending on the situation, attacking the net freely without an obvious pattern. I remember his matches from the mid 00s when he was almost invincible, he could play a few games in a row not being interested to play a single volley, and then, all of a sudden he could apply a few serve-and-volley actions behind the second serve or propose cheap-and-charge. Federer's new face was brutal for two players in particular: Hewitt and Roddick. It was rather sad watching how these two young men were helpless facing Federer, especially that he was giving them a taste of their own medicine: against Hewitt, Federer could be glued to the baseline, exchanging shots of different spins, simply showing the Australian that his baseline game was more versatile, his footwork better, and it was enough - adding much better serve - to defeat him fifteen times in a row (!) while against Roddick, Federer was serving better than against anyone else because of the specific rhythm of their matches - when your

opponent holds easily, you have more energy to serve faster and that's what Federer was consistently implementing. He knew how to read Roddick serve, and the rock solid backhand block, allowed him to put the ball onto Roddick's side more often than other players, with this methodical approach Federer knew that he should break A-Rod at least once each set, if not - not a problem at all, one mini-break in the tie-break should be enough to take the set anyway... Federer defeated Roddick eleven times in a row (6-0 in tie-breaks in those matches). Federer created a huge gap between himself and all the most talented players born in the years 1980-82, only Marat Safin seemed to be a challenging opponent, but once he won his second major title ([Australian Open '05](#); epic semifinal over Federer) he couldn't find the motivation anymore. Already when Federer had won 5-6 majors, people started to foresee twenty for him which finally came true, but it's scary to think how many biggest titles Federer could have collected if two arch-rivals hadn't stood in his way: Nadal & Djokovic. The Spaniard manifested his big hunger for glory in the first meeting against Federer. It happened at Key Biscayne '04. The Swiss opened the year with a 23-1 record, had won three titles and then, Nadal stunned him 6-3, 6-3... Federer hadn't lost a match of this type for 1.5 years when he had been defeated by other left-hander Franco Squillari 2-6, 3-6 in Sydney. The first few matches didn't indicate that Djokovic would be a serious threat for Federer's records. The Swiss won their first four matches, dropping two sets in the process, but his victory wasn't threatened in any of those matches. Montreal '07 changed everything in their rivalry; it's not only that Djokovic defeated Federer in the final, he did it in dramatic circumstances, [7-6, 2-6, 7-6](#) (saving a triple set point on return at 5:6 in the opener). That match set a tone for the rest of their rivalry. The Serb got the edge in tighter moments, actually it's ridiculous how many times he defeated Federer when the things were balanced for them both at the end of their matches: Djokovic has won all their three matches when a deciding third set tie-break was required, and all their four five-setters (three of them when Federer was holding match points, twice on serve which is absolutely mindblowing).

Biggest titles (20 majors):

Australian Open [2004](#), [2006](#), [2007](#), [2010](#), [2017](#), [2018](#)

Roland Garros [2009](#)

Wimbledon [2003](#), [2004](#), [2005](#), [2006](#), [2007](#), [2009](#), [2012](#), [2017](#)

US Open [2004](#), [2005](#), [2006](#), [2007](#), [2008](#)

Davis Cup [2014](#)

Masters [2003](#), [2004](#), [2006](#), [2007](#), [2010](#), [2011](#)

Biggest lost finals (11 majors):

Australian Open [2009](#),

Roland Garros [2006](#), [2007](#), [2008](#), [2011](#)

Wimbledon [2008](#), [2014](#), [2015](#), [2019](#)

US Open [2009](#), [2015](#)

Olympics [2012](#)

Masters [2005](#), [2012](#), [2014](#), [2015](#)

FERREIRA, Wayne (South Africa, 1971)

6.

Along with Richard Krajicek, (and Carlos Costa, MaliVai Washington to a lesser extent) Ferreira was the biggest revelation of the 1992 season. They were both 21-year-olds when they reached the Australian Open '92 semifinals. Krajicek pleased the tennis world with a terrifying serve and great volley skills, while Ferreira displayed a lethal forehand. Ferreira's career was long and fruitful, in some sense he was an icon of Grand Slam events, never missing a major between Australian Open '91 and US Open '04 (as many as 56 consecutive Grand Slams - a record at the time) when he knew it would be his not only last tournament at that level, but also the last main-level event altogether (332nd in total). Despite so many appearances at majors, and a very good five-set record, he never enjoyed such a successful year at Slams like in 1992 when he backed up the Aussie semifinal with the US Open quarterfinal and fourth round at Wimbledon (in all those events he was ultimately defeated by great players on Centre Courts). By me, he is considered as the best Open Era player to never play a major final. He wasn't even close; in [1992](#) as well as in [2003](#), he had no chance in Melbourne facing Stefan Edberg & Andre Agassi respectively in the semifinals. Agassi was actually Ferreira's nightmarish opponent. They met eleven times, and just once Ferreira was close to winning it - at the Olympic games in Atlanta '96. The South African led 5:3 in the decider before losing 5-7, 6-4, 5-7. Ferreira also never defeated Michael Chang (seven meetings and deciding set required thrice). Against the best player of the 90s - Pete Sampras - Ferreira was quite successful. He admittedly lost their H2H 6-7, but in the years 1995-1998 he won all their four encounters (always '6-3' in the 3rd sets), and what's quite funny the first two wins had the same pattern as well as the following two. Apart from Agassi & Chang, Ferreira defeated all players who were the showpiece of the decade; as a veteran he was still a dangerous opponent for the young guns (two very dramatic wins over Lleyton Hewitt - in five meetings, also two against Roger Federer - in three meetings). Ferreira was an offensive baseliner, yet playing at the net was his natural surrounding (he was regularly participating in doubles competitions). Serve-and-volley tactics meant something obvious for him on grass while on hardcourts and indoors, he was applying this style depending on the needs. I think his inability to defeat Agassi at least once, may be explained by this - he couldn't match Agassi from the baseline, but his serve-and-volley skills weren't good enough to defeat the great American implementing the plan B, he could only count on a worse day of his nemesis, and it happened in Atlanta... Who knows, maybe if he had defeated Agassi then, he would have been a gold medalist which could give him fulfillment. I assume that two Mercedes Super 9 titles ([Toronto '96](#) and Stuttgart '00) compensate to some degree for not winning anything bigger. *"I had on occasions felt that I lost to players who I should have beaten and this (is) something I became aware of much later in my career. Often I would take the first set easily and then I became bored. I would lose interest and then sometimes didn't recover sufficiently to win the match."* Ferreira reflected on his career. Trivia: Ferreira was the hottest player after the US Open in two consecutive seasons, in 1994 he won three titles in his three consecutive starts; the following year he won back-to-back European events indoors, then reached the semifinal at Paris-Bercy.

FERRER, David (Spain, 1982)

3.

Full name David Ferrer Ern... Ferrer once said *"I'm the weakest player in Top 100"*, and he said it (if I remember correctly) already being a Top 30 player, so it was an exaggeration, but maybe I know what he meant. Namely: he thought that he didn't have even one solid weapon. I couldn't agree with that, since I remember, he was always incredibly fast and persistent, that type of guy you have to be focused even when you lead 6-2, 5:0 (it happened to young Andy Murray, but he saved a set point to win 6-2, 7-6 avoiding a disaster) because a short moment of hesitation may cost you a bitter defeat. Tennis is not about how fast you serve, and how enormous top-spin you can generate; it's also how you can deal with different circumstances combined together (weather, scoreline in progress, the style of your opponent), and Ferrer knew that he needed to work a lot. His technical limitations mainly contributed to the fact that against a genius like Roger Federer, he couldn't do too much. 17-0 in their rivalry for the Swiss, and the Spaniard was never really close to get at least one victory. But against other three best players of his times, he had very good matches being involved in very long rallies against them, his dedication, his fighting spirit were hoored. Ferrer not only defeated Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic & Andy Murray, each of them a few times, he also did it in 'the best of five' formula. Nadal experienced it in very bad timing, because he was on the way to win his fourth straight major when Ferrer crushed him 6-4, 6-2, 6-3 in the Aussie Open quarterfinal '11. Someone could say "Nadal lost because was not 100% fit". Ok, but not once, not twice, he won matches not being fully fit, so credit to Ferrer for his arguably biggest victory on that day. Actually defeating Nadal in a major match (US Open '07) opened a new chapter in the career of the man from Xabia (coastal town in the province of Alicante). Following that victory, he switched from Top 20 to Top 10, and stayed there almost permanently until 2015 which is incredible considering his short height. It seemed that somebody like him couldn't be a top player in the 00s - he was at the top even in the 10s, forming a solid second "big 4" along with Jo-Wilfried Tsonga (3-1), Juan Martin del Potro (6-7) and Tomas Berdych (8-8), at the turn of the decades - their H2Hs in the parentheses. Was Ferrer the fifth best player of his times? It's a matter of discussion, by his technical potential certainly not, but similarly to these three guys just mentioned, he won at least [one big title](#), and contributed more than any one of them to the Davis Cup triumph (thrice). Clay was Ferrer's best surface, no question about that, but the biggest wins in his career, two in the Davis Cup finals (both after dramatic five-setters) and in the 'Masters 1K' final, they all came from indoors!

Biggest titles: Davis Cup 2008, 2009 & 2011

Biggest lost finals: Roland Garros [2013](#), Masters [2007](#)

FERRERO, Juan Carlos (Spain, 1980)

1.

Full name Juan Carlos Ferrero Donat... When he appeared on the ATP tour at the end of the previous Century, I was quite surprised to receive a message that he's in a group of those

talented youngsters born at the beginning of the 80s who could become the best in the world in the upcoming years. I don't know who said that, not sure if I heard it or read it, I registered something like this in my memory nonetheless. Already in his ATP debut he reached the semifinal as a qualifier with 24 straight pro wins (five in Casablanca including qualies, preceded by 19 Satellite wins), he followed it with his first Challenger title (in his third appearance at this level) and dramatic third round match in Barcelona against Carlos Moya, who was virtually the best in the world then. The years 2000-2003 belonged to Ferrero on clay-courts; even though he lost two French Open semifinals to Gustavo Kuerten, he won the most clay-court matches in the first four years of the new decade. In 2002 he reached the final in Paris when lost a bizarre match to Albert Costa, finally a year later he fulfilled his dream defeating a sensational runner-up Martin Verkerk, converting a match point with his trade-marke shot - aggressive forehand from the middle of the court. The skinny Spaniard got a nickname "Mosquito" from his friends due to his vicious forehands in all directions. His backhand was also good, his volley technique beyond reproach, his serve improved as he obtained some muscles in the process of becoming one of the best players in the world, which happened after the Parisian triumph (he was in the mix with Andy Roddick & Roger Federer for several months). There are plenty of clay-court specialists who quickly run and can patiently hit the ball from both wings with astonishing accuracy - what separated Ferrero from a bit older guys like Alex Corretja, A.Costa & Felix Mantilla, it was his ability to win dramatic matches with high frequency. Before losing the [Rotterdam '04 final](#), he had won three straight matches in deciding tie-breaks, at the time he had survived as many as ten matches being one point away from defeat in more than 100 main-level events (fantastic ratio). Following the Rotterdam event, Ferrero unexpectedly lost in Marseille to the local journeyman (Gregory Carraz) and actually he was never the same afterwards. *"I found out yesterday I had the chickenpox,"* said the 24-year-old Ferrero withdrawing from Indian Wells '04. *"Sometimes things happen and you can't do anything about it. I'm disappointed because I was looking forward to playing here."* His body was weakened in the consequence, admittedly he was sidelined just several weeks, but once he came back on the tour to his beloved clay, he couldn't regain his self-confidence. At the end of 2003 he was no. 3 with an episode of being on the top after the US Open final (secured no. 1 with a [semifinal victory](#)) where he proved he wasn't just a clay-court specialist; the year 2004 he finished as no. 31. and here is this what I mentioned at the beginning of this bio - I perceived the young Ferrero as someone who would achieve as much as he ultimately achieved in the period 2004-2012.

Biggest titles (1 major): Roland Garros [2003](#), Davis Cup [2000](#)

Biggest lost finals: Roland Garros [2002](#), US Open [2003](#), Masters [2002](#); Davis Cup [2003](#)

FIBAK, Wojtek (Poland, 1952)

10.

Unquestionably the best Polish player in history, but neither reached a major semifinal (Jerzy Janowicz did it at Wimbledon '13) nor won one of the biggest events (Hubert Hurkacz triumphed in Miami '21). A final at Masters '76 is some sort of consolation. Fibak was very close to win a final against Manuel Orantes (had defeated him in two sets opening the event at group

stage), but lost 7-5, 2-6, 6-0, 6-7, 1-6. Very weird circumstances are associated with that final. As Fibak led with a double break 4:1 in the 4th set, an interview with Kirk Douglas (one of 13.5000 spectators) was displayed on two TV-screens inside the hall. *"Instead of only thinking about the Masters, about the last tournament,"* Fibak said, *"Instead of putting all my thoughts on the match, I was thinking about the TV to Poland. I was caring how it looked and what was to be said, especially when they had those interviews."* Fibak was serving at 5:4, but failed to close the match out and lost his mind in the decider, as well as the final 10 points. *"I think he got a little too anxious in the fourth set,"* Orantes said. *"He never played one important match like this."* The other side of the story is that Fibak was generally lucky to appear in the event at all because three best players at the time (Jimmy Connors, Bjorn Borg & Ilie Nastase) withdrew from the event due to different reasons. Never before or after something like that happened in the season ending championships. Among his four major quarterfinals, the closest to reach the semifinals Fibak was in New York '80 - then not Orantes, but another player with tremendous fighting spirit spoiled the occasion - Johan Kriek. The South African, one of the finest 5-set players in history, recovered from a 2:5 deficit in the deciding tie-break, collecting five points in a row to win 4-6, 6-2, 3-6, 6-1, 7-6. Before that match Fibak led 3:0 in their H2H. Fibak defeated the three greatest players of his time (Borg, Connors & John McEnroe) - each of them once. He never managed to get a win against his good friend, Ivan Lendl. At the end of his career, Fibak served as Lendl's coach, helping him to become the best player in the world. Fibak also helped a bit in the development of a teenage Boris Becker. Becker won his first main-level title pairing with Fibak (Munich '84). Many years later Fibak said that he didn't recognize tremendous potential in Becker, because he could be his manager, but left this function to Ion Tiriac. Trivia: at the beginning of his career (1974) Fibak won one of the most incredible matches of the 70s; his match against a young & inexperienced Balazs Taroczy, was suspended due to darkness as the Hungarian was supposed to serve for the match at 5:4 in the 4th set. On the following day Taroczy quickly got three points, and something that looked like a brief resumption turned into one hour. Fibak saved the triple match point on return to win 4-6, 6-4, 5-7, 7-5, 6-4!

Biggest lost final: Masters 1976

FISH, Mardy (USA, 1981)

7.

Third best player of a generation of Americans who began their professional careers at the time when Andre Agassi & Pete Sampras were finishing theirs. No doubt that Andy Roddick was a leader, behind him James Blake & Fish, both enjoyed very similar careers. Fish played five big finals, Blake three; Fish played three major quarterfinals, Blake the same. In the hierarchy of American tennis, I place Blake a bit higher though, because he made a big impact on the Davis Cup title for the US team in 2007. Besides, Blake won a few titles more, and 65 more matches, yet percentage-wise they share the same 58% win/loss record. During their years on the tour, the toughest task in terms of potential opponents, it was defeating Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal. Both Americans have quite similar H2H records against the legends of the game: Fish 1-8 vs Federer & Nadal, Blake 3-4 vs Nadal & 1-10 vs Federer.... Fish, similarly to his peer

Federer, showed inclination to serve-and-volley tactics in his first years on the tour. It was a time of a transition to more defensive attitude, and over the years Fish's game became more based on groundstrokes which couldn't work very well in his case since his forehand was very inconsistent, especially under pressure (Blake had the same problem with his other wing). Early on, Fish was a serve-and-volleyer with a huge first serve, a worse version of Sampras, one of the best serves in the mid 00s. Enough said, when he reached the [Cincinnati final](#) (lost it having a match point) in 2003, numerous very good players weren't able to break him, with Roddick included in the final. Between the Cincy first round, and the second round of the US Open '03, Fish held 92 straight times! The year 2004 was the most important from a patriotic point of view. Fish reached the final of the Olympics in Athens, and he was a favorite to get the gold medal, a few weeks later he helped the USA in advancing to the Davis Cup final, winning a crucial rubber against Max Mirnyi (Belarus). Fish lost his status as an elite player in 2005 as a consequence of left wrist injury (two surgeries). Even though it was the left wrist, so not responsible for serving & forehand, it made things complicated because of his stronger backhand side. Fish emerged after two bad years (2005-06) as a more complex player. He was using serve-and-volley only as an element of surprise, his serve was more variable, but still it was a big weapon, for example in Lyon '07 he fired 43 aces in three sets against Oliver Rochus. The years 2010-11 were the best in Fish's career. Approaching 30, he lost 13 kilograms! He did it thanks to a new diet (rejected: cheese, sugar, pizza, cheeseburgers and French fries) and harder work on the physical preparation. *"A lot of it is maturity and getting older,"* he said. *"You know, sort of getting married and realizing you're not out there for yourself anymore. You can be pretty selfish as tennis players, being an individual sport."* In 2011 he finally became a Top 10 player, something that seemed like his destination already in 2003. Before he played 'Masters' in London, his decline began - with a semifinal in Tokyo he lost to Nadal. Since that tournament, he couldn't win two consecutive matches in nine tournaments in a row. In 2012 he was sidelined for part of the season with health issues and actually the US Open '12 meant his last good event (reached the fourth round and withdrew from a match vs Federer), which had occurred three years before he officially finished his career - it took place in the same venue (after participating in a few events of 2013, in 2014 he didn't play at all - anxiety disorder was the cause he skipped many tournaments; in June that year he had a cardiac catheter ablation operation to correct misfiring electric pulses in his heart).

Biggest lost final: Athens (Olympics) [2004](#); Davis Cup 2004

FORGET, Guy (France, 1965)

4.

There were two left-handed French players who seemed like potential successors of a few years older Yannick Noah: Guy Forget & Henri Leconte. They both had some special skills allowing them to believe they would win at least one major. Leconte reached one great final (French Open 1988), Forget remains as one of the best players in history to never play a major semifinal, but his career was generally better, chiefly thanks to a memorable 1991 year when Forget was in a mix with Stefan Edberg, Boris Becker, Jim Courier & Michael Stich. He was

magnificent, the hottest on the tour, in the first quarter of the year when won 25 of his first 28 matches (counting three Hopman Cup wins – prestigious event at the time), defeating world's No. 1 Stefan Edberg twice in the meantime. So he could be perceived as a potential leader of the ATP ranking, especially considering the fact he put the serve as a weapon to another level, unknown in the 80s, serving more than ten aces per match. His momentum was halted by Courier, the American defeated the Frenchman in the [Indian Wells final](#) (7-6 in the 5th set), and one week later in the Key Biscayne fourth round. Forget suffered a setback during the subsequent clay-court season, but regained his confidence in the last few months claiming his two biggest titles ([Cincinnati](#) & [Paris](#)), and winning a deciding Davis Cup rubber, defeating on all three occasions a 20 y.o. inconsistent Pete Sampras. Forget developed quite interesting game-style in the early 90s; he was the best server then, but only as far as the first serve was concerned - he could go to the net behind it or stay back (quite often hitting the ball harder) on hardcourts and carpet (on grass he stuck to the tradition), but his second serve was just an invitation to a baseline rally, so he was able to introduce to the game a big arrhythmia - you could expect completely different pace from him as he was serving or receiving, and within his serving games, also two different modes. Forget slowed down his glamor in 1992, but he was still among the best players in the world; in 1993 he suffered a right knee injury, sidelined almost exactly a year - after his comeback the mixed style that had been developed in the early 90s paid off - he couldn't play serve-and-volley anymore, yet had enough experience from the back of the court to change his profile from a serve-and-volley baseliner to a baseliner who can surprise you with fast serve and sporadic net adventures. With a limited movement, Forget got his last major quarterfinal ([Wimbledon '94](#)) ranked 1130 (!), and won his last title after a four year break (Marseille '96). The limited movement prevented him from applying serve-and-volley in singles, but there was no problem to continue that style in doubles covering just half of the court - admittedly he didn't win any doubles title in his last full season (1996), but I assume it was one of the most satisfying doubles seasons because with his old partner - also in the twilight of his career - Jakob Hlasek, Forget reached a quarterfinal, at least, in all majors; in his last match of the season (along with Guillaume Raoux) he got an extremely important point which considerably helped France to win the Davis Cup trophy (against Sweden) for the second time. As a player he was fulfilled at the age of 31, in 1997 he played just five tournaments, in the moment of retirement he had lost 11 out of his last 12 main-level matches in singles.

Biggest title: Davis Cup 1991 & 1996

GASQUET, Richard (France, 1986)

7.

There were great expectations in France about Gasquet once he appeared in his first main-level event - Monte Carlo '02. In the first round, as a qualifier, he stunned a former French Open semi finalist Franco Squillari becoming one of the youngest tour winners of the Open Era. It'd happened before he played his first Challenger which he won by the way (Montbaun), and soon afterwards he stole the first set from Albert Costa at French Open, that Costa who raised the trophy two weeks later! No-one doubted that the boy was exceptionally gifted. For the next

two years Gasquet was mentioned many times in the same sentence with his peer Rafael Nadal. They faced each other in an intriguing semifinal in Monte Carlo (after Gasquet had [defeated Roger Federer](#) a round before withstanding three match points). Since then, their similar paths were completely torn apart - Nadal became the 'King of Clay', unquestionable no. 2 in the world for a couple of years while Gasquet didn't even become a Top 10 player, he quickly realized that one year younger Novak Djokovic and Andy Murray had better futures ahead of themselves. Quite telling was a fourth round match at Wimbledon '08 in which Gasquet, who had defeated Murray in their two previous meetings, lost to the Scot despite being close to win in three rather comfortable sets. That match wasn't accidental, it confirmed Gasquet's unstable mentality. His awesome backhand could delight spectators in the biggest arenas, but in tennis there are so many tight moments when the mental strength is required - Gasquet was deprived of it in general. This lack of adding something special cost him even more brutal defeats at the Australian Open in two consecutive years (to [Fernando Gonzalez](#) & Mikhail Youzhny). I think these defeats defined Gasquet's future, even though he was just 24-year-old. The year 2013 was the most successful in Gasquet's career - he won three titles and reached the US Open semifinal erasing a bit his five-sets demons defeating in back-to-back five-setters Milos Raonic & [David Ferrer](#), especially that second win could impress because Gasquet overcame a streak of five defeats to the Spaniard not winning even a set.

Biggest lost final: Davis Cup [2014](#)

GAUDIO, Gaston (Argentina, 1978)

5.

Gaudio's unexpected triumph at Roland Garros '04 gave me thrills, perhaps the most amazing emotions I've ever felt watching tennis in the 5th set of his epic drama vs Guillermo Coria. Even though Gaudio began the event as No. 44, not having even played a major quarterfinal (he didn't play afterwards too), I put his name among a few main contenders to the title (on my website I was running at the time). For me personally it was an astonishing prediction when he won a match point vs Coria; I believed in him based on his matches against the best clay-courtiers of the early 00s in Paris: in 2002 (4R) he lost to Juan Carlos Ferrero 7-6, 1-6, 7-6, 2-6, 4-6; one year later (3R) to Gustavo Kuerten 6-7, 5-7, 7-5, 3-6; in [Davis Cup 2002](#) (semifinal) he lost a very dramatic five-setter to Yevgeny Kafelnikov indoors. Those matches were tight, could have gone the other way if Gaudio had been mentally more stable... the highest level of clay-court tennis in them, so my assumption was "if he deals better with pressure in the most important moments, he may win the whole thing". The context of the French Open 2004 was quite special - both Ferrero and Kuerten were far away from the form they presented raising the Parisian trophy, a teenage Rafael Nadal withdrew (tough to say how far he could go in 2004, but worth mentioning that Gaudio comfortably led Nadal 3-0 until Monte Carlo '05). The draw was wide open, Coria was the main favorite and he confirmed his phenomenal disposal. In that memorable final he led 6-0, 6-1, 4:3* when a miracle occurred - the crowd started to cheer for Gaudio with "Mexican wave" changing the tone of the final. Coria started to cramp and suddenly - Gaudio - who was trying to avoid humiliation, looked a bit

paralyzed having a wide open door in front of himself. According to my stats in his 119 main-level events prior FO '04 he had just won one match facing a match point, against Coria he fought off two match points (on return!) and survived the 3-hour 31-minute struggle with his trademark shot - cross-court backhand. Gaudio had an abysmal 1-9 record in five-setters prior to those fantastic two weeks in Paris, during the event he won three five-setters; the first two already in the first two rounds against quality opponents! Gaudio can be labelled as a one Slam wonder, nevertheless in the aftermath of that triumph he established himself as a Top 10 player for two years, notched two 'Masters' events ([humiliated in the semifinal](#) on the second appearance). Finally he was able to do what could have been expected from him for a couple of years before Paris '04 - he found a way to win tight matches with better ratio which allowed him to play clay-court ATP finals quite regularly. Gaudio participated in twelve ATP finals in his career (all on clay), record 8-8 (2:4 before Paris '04 and 6:4 after it).

Biggest title: Roland Garros [2004](#)

GERULAITIS, Vitas (USA, 1954)

3.

"Nobody beats Vitas Gerulaitis 17 times in a row." said a happy American of the Lithuanian heritage, after defeating Jimmy Connors in the [Masters '79](#) (New York) semifinal. Even though Gerulaitis belonged to the strict tennis elite of the late 70s, he was regularly losing to the two best players (Bjorn Borg & Connors) and ironically finished his career with a 0-17 H2H against the Swede. In January '80 he turned the tables against Connors though, that shocking semifinal initiated a streak of his four consecutive wins over the fellow American whom he had beaten in their first meeting seven years before, also in New York. Gerulaitis was for tennis at the turn of 70s & 80s someone like Juan Martin del Potro at the turn of 00s and 10s. This is how I see the analogy: Connors (Roger Federer), Borg (Rafael Nadal) were established as the best guys of the decade when two new great rivals appeared - John McEnroe (Novak Djokovic) and Ivan Lendl (Andy Murray). Gerulaitis - like thirty years later - Del Potro, was the most dangerous player for the Big 4. Admittedly he never defeated Borg, but almost did it in the most important match of his career - a memorable [Wimbledon '77 semifinal](#), by many pundits considered as the best match of the 70s. Gerulaitis had his issues with mental resistance, not only in that semifinal vs Borg the nerves got him, it also happened in his [US Open '81 semifinal](#) when wasted nine breakpoints (in three different games) in the decider against McEnroe, tentatively playing all the most important points. His third famous five-set loss, comes from Masters '81 when he squandered a match point to beat Lendl in straight sets before losing in five. Taking into consideration his entire career, he deserved to win at least one major (like Del Potro) - it happened in a bizarre 1977 season when two Australian Opens were held at Kooyong. Borg, Connors as well as Guillermo Vilas didn't play then, Gerulaitis was a top seed and confirmed it winning before the final all matches with relative ease. Given the status of Aus Open at the time, the US-playboy (as he was mentioned sometimes in the press because of his fondness to the night life) got the biggest title of his life at Foro Italico in Rome '89 when he survived a marathon against Vilas (6-7, 7-6, 6-7, 6-4, 6-2). It lasted 4 hours 53 minutes, the longest

main-level final of the 70s. *"I kept attacking throughout the match,"* said Gerulaitis, *"He seemed to be getting tired, but I felt good, not nearly as tired as I should have been after almost five hours of tennis. I changed strategy about four times during the match and played just about every way I know how to."* The amazingly tight match had a sudden twist at 2-all - up to that moment neither of the players had won three straight games, and Gerulaitis took the final four.

Comparing of Gerulaitis' & Del Potro's Head-to-Heads against the Big 4:

Gerulaitis - Connors 5:18, Borg 0:17, McEnroe 3:11, Lendl 3:3

Del Potro - Federer 7:18, Nadal 6:11, Djokovic 4:16, Murray 3:7

Biggest title (1 major): Australian Open 1977; Davis Cup 1979

Biggest lost finals (2 majors): US Open [1979](#), Roland Garros [1980](#), Masters 1979 and [1981](#)

GILBERT, Brad (USA, 1961)

4.

Gilbert will be remembered as an excellent coach, someone who considerably helped many great players, especially three guys who share the same name "Andrew": Agassi, Roddick & Murray. As far as these three guys are concerned Gilbert played a role in reaching no. 1, especially his fellow Americans, they both reached the peak under Gilbert's guidance. An author of "Winning Ugly" book, TV personality, tennis pundit. During his 20s he belonged to the tennis elite, and as someone who never reached a major semifinal, he won plenty of matches (more than 500) and 20 titles (he knew where to play, didn't he?). His biggest title comes from Cincinnati '89. Summer of 1989 was a time when he could perceive himself almost as the best player in the world. First he helped the United States to defeat West Germany in a Davis Cup semifinal (five set win over Carl-Uwe Steeb), then reached a final in Washington - he lost to Tim Mayotte in a rain suspended match. Following that defeat, he captured three titles within three weeks (Stratton Mountain, Livingston, Cincinnati). It was 17 matches in a row, the end of the streak was awesome - in back-to-back matches, Gilbert defeated after tough three-setters [Boris Becker](#) & Stefan Edberg, the best players in the world at the time, just behind Ivan Lendl. Only a win over Lendl separated Gilbert from full satisfaction. They faced each other 16 times, and Gilbert never found a medicine, so it's a pity they didn't play in Gilbert's amazing Summer of '89. Gilbert, as the hottest player on the tour, was stunned in the first round of the US Open by Todd Witsken in what seemed to be a routine three-set victory. *"I was trying to eat, but I wasn't keeping much down,"* after the defeat said Gilbert, who had won 23 of his previous 24 matches since Wimbledon, *"I tried to eat some bananas. I tried some chocolate and brownies, which were good for a buzz for a few games. Then I got too much of a sugar rush. But I still had my chances. I was up a set and 4:2 and I had a chance to go up a double break. If I had been able to tough that out, I would have been up two sets and I could have played around a little more in the third set. Todd played well and made some good shots."* The 28-year-old Gilbert was never the same afterwards, but in the early 90s he took an opportunity to become one of the richest players thanks to a controversial event in Munich (Grand Slam Cup). In the first edition, Gilbert, as an alternate [advanced to the final](#) (after a five-set win over David Wheaton, the players

almost had a fight after the third set). His three wins were worth 1 million dollars, amazing money at the time. Considered as the fifth Slam then, the event in Key Biscayne offered \$1,200,000 for 96 players in the main draw! In 1994, as a Top 50 player, Gilbert became a coach of Agassi, helping him to triumph at the US Open in an initial phase of their cooperation which lasted eight years. Gilbert, as a coach, wasn't the same player, he was regularly losing, within twelve months since taking tutelage over Agassi, he won only 9 of 26 matches and decided to quit when the prospect of playing qualies in the French Open '95 appeared on the horizon.

GOMEZ, Andres (Ecuador, 1960)

4.

Full name: Andrés Gómez Santos... It was Paris '90 when Gomez, as one of the best players of the 80s, unexpectedly fulfilled himself triumphing at Roland Garros. Admittedly he was in great form because of winning two big clay-court Spanish events (Barcelona & Madrid) that year, but he had won similar titles in the previous decade (Rome '84 was the biggest). Roland Garros '90 it was a very specific event; Gomez's peer & the three-time champion of the event, Ivan Lendl, who had defeated Gomez (each time in four-setters) in all three Parisian quarterfinals of the Ecuadorian, withdrew from the event preparing himself to claim his first Wimbledon title (it didn't happen by the way) while two other best players at the time, who faced each other a year before in the semifinal (Boris Becker & Stefan Edberg), lost already in the first round, to the future major champions incidentally (Goran Ivanisevic & Sergi Bruguera)... The main-draw was unlocked, and Gomez took advantage of it - prior to the semifinal he was a big favorite to win all the matches, and saved a lot of energy because the potentially toughest opponent (Magnus Gustafsson) gave him a walkover in the fourth round. The semifinal against Thomas Muster was open for different outcomes because they were fresh after their Roman semifinal which Muster barely survived. In Paris though, Gomez was clearly better; in the championship match, he wasn't finally a favorite against the 20-year-old, but already every experienced & super-gifted Andre Agassi. It was quite a strange match looking deeper inside because Gomez won one point fewer, it would be very tough to guess judging by the scoreline (6-3, 2-6, 6-4, 6-4), so on that day he was able to win all the most important points in tighter games. All of a sudden, at the age of 30 he became a Grand Slam champion in singles (two doubles titles - US Open '86 w/Bobo Zivojinovic & French Open '88 w/Emilio Sanchez). After the final, Gomez said about his lack of mobility: *"I am not a Wilander. I don't have a great pair of legs to keep me going for six hours. I can't do that. What is important is not how many errors I make, but how many winners I make. Some people don't like that. I like it."* It was a very good description of his game-style, serve & forehand were his main weapons, he could economically dictate the pace with these two strokes. Even though he belonged to the tallest players of the 80s, and was very successful in doubles, similarly to Yannick Noah, he didn't feel grass, never won a tournament on that surface, and reached just one quarterfinal at Wimbledon, facing in four consecutive matches much lower ranked opponents (including 18 y.o. Guy Forget). Following his sensational triumph in Paris, Gomez was never the same, but the great Spring of '90 on clay-courts allowed him to

appear in the first edition of Masters in Germany (he didn't play in that tournament in three previous editions) as well as in the first edition of Grand Slam Cup in Munich - counting those events, Gomez suffered twelve straight defeats, something unseen before or later in a case of a Top 10 player. Gomez' days were counted, but in 1991, with a ranking no. 142 (!), he claimed his last title playing with 'wild card' in Brasilia, and the following year at Key Biscayne, for 2 hours 20 minutes he'd been dealing on equal terms with Jim Courier, a freshly crowned best player in the world (!) before retired due to ankle injury at the open scoreline (4-6, 7-6, 3-4 ret.)... One year later, against one of the best clay-courtters at the time - Carlos Costa - Gomez spent 2:30 hrs on the court, losing 4-6, 7-6, 6-7 in Mexico City. It was the end of his physical abilities, soon afterwards Gomez made an exit, and to this day he remains the best Ecuadorian player of the Open Era. His son, Emilio Gómez, is a professional tennis player and quite recently (Roland Garros '20) notched his major debut at the age of 29, while his nephew Nicolás Lapentti reached a world ranking of No. 6.

Biggest title (1 major): Roland Garros [1990](#)

GONZALEZ, Fernando (Chile, 1980)

5.

One of the most entertaining players to watch in the 00s. He became the French Open junior champion in 1998 defeating Juan Carlos Ferrero [in the final](#) (Ferrero will take revenge in the Parisian quarterfinal five years later). On the professional tour the Spaniard made much quicker progress, in the years 2000-01 he appeared in the French Open semifinals while Gonzalez barely played the qualifying rounds there. Admittedly he needed a few years to fulfill (at least partially) high expectations in the aftermath of Marcelo Rios becoming no. 1 in the world, but in 2000 he triumphed [352] in Orlando, in his just third main-level event having saved four match points in the qualifying second round (vs Giorgio Galimberti). After Orlando he needed to work hard drifting between Challengers & ATP to reach a higher ground. Defeating Pete Sampras in Miami, he sent a signal he wasn't just another clay-courtter from South America. To the end of his career he was similarly dangerous everywhere except grass where his broad forehand preparation and a bit unnatural slice couldn't help. The forehand was his trademark, no doubt about it - considering the biggest forehands in tennis history Gonzalez is certainly a Top 5 contender. His faith in that shot was similar to Mark Philippoussis' faith in his serve. I think these two guys loved to risk the most, they didn't want to give their opponents any hope in longer rallies when the things got tight; set point down, match point down, it didn't matter - Philippoussis wanted to serve as hard as he could, Gonzales did the same with his forehand. Statistically speaking that attitude paid off, they both finished their careers with positive ratios as far as dramatic conclusions are concerned. Gonzalez lost the two biggest finals of his career (Australian Open '07, the Olympics in Beijing '08), but the task to win at least one of them was exceptionally difficult - he faced Roger Federer & Rafael Nadal at their best, respectively. Along with Nicolas Massu, Gonzalez won the gold medal in doubles of the Olympics in Athens '04, he also obtained the bronze medal in singles after an amazing (6-4, 2-6, 16-14) victory over Taylor

Dent in the third place match, withstanding two match points at 13:14 (service & forehand winners). The forehand was massive, usually you could assume he'd hit more forehand winners than his opponent regardless of the result, almost impossible to witness a match won by "Gonzo" with fewer forehand winners.

Biggest lost finals: Australian Open [2007](#); Olympics (Beijing [2008](#))

GOTTFRIED, Brian (USA, 1952)

3.

How to play perfect volleys off fast passing-shots? Gottfried, considered as one of the best volleyers in the 70s, responded: *"When I was 14, my trainer Nick Bollettieri, ordered me to stay close to the net, trying to protect myself from the balls that were hit at me by other boys from the baseline. I was like a moving wall! I was complaining about that exercise, but it helped me a lot to improve my volley skills."* The volleys are necessary in doubles, so it's quite obvious that from the beginning, Gottfried was playing doubles often, and with very good results. He was the best American junior player in doubles at the end of the 60s, but he also won the USTA boys 18s singles championship. As a professional player he co-created one of the best doubles pairs of the 70s along with Raul Ramirez (beside pairs Lutz/Smith, Hewitt/McMillan & Riessen/Stewart). They captured plenty of titles, including three majors. It didn't damage his singles results. Tennis in the 70s wasn't so physically demanding yet, some good singles players already limited their doubles activity, not Gottfried though. In his best two years on tour 1976-77, Gottfried could be considered as a potential best player in the world in singles and doubles! He needed a Grand Slam win in singles though; in 1977 he reached his first major final, but it was a brutal experience as he grabbed just three games against Guillermo Vilas. In that moment it was quite clear that the No. 1 in singles was beyond his abilities. Before the French Open '77 final, Gottfried had beaten Vilas in two finals that year (carpet, hard), but on clay Gottfried's serve-and-volley game couldn't be so efficient. Soon he lost to Vilas also two clay-court finals following their meeting in Paris. The American played as many as 15 finals in 1977 (record: 5-10). Gottfried's seven years younger compatriot John McEnroe proved that you could be more successful in the singles-doubles combination at the times it seemed impossible because the game became much more physical with an increasing number of players using aluminium rackets. After a 5-year-break, the United States won the Davis Cup with these two great singles-doubles players. Nevertheless Gottfried suffered arguably his most bitter defeat losing after 4 hours 29 minutes to Christopher Mottram 6-4, 6-2, 8-10, 3-6, 2-6, squandering a match point. The loss could have been much more bitter if the 19-year-old McEnroe hadn't been in superb form. McEnroe easily outplayed John Lloyd and Mottram to give the USA insurmountable 3:1 lead over Great Britain (the second point obtained doubles specialists, the ageing pair Stan Smith and Robert Lutz). Gottfried didn't feel himself comfortably in five-setters, he lost in five sets inter alia to the best players of the 70s (Bjorn Borg at US Open '76 and Jimmy Connors in Philadelphia '78), leading two-sets-to-love in both matches (suffered eight defeats of this type in total).

Biggest title: Davis Cup 1978

Biggest lost finals: Roland Garros [1977](#)

GROSJEAN, Sebastien (France, 1978) 4.

The best junior in singles & doubles of 1996; the first such a feat since 1987 (Jason Stoltenberg). Looking at Grosjean's posture it was quite obvious that he wouldn't emulate his junior successes as a professional. Very characteristic player - always the visor of his baseball caps worn backwards, and quite often a collar of his polo shirt upwards. Tennis-wise, Grosjean's trademark was his forehand - absolutely amazing acceleration. Despite the modest height, the serve didn't belong to Grosjean's weak strokes, actually he was the first man below 180 cm, who was able to regularly deliver +200 kph. He came to prominence at Key Biscayne '99, en route [to the final](#) he defeated i.a. Gustavo Kuerten and Carlos Moya (fresh no. 1 in the world) withstanding three match points in the deciding tie-break. In regard to his four major semifinals (at three different venues) his only four titles are staggering. He managed to get one big title though, and it happened in very specific circumstances. Every year Paris-Bercy is a tournament in which there's a group of players fighting for the last place(s) in Masters (ATP World Tour Finals). Majority of them had only theoretical chances; in 2001 it was Grosjean's case – he needed to win the event to qualify, which was highly unlikely when the event kicked off because he had won just one ATP event. The Frenchman [8] took advantage of a very beneficial draw to advance to the semifinals where he faced Tommy Haas, who'd seemed to be certain of his participation in the season-ending championship because all he needed was to avoid a situation when Grosjean was a champion. So basically Haas had his destiny in own hands... he lost, but Grosjean still needed one more victory. In the final Grosjean [defeated in four sets](#) Yevgeny Kafelnikov, preventing the Russian from at least one Masters 1K title. The end of the year was awesome, Grosjean reached the Masters final, then was a member of the French team which won Davis Cup (losing both final rubbers though).

Biggest titles: Davis Cup 2001

Biggest lost finals: Masters [2001](#)

HAAS, Tommy (Germany, 1978) 2.

Began playing at age 4 with his Austrian father, Peter, who is a former European champion in judo and ex-schoolmate of actor Arnold Schwarzenegger... Haas' career is one of the longest (21 years at the main-level) & strangest, as many as four times interrupted by long breaks, even five times if we count his junior career. Haas' potential was noted by tennis guru Nick Bollettieri. The US coach was so impressed by the young German's talent that he offered Haas the chance to stay and train at his Bollettieri Academy in Bradenton, Florida for free, and Haas

began attending at age 11. Two years later, speaking little English, Haas moved full-time to Florida to train at the academy along with his older sister Sabine. Another two years and he appeared on the ATP ranking thanks to some points obtained in American Satellites. In January '95 Haas broke his leg and didn't play four months at all. When he came back he had to modify his plans and instead of attacking bigger events (Challengers & ATP), he continued his junior career achieving the best result at the end of the year when lost the Orange Bowl final to Mariano Zabaleta. First attempts to play in ATP events weren't successful and Haas decided to play his farewell junior event (Roland Garros, quarterfinal). Afterwards as a player unranked he debuted - thanks to "wild card" - in a Challenger in Weiden, and advanced to the final defeating players with ATP experiences. It boosted his confidence and when he got a "wild card" to his first main-level event in Indianapolis, he reached the quarterfinal, being stopped by the best in the world - Pete Sampras. A few months later they met again, and Haas easily took a set in Basel (4-6, 6-2, 3-6), then it was quite obvious that he'd be a Top 10 player soon. Bollettieri said that Haas was the most gifted player he had ever trained, indeed the young German sometimes was playing like "unbeatable Roger Federer" many years later: very good serve, great movement, equal easiness to hit the ball off both wings, attacks to the net? - no problem after the serve and during rallies. The big problem it was his consistency, something what was bothering the young Andre Agassi (albeit the teenage Agassi achieved much more than the young Haas) - if Haas had a good day in the years 1997-98, he would easily; if the things didn't go his way, he complained mixing English & German, was throwing his racquets & losing quickly, he was almost deprived of really dramatic matches in the first two years of his career. Another two years finally delivered complex matches, Haas reached [Australian Open '99 semifinal](#) & obtained Olympic silver medal in Sydney '00, on both occasions being beaten by Yevgeny Kafelnikov. It seems the end of 2001 brought the best version of Haas and he would be able to fulfill expectations. Between [Long Island '01](#) and [Australian Open '02](#) he was actually the hottest player on the tour winning 29 out of 34 matches (three titles) – it meant more wins than collecting the best player at the time – Lleyton Hewitt. That fantastic streak was soon reflected in the ranking, Haas became No. 2 in the world in May 2002, and there are two curiosities connected to that year proving Haas' weird career: despite being No. 2 he didn't play "Masters", neither that year, nor in the future - no other player ranked so high, never participated in the season-ending championships; the second curiosity - he underwent right rotator cuff surgery in New York on Dec. 20, 2002 which caused the first of his three long breaks. In 2003 he didn't play at all (another surgery on the same shoulder on July 18, 2004), another time sidelined for a year between the seasons 2010-11 as he underwent right hip surgery on Feb. 21, 2010 and one month later underwent right elbow surgery; the third long break it's a period between Summer 2014 and 2015 (arthroscopic surgery on right shoulder again), finally the fourth long break occurred in the entire 2016 as on April 13 that year, he underwent ninth surgery of his career to repair a torn ligament in his right foot! As a 39-year-old father of two daughters he came back one more time in 2017 to play his farewell season, losing more often than winning, but in Stuttgart as No. 302 he stunned 36 y.o. Federer [5], saving a match point, in the oldest ATP match since 1981 Brisbane 1R (46 y.o. Mal Anderson defeats 28 y.o. Jim Delaney), thus 75 years combined beat 74... Haas was an all-court player, capable of playing well on each surface. There's one interesting thing about his five-setters: no other player in the Open Era has won so many 5-set matches being 1 or 2 points away from defeat.

The German won six five-setters saving match points (out of twelve matches of this type), including one of the most amazing matches in history at Roland Garros 2013 when he ousted John Isner 7-5, 7-6(4), 4-6, 6-7(10), 10-8, having wasted twelve match points in the 4th set (nine at 6:5!)... then he saved 1 MP at 4:5 in the 5th set, earlier trailing 0:3 (30-all). If he had lost that match it would have been the record of match points wasted before the loss. Besides six "best of 5" MP-down wins, he also won thrice in five-setters being two points away from defeats.

Biggest lost final: Sydney (Olympics) [2000](#)

HENMAN, Tim (Great Britain, 1974)

4.

Some matches separate the men from the boys, and for Henman such a match occurred in the first round of Wimbledon '96 against the new French Open champion Yevgeny Kafelnikov on Centre Court. They are peers, but in terms of serious results Kafelnikov was far superior at the time - he had already established himself as the man while Henman had been only recognized as a boyish-looking player, who was nice to watch with his classical style, perhaps too fragile physically and mentally to win the big things. In that encounter in front of the supportive home crowd, Henman showed guts a couple of times and sensationally won in five sets, suddenly becoming a national hero. His following matches at Wimbledon '96 aroused the greatest interest. It was an event of sensations, so when he advanced to the quarterfinal he would be even perceived as a potential champion, [lost to Todd Martin](#) though. That tournament made him a new tennis star and bonded his career with Wimbledon for the years to come. A new phenomenon, called "Henmania" was associated with Henman's appearances in the most prestigious tennis event actually until 2004 when he experienced his most mature & stable year (it actually began in Autumn '03 when he triumphed in Paris - [his most precious title](#)). In the years 1996-2004, when Henman was the biggest attraction during Wimbledon, he lost four times in the semifinals, and four times in the quarterfinals. Undoubtedly, the closest to reach the longed for final, he was in 2001 when lost an incredible, [three-day match](#) to Goran Ivanisevic - two points separated Henman from "failed destiny". Henman was a victim of unfavorable draw a few times, in the years 1998-99 he faced twice the unquestionably best grass-court player of the 90s - Pete Sampras, played good matches, but details decided about his four-set defeats; in 2002 (another crazy Wimbledon following the year 1996), in the semifinal he lost to [Lleyton Hewitt](#), who was merciless for the attacking players in the early 00s (in the second semifinal David Nalbandian faced Xavier Malisse then; Henman could have been an overwhelming favorite against each of them). Certainly I'd call the Brit "underachiever" if he didn't win in Paris-Bercy '03. In retrospect that triumph is sensational with the knowledge how Nikolay Davydenko, and especially Roger Federer developed afterwards. The beaten in the semifinal Andy Roddick, was the best player of the season then. So many disappointments and bad draws over the years at Wimbledon, and in that Parisian final Henman met Andrei Pavel for whom it was a shocking result because he was coming back from an injury. *"It's been an unbelievable week for me,"* said Henman after the final. *"If you'd have told me six months ago*

that I'd win this title I'd have probably thought you were smoking something. Coming in here I'd never won a Masters Series title and I could count the matches I'd won here on one hand but from the word go I was in the right frame of mind." In terms of the style, Henman was a prototype of an early Federer. Due to his classic game-style and overusing backhand slices, at the turn of Centuries he was mentioned many times in the same sentences with Stefan Edberg & Patrick Rafter, but in contrary to these two multiple Grand Slam champions, Henman wasn't a constant attacker behind the second serve on faster surfaces, even on grass at the times when serve-and-volley was a norm. Maybe this particular attitude of constructing points may explain Federer's initial failures in encounters with Henman. The Brit won six of their first seven meetings (the only loss when retired), to some degree Federer was constantly losing to his more experienced copy. The year 2004 when Federer changed his tactics becoming a defensive player, turned the tables and he won their last six matches not dropping a set ([one big final included](#)).

HEWITT, Lleyton (Australia, 1981)

1.

I remember that when I saw in a newspaper that Hewitt defeated Andre Agassi 7-6, 7-6 in the Adelaide semifinal, I thought he would become the best player in the world (I was right, but I expected that he'd dominate the entire decade which didn't happen ultimately). He was almost 18-year-old, ranked 550, played in the event thanks to 'wild card'. Admittedly Agassi was coming back to the tour after very poor 1997 year when he significantly dropped in the ranking, anyway his name could have been fearsome, paralyzing the kid; so I assumed if that inexperienced Aussie teenager defeated in two tie-breaks a player, who had been already established as the second best in the 90s, he'd make big things in the future. The following day Hewitt survived a tight contest against his future coach (Jason Stoltenberg) becoming the lowest ranked champion in the ATP history (the third youngest behind Aaron Krickstein & Michael Chang). Hewitt's career was divided into two parts - when he was a top player, actually the best one of the first half of the 00s, and the second part when he grinded to a halt. Pondering why the Australian, rather deprived of one leading shot at least, was so successful, especially in the early 00s, I think that two factors were crucial:

- at the time the serve-and-volleyers were still a force in men's tennis, yet in retreat and Hewitt found a formula to frequently beat them

- Hewitt matured earlier than the most gifted players born in the early 80s (Roger Federer, Andy Roddick, Juan Carlos Ferrero, Marat Safin... none of them made big results as a teenager)

If I have to draw a parallel between Hewitt and other great champions, I may indicate Jimmy Connors. Just like the American legend, Hewitt was playing flat strokes, he wasn't a natural serve-and-volleyer, but following the Australian tradition, he had been playing doubles regularly, so he was not afraid of attacking the net during rallies. Another similarity between Hewitt and Connors it's their unbelievable competitiveness; they're the types of guys who are ready to leave on the court everything they possess, they will be fighting to the end regardless of inconveniences, they will use all the trickery within the rules to intimidate the opponents, to beat them in a mental battle first, then in a battle of pure tennis skills. Hewitt's records in the early

00s against ten years older (more or less) serve-and-volleyers were terrific: 9-1 Tim Henman, 5-4 Pete Sampras, 4-3 Greg Rusedski, 3-1 Patrick Rafter, Mark Philippoussis & Todd Martin, 3-0 Goran Ivanisevic, 1-0 Richard Krajciek. Those records clearly indicate his great reflex, ability to keep the return at relatively good percentage against guys who obtain plenty of points directly behind the serve; he could force them to play volleys, then passing them or lobbing - if I have to say what was Hewitt's distinctive shot, it's the lob - the stroke very important facing attackers, but quite useless in confrontations against grinders. One of them, Tommy Robredo defeated Hewitt in five sets at French Open '03 and looking backwards, might be said it was the beginning of the end of his reign in men's tennis which lasted two years more or less, being initiated with his US Open '01 triumph when he utterly deconstructed Sampras' mighty serve, like no one else before on hardcourts. *"He returned and passed about as well as anyone I've ever played,"* said the 14-time Slam champion. *"He's got the best return and the best wheels in the game."* During his best years, Hewitt's serve was also formidable, he used to risk a lot with his second serve, perhaps more than any other player of his size.

Biggest titles (2 majors):

US Open [2001](#), Wimbledon [2002](#), Masters [2001](#) & [2002](#); Davis Cup [2003](#)

Biggest lost finals (2 majors): US Open [2004](#), Australian Open [2005](#); Davis Cup [2000](#)

HIGUERAS, Jose (Spain, 1953)

6.

As a coach, to some degree Higuera was a wizard helping Michael Chang & Jim Courier to win Roland Garros titles. Admittedly they did it on Higuera's favorite surface, but the Spaniard was only a few years after retiring from the professional circuit and he isn't a native speaker of the English language. Higuera played 26 out of his 28 main-level finals on clay. In Hamburg '82 he co-created one of the most memorable matches of the 80s as he defeated Paul McNamara 6-4, 7-6, 6-7, 3-6, 7-6 after 5 hours 6 minutes, and it was the longest "best of five" until the Rome '14 final. Higuera held a match point leading 5:3 in the 3rd set, then he came back from 2:4 in the 5th, saving a match point at 5:6 before clinching the decisive tie-break 7/3. Higuera belonged to the tennis elite in 1979, but another two years were tough for him because he struggled with hepatitis. *"Almost all the World ended me. I had to fight a lot. And in the United States I found the necessary help to be able to achieve it"* said Higuera about his sensational comeback to the elite in 1982. He was a favorite to win Roland Garros in 1982 as he destroyed Jimmy Connors 6-2, 6-2, 6-2 in the quarterfinal, unfortunately for him almost as easily as he beat "Jimbo" he lost to the ageing Guillermo Vilas in the semis. *"We were close in a lot of games,"* said Connors. *"I just couldn't put two or three points together. I wasn't hitting the ball badly, but he didn't miss many."* The patience was Higuera's biggest merit. One year later in Paris he was patient enough to outlast Vilas in the quarterfinal, yet that victory cost him too much and a teenage Mats Wilander took advantage of it in the semis. Higuera paid for his demanding game-style at the age of 32, in 1985 he was just a shadow of himself and decided to quit the following year. In his farewell event in La Quinta '86 he managed to beat two good players (Guy Forget & Matt Anger) before having no chance against a powerful young Boris

Becker. *"It's all much easier now. I really enjoyed playing today. To me, it was just a tennis match. I didn't have to worry about the points."* Higuera said after his victory no. 456, and the last one. He finished his career with a stunning 10-3 record in five-setters, I think he has not played enough to mention him among the greatest specialists of winning matches of this type though.

HLASEK, Jakob (Switzerland, 1964)

7.

Born as Jakub Hlášek, was he a "poor man's Edberg"? The same height, also right-hander, both light blondes with manes, both serve-and-volleyers who possessed better backhand than forehand. One huge difference - Edberg was doing everything better. Perhaps Hlasek's first serve was generally faster, but Edberg's serve was overall better considering his distinctive second delivery. In the first few years on the tour Hlasek was just a solid Top 50 player. It was changed in the last quarter of the '88 season when he was playing like possessed week by week winning a few matches on four continents. It all began in America at the US Open when he reached the fourth round and played a competitive 4-seater against the best player in the world - Ivan Lendl; then after a week break he flew to Asia (South Korea) to participate in the Olympics, then came back to Europe to play four indoor events within six weeks and get his maiden title (Wembley); directly from England he flew to Africa (Johannesburg) to raise the trophy again, only to play the following week his third successive final... in Europe (Brussels). All those events allowed him to jump from No. 25 to no. 8 which meant that after packing his check for being a runner-up in Belgium, he flew to New York to join the best players in the world - with such an intensity of appearances he could be anticipated as a whipped-boy who ran out of gas, however, Hlasek, in his first match at "Masters", stunned Lendl trailing 2:4 in the 3rd set, won another two matches only to be beaten in the semifinal by Boris Becker after two tie-breaks. Between his two New York events, Hlasek manufactured a 32-7 record while in the first three quarters of the season he had just 17-8. Like many players before and after, Hlasek remained a man of one season, or more precisely a man of amazing three months. Hlasek, as a player of two decades, defeated at least once each of all the greatest players of those decades, the best H2H among the greatest he has against John McEnroe (3:4).

Biggest lost final: Davis Cup [1992](#)

IVANISEVIC, Goran (Croatia, 1971)

2.

One of the most psychologically intriguing players of the 90s. He was constantly changing his outlook: long hair or short (at the beginning of 1992 he was almost bald "mohawk hairstyle"); stubble, full beard or clean-shaven. On his head a cap or a headband; in 1996 a plume gathered up from just above his forehead. *"I think young people like it. Old people, you know, are not so happy. It's tough to please old people. They are complaining too much."* He commented on that eccentric hair-style. Actually he didn't show up in one T-shirt longer than a

month (but always the "Sergio Tacchini" brand). So he was giving an impression of someone emotionally incoherent. His on court jokes and positive attitude towards people all over the place suddenly could be replaced by an eruption of anger. Like every experienced player, he played dozens of dramatic matches, but in the 90s he was involved in them more often than any other player. In matches involving Ivanisevic, simply everything was possible: he won 15-13 in the 5th set (Richard Krajicek), lost 12-14 in the 5th set (Magnus Norman); he equalled twice a record of the longest tie-break (20/18) within four years (winning them against fellow left-handers, Daniel Nestor & [Greg Rusedski](#)). He won other marathon tie-breaks: 15/13 (Guy Forget), 14/12 (Jason Stoltenberg, Sebastien Lareau) or 13/11 (Hendrik Dreekmann, Cyril Saulnier). He found his way to lose a tie-break leading 5:0 (Carlos Costa). In 1998, he collected major three-setters consisting of three tie-breaks (lost to Marzio Martelli, one month later won over Jan Siemerink - one of a few Open Era matches in which the winner saved set points in all sets he won). His matches were like a roller-coaster leading to extremes. His amazing serve, arguably the best one in the 90s was the key - usually that weapon was leading to his victories, but from time to time it was a double-edged sword. Analyzing that stroke, I drew - perhaps - controversial conclusions. I had an impression that quite often, even facing top players, he provoked difficult situations, just to check his mentality under pressure. How many times I witnessed matches when at 4:5 or 5:6 in a set and 5:6 or 6:7 in a tie-break he gifted a set point for an opponent just to erase it with an ace (also off the second serve). He loved the thrill, winning sets being a point away from losing them. The serve saved him so many times, but quite often caused his bitter defeats. His big problem was that the serve deserted him a few times in the most important moments of the most important matches - three times in the Wimbledon finals (once lost to Andre Agassi being a favorite, then twice to his most difficult opponent - Pete Sampras) as well as twice in the Masters semifinals. One of examples - his match against Sampras in [Hannover '96](#) - Ivanisevic was phenomenally serving that day (35 aces in three sets); a deciding third set tie-break seemed inevitable; he led 30/0 in the 12th game, but three causal points gave a match point to Sampras - Ivanisevic fired 186 kph his second serve, the fastest on that day - out... Sampras just looked at the speed measurement and shook his head in disbelief. Ivanisevic, just a month younger than Sampras, was ranked higher after their first two years on the tour. In 1990 they had similar season ranking-wise, Sampras won the US Open, the Croat reached the [Wimbledon semifinal](#), but when they faced each other in the [Munich quarterfinal](#), the future seemed wide open. The American prevailed an enormously tight contest and built a mental advantage over his opponent. Even though Ivanisevic was dealing very well with tight situations in general, against Sampras many times, few points here and there separated him from winning very important matches. At the end of 1995, Ivanisevic changed his coaching staff, and finally began winning matches with consistency - between December '95 and March '96, the Croat was competing with astonishing frequency, he collected five titles in the meantime, finally he ousted Sampras in the [Key Biscayne semifinal](#), and when it seemed that he would overthrow the American (three straight years on the top then), the intensity of appearances took its toll, and the left-hander must have retired in the final. Nonetheless the rest of the year was good enough to call it the best in his career. The end of the 90s brought stagnation, many spectators would expect that Ivanisevic would be remembered as the best player of his generation deprived of a major title. Wimbledon '01 - an event of miracles. Ivanisevic [125] took part only to 'wild card', his second round win

over Carlos Moya was already a bit surprising - a seven-time champion Sampras was defeated in the 4th round by a young Roger Federer, and the route to the title for the Croat was wide open. He was phenomenally serving like in the mid 90s, the luck was on his side (back-to-back matches won being two points away from defeat), and at the age of 30, similarly to Andres Gomez & Petr Korda, Ivanisevic raised the most precious trophy in the air. *"I don't care now if I ever win a match in my life again,"* Ivansievic said after a memorable Monday final against Patrick Rafter (Ivanisevic's [semifinal](#) against Time Henman was extended over three days due to rain!). *"Whatever I do in my life, wherever I go, I'm always going to be Wimbledon champion."* He won matches afterwards, but not too many... Wimbledon '01 meant Ivanisevic's beautiful swan song.

Biggest title (1 major): Wimbledon [2001](#)

Biggest lost finals (3 majors): Wimbledon [1992](#), [1994](#), [1998](#)

JARRYD, Anders (Sweden, 1961)

5.

Jarryd's advancements to the main-level finals spread over sixteen years, marking defeats in his first (1981, Bastad) and last final (Rosmalen, 1995). Above all, he was an excellent doubles player - won all Grand Slam tournaments. For over a decade he was a pillar of the Davis Cup team, mainly playing doubles, but it's worth mentioning that in 1987 he played in the final against India instead of higher ranked Stefan Edberg. Two years earlier, against the Hindu players he won an amazing first set along with Edberg, defeating the Amritraj brothers (21-19, 2-6, 6-3, 6-4). As many as six times he participated in the Davis Cup finals between 1983 and 1989 (once as a singles player, five times as double specialist, with three different partners: Henrik Simonsson, Edberg and Jan Gunnarsson). Apart from the Swedish guys (Simonsson & Edberg), Jarryd was successful in the biggest doubles events partnering John Fitzgerald). I see similarities between the careers of Jarryd and eleven years younger Jonas Bjorkman. Both were more natural baseliners, hitting double-handed backhands, but both very successful in doubles taking advantage of great reflex more than of delightful volley skills. Jarryd collected 8 titles in singles, 58 in doubles while Bjorkman 6 in singles and 54 in doubles. Both loved representing Sweden in the national competitions.

Biggest titles: Davis Cup [1984](#) and [1987](#)

JOHANSSON, Thomas (Sweden, 1975)

7.

The Grand Slam champions from Sweden and the number of their titles? 11 - Bjorn Borg, 7 - Mats Wilander, 6 - Stefan Edberg... 1 - T.Johansson, who is not related to Joachim Johansson. There were so many distinctive players from the country of Three Crowns, yet somehow, apart from the three titans, only Johansson claimed one of the four most desired titles in tennis. He

got my attention for the first time in 1993 when as an unranked 18 year-old WC, beat in Bolzano experienced Karel Novacek who was No. 17 at that time, and advanced to QF where he lost to Andrei Olhovsiky after a tense three-setter. Such a result in debut (ToJo hadn't played earlier even a Challenger or Satellite!) was absolutely amazing, and I thought it would be an extraordinary player... I saw him for the first time in Vienna 1995 when he was playing against Michael Stich, and a couple months later against Boris Becker (Melbourne) and Goran Ivanisevic (Munich) - didn't impress me at all. When he devastated (6-1, 6-1, 6-4) Henri Leconte in the farewell match of the Frenchman, on Centre Court in Paris '96, I was surprised that the young, modest and a little bit scared Swede, won the match so easily. If someone told me then, he would be a Grand Slam champion, probably I couldn't believe it... I used to like him, actually the same thing with all Swedish players, always appreciating his 1st serve and groundstrokes down the line, I like the fact he won the Aussie Open nineteen years ago as one of the most surprising GS champions in history. *"I was only 24 years old, so for me it was a huge title,"* Johansson said about his first big title (Canadian Open '99). *"All of the best players in the world were here. That was like an approval that if I played my best tennis, I could compete with the best players in the world. So that was a sign that I was on the right track. I felt that I belonged, but I also felt that beating Kafelnikov and also beating Jim Courier, to beat those two big champions was just amazing."* Trivia: in Adelaide '04 Johansson for the second time advanced to an ATP quarterfinal being unranked, it happened because of left knee surgery (didn't play the entire 2003 season).

Biggest title (1 major): Australian Open [2002](#)

KAFELNIKOV, Yevgeny (Russia, 1974) 1.

When you enter the Top 100 for the first time and you're lucky enough to face two best players in the world, people rather expect you to win five games in a set to get important experience. Kafelnikov had other ideas about that. The 19-year-old Russian first defeated Michael Stich [2] in Lyon '93, then a few months later he was only two points away from eliminating Pete Sampras [1] of [the Australian Open '94 second round](#). The fact the American had won two previous majors and everyone was talking that he'd become the first man since Rod Laver to capture all Grand Slam titles (within the non-calendar year), didn't intimidate the blonde man from Sochi. Kafelnikov didn't possess very big serve, his groundstrokes weren't overwhelming either, how could he be two points away from defeating the two best players in the world within a few months as a player actually unknown to casual tennis fans (before he had notched one valuable result: quarterfinal in Barcelona '93)? The following years proved that those matches hadn't been accidental, Kafelnikov developed himself as one of the best players of the 90s. He was a smart, very clever tactician. As an offensive baseliner he hadn't big strokes like Ivan Lendl or Andre Agassi; his game-style rather evokes Jimmy Connors. Kafelnikov knew how to spread the flat balls in all directions when returns of his opponents came back to his side, he knew how to finish the rally off a slow ball (especially down the line), finally he knew when to attack the net. He wasn't an artist at the net, but similarly to Connors, Kafelnikov's volleys off

both sides were very solid. They both, Connors & Kafelnikov, found different ways to rely on attacking to the net during rallies: at Connors' early times, playing serve-and-volley was almost mandatory, so the American was actually forced to play plenty of them while Kafelnikov became a doubles lover. He was the last player at the top (along with Patrick Rafter), who could enter the same tournament in singles and doubles, participating successfully in them both. In 1999, rather unexpectedly he became the best player in the world for a short period of time, it happened when he had lost seven consecutive tournament matches (in the meantime he won two Davis Cup rubbers against Russia)! *"I think it's the ultimate goal for every professional tennis player, to be able to reach that pinnacle. That's what we play for,"* Kafelnikov said. *"It's one of the most enjoyable accomplishments from my career."* Trivia: he played as many as five three-set matches consisting of three tie-breaks and won them all (Petr Korda, Slava Dosedel, Julien Boutter, Nicolas Escude, Alexander Waske); in 2000, Kafelnikov played three matches against Fernando Vicente, and won them all on three different surfaces (clay, grass, hard) being a few points from losing each match.

Biggest titles (2 majors)

[Roland Garros 1996](#), [Australian Open 1999](#), [Sydney \(Olympics 2000\)](#)

Biggest lost finals

[Masters 1997](#), [Australian Open 2000](#)

KORDA, Petr (Czechia, 1968)

2.

"I was waiting for this a long, long time. What we went through was unbelievable. I didn't believe it could happen. It's a dream come true." said Korda after winning Australian Open at the age of 30, repeating Andres Gomez' story ([French Open '90](#)) of claiming a maiden major title after ~ten years of playing at the highest level. The Czech in his 33 previous major appearances played one final though (it didn't happen in the case of Gomez, who failed to reach even the semifinal before the French Open '90 in his 26 attempts - the Ecuadorian was regularly skipping the Aussie Open). Born in Prague, Korda began his tennis journey under the guidance of his father *"Because of him I've got a golden touch!"* From the earliest years he was admiring Ivan Lendl, during one of events in Prague, Korda had a pleasure to work as a ball-boy during Lendl's match, so defeating his childhood hero (5-7, 6-1, 6-4 Stockholm '91) must have been a career highlight in the first year on the tour (ultimately Korda won 4 out of their 5 meetings). Korda as a child was exceptionally thin, with years he obtained kilograms, but as a professional player he still looked far away from the athlete standards. Quite untypical problems haunted him: groin, hernia, paranasal sinuses and other small issues. He was devastated at times, thinking about premature retirement. *"I was in constant pain, I was wondering whether I'd normally live."* He overcame a series of operations and approaching 30th birthday, he finally firmed up his disposition. Between July '97 and January '98 he jumped from no. 27 to 2! He even had for a few weeks a chance of becoming the best player in the world, but always 2-3 matches separated him from that feat. Unquestionably, Korda must be mentioned in discussions about claiming title in the most extraordinary circumstances. During

Compaq Grand Slam in Munich '93, he defeated in the quarterfinal ([4-6, 6-0, 6-4](#)) Sergi Bruguera trailing 2:4 in the 3rd set. In the semifinal he outlasted [Pete Sampras after almost 4.5 hour struggle](#); he seemed to be finished in the 4th & 5th sets of that encounter, hardly standing. There were even speculations that he'd pull out of the final, he not only entered the court - he won another five-set thriller, against the second best player of the season - Michael Stich. Unbelievable, he not only won as long deciders in back-to-back matches as no-one before, he did it against the best players in the world on a surface favoring his opponents, and what's more astonishing he managed to do that winning fewer points on both occasions (10 vs Sampras, 13 vs Stich)! Unfortunately, that difficult, yet successful career was finished in controversial circumstances. At the end of 1998, the ITF announced that during Wimbledon '98 Korda tested positive for the banned steroid nandrolone. Korda was stripped of the ranking points (1999) and prize money (94.500\$) that he had won at Wimbledon '98, but was not banned from the sport. Korda immediately lost his respect for his colleagues. Krajicek: "If he used nandrolone why hasn't he been disqualified? If he was found not guilty, why did they take away his money? Bjorkman: *"Before Wimbledon he was playing the best tennis of his life, much worse after it. If someone takes illegal substances he should be banned for a few years."* Despite criticism, Korda went to the Australian Open to defend his title, and got a slap in the face in the first round - he defeated Galo Blanco after five sets, but the Spaniard refused to shake hands. Shortly after he was banned in his native country - couldn't play in any official tournament for two years since the ITF's announcement. It was a depressive period for him, he was dropping in the ranking like crazy, just one year after trying to reach the peak of the tennis world, he found himself outside the Top 100 (six defeats in a row, including to Rodolphe Cadart who won just three main-level matches). He lost to Danny Sapsford (paradoxically playing his last event in career) in the Wimbledon qualies, and the cup of bitterness was full to overflowing - he suddenly announced his retirement. 1.5 years later, when the Czech ban expired, Korda made his came in the hometown, playing in the first round of Prague Challenger losing 6-4, 3-6, 6-7 to little known Martin Hromec of Slovakia (never played a main-level match). The 32-year-old Korda said that playing in the tournament would be the best present for his father, who turned 60 that week... Generally speaking Korda was an offensive baseliner, but on grass he was implementing serve-and-volley tactics, and he knew how to play it on other surfaces as an element of surprise. Quite recently, his son (Sebastian, born July 5, 2000) out of nowhere (0-3 main-level record, ranked outside Top 200) reached the fourth round of Roland Garros where he was brutally verified by Rafael Nadal. Will the Korda junior be as good as his father? The next few seasons will tell. He is taller than Petr and plays double-handed backhand using the right hand at all other strokes.

Biggest titles (1 majors):

[Munich \(GSC\) 1993](#), [Australian Open 1998](#)

Biggest lost finals:

[Roland Garros 1992](#)

KRAJICEK, Richard (Netherlands, 1971)

4.

Born in Rotterdam, but began playing tennis in Amsterdam (as a 3 year-old kid!) where he lived with Czech parents (Peter & Ludmila Krajiček) who fled from Czechoslovakia in the aftermath of the invasion of five Warsaw Pact countries (the Soviet Union, Poland, Bulgaria, East Germany and Hungary). The father was crazy about sport, had professionally played handball in his native country. The little Krajicek must have trained hard from the time he picked the racket and was known in the Netherlands as a prodigy already in the early 80s (there's a London photo of him with John McEnroe of 1982 in which Krajicek is 30 cm shorter; ten years later they would professionally play a few times with Krajicek 16 cm taller). When Richard was 12 (just like Pete Sampras & Stefan Edberg) changed his backhand from two-handed to one-handed; for several years he remained a defensive player though, because until he turned 16, he had not been tall among his peers (very similar with Krajicek's namesake - Fromberg, who didn't change his style suddenly growing 20 cm). The junior period of transition from one style to another determined by the height, could have interfered with Krajicek's reasonable plans of becoming a top player in the future. He became a member of a group created by Stanley Franker of Surinam, and training with a bit older Jan Siemerink & Jacco Eltingh, Krajicek improved his volley skills; in the early 90s they all became the Top 100 players presenting a very similar, attacking style. Krajicek won his Challenger debut as a qualifier (Verona, defeating Eltingh in the final - Eltingh's first final too, in his 8th Challenger). Once they all won their first ATP matches it was clear that Krajicek would achieve much more than two other Dutchmen thanks to his fantastic serve and powerful forehand (especially cross-court on the run!). For a few years Krajicek couldn't win anything big despite having defeated all the best players in the world. Two factors contributed: numerous injuries (shoulder, knees) and weak offensive backhand, the shot which separated Krajicek from other best servers of the early 90s (Goran Ivanisevic, Michael Stich & Sampras); paradoxically Krajicek was successful against the best of them - Sampras (he led 6:2 in their H2H, ultimately finished at 6:4). Finally everything clicked for Krajicek during rainy Wimbledon '96. It was a very strange tournament for him; he was ranked no. 13 but initially unseeded as a first round loser of the two previous editions. When the event kicked off, he got no. 17 seed due to Thomas Muster's withdrawal. During the fortnight, Krajicek's uncertain backhand was working tremendously well (something similar will experience Greg Rusedski two years later in Paris-Bercy), and helped him to beat the two champions of the event in back-to-back matches (Stich, [Sampras](#)), not dropping a set against them! All of a sudden, Krajicek was a heavy favorite in the semi- and final against players for whom reaching those stages were more surprising (Jason Stoltenberg, MaliVai Washington). Krajicek completely outplayed them, and fulfilled his expectation of the early 90s in a year no-one expected him to triumph. The runner-up Washington said: "If he continues playing like this, he'll be the best in the world". Three years later, five matches separated Krajicek from Washington's prophecy. The Dutchman arrived in Hamburg as no. 4, the top seed, and he needed to win the title - it didn't seem out of his reach even though clay was his least favourite surface (he had played [French Open '93 semifinal](#), [Rome '96](#) final and triumphed in Barcelona '94). Krajicek's dream was over already in his first match as he lost to an unpredictable Hicham Arazi despite winning their two previous meetings. Following that defeat, Krajicek had problems

with his body again, and decent results prevented him from creating another opportunity in the years 1999-2000 when Sampras lost his charm, and as many as five players reached the no. 1; Krajicek could be easily one of them with better timing to avoid health problems. Krajicek missed the entire 2001 season in singles, he returned after missing 20 months following two elbow surgeries. Already in his second event after the comeback he did something similar to Guy Forget in 1994 - with very low ranking, reached the Wimbledon quarterfinal (after a remarkable three-day contest [against Mark Philippoussis](#) consisted of four tie-breaks). A few weeks later heel injury forced him to retire at the US Open. Krajicek planned to finish his career at Wimbledon '03, but the draw was the worst among possible ones - Lleyton Hewitt, no. 1 in the world, the defending champion. Krajicek's recent 1-6, 2-6 humiliation on grass to Andre Agassi made him realize a similar disaster on Centre Court. He preferred to avoid it, he was replaced by another big server, little known at the time, the Croatian giant - Ivo Karlovic, who eliminated Hewitt in four sets producing one of the biggest upsets in Wimbledon history... Trivia: all three Frank's boys made Slam debuts in the same event, and for them all it was a success - Australian Open '91: Krajicek [113] and Siemerink [132, qualifier] reached the fourth round, Eltingh [125] advanced to the third round.

Biggest title (1 major): [Wimbledon 1996](#)

KRICKSTEIN, Aaron (USA, 1967)

6.

The prodigy of the American tennis, the youngest player to win a main-level title (at age 16.2 months in Tel Aviv - quite interesting because he's of the Jewish origin). Krickstein also set a record for being the youngest player to ever break the top 10 (at age 17) - he reached the Rome final where he lost to Andres Gomez in four sets. The Ecuadorian became Krickstein's most frequent opponent after that final. In the years 1984-86 they faced each other and Gomez won all their eight meetings. Gomez's style definitely didn't suit Krickstein, but the teenage American had also another foe at the time - Jimmy Connors. The American legend bageled his 15 years younger compatriot when they met for the first time in 1984; how important in mutual meetings can be building a mental edge, confirmed their memorable match at the US Open '91 - the 38-year-old "Jimbo" defeated Krickstein in [dramatic five sets](#) despite Krickstein's fantastic five-set record. Krickstein was a great counter-puncher, he drove Stefan Edberg a few times, but on the other hand Krickstein couldn't beat for a few years the more powerful serve-and-volleyer, Boris Becker. At the time when Connors & John McEnroe were behind their prime, Krickstein was the biggest US hope. His ability to win five-setters was impressive, but when you're involved in too many long matches, sooner or later your body lets you down. So inability to win matches easily, contributed to the fact that Krickstein's amazing progress was halted. It's not only that, in the mid-80s he suffered a few injuries (problems with knees and wrists), he was hurt in a car accident in 1987; Krickstein had just finished his first practice in four months with the broken leg and got into a taxicab on Long Island that would take him to where he was staying. Krickstein's driver ran a red light and the taxicab was hit broadside by another car. Two of Krickstein's ribs were broken. *"I had to start all over again psychologically,"*

Krickstein said about his attempt to recreate his career at the beginning of 1988. Within two years he came back to Top 10 (he was there in 1985) to play at Masters for the only time, unsuccessfully. As a "marathon man" he certainly could have achieved something bigger at majors as well as win a big event. His biggest title is not included in his official resume. It happened in Antwerp '91 (a year before that event got an ATP status) when the prize money was the biggest in the event history (\$1,250,000); Krickstein was generally the most efficient on hardcourts, but in Autumn '91 he had played his best tennis on carpet, first reached the Stockholm semifinal having defeated Michael Stich & Gortan Ivanisevic (lost to Edberg) and went to Antwerp where trashed four opponents. In the final he was supposed to face Boecker who had never been defeated before, unfortunately the German withdrew because of the flu. Krickstein got \$250,000 his biggest paycheck. A few months later they met in Monte Carlo, and Krickstein defeated Becker (6-1, 6-4) for the only time in their eight meetings; Krickstein had the same story with the Lendl meetings.

Biggest Slam results

Semifinals: [US Open '89](#) and [Australian Open '95](#)

KRIEK, Johan (South Africa, 1958)

7.

Remarkable that two best South African players (Kriek & Kevin Curren) of the 80s were born within a month, each of them played two major finals (Kriek won both, Curren lost both) and they both became the U.S. citizens. As a 16-year-old boy Kriek was the South African champion in running and three-jump. Not surprising that with this athletic background - he was considered in the 80s (until he turned 30 which was coincidental with the appearance of Michael Chang) as the fastest player on the tour. Very energetic, vivid, quicksilver, the most dangerous on fast surfaces despite his short height. The two-time Australian Open champion after two final wins over Steve Denton. Kriek must be proud that he won (even twice!) one of the four most important tennis events, but the truth is that in the early 80s the best players didn't participate in it. Anyway, in retrospect it's fair to say he deserved it much more than one-dimensional Denton. Kriek reached two major semifinals and he is written in the history books as one of the best specialists of winning five-setters (an impressive 18-4 record). He defeated the icons like Jimmy Connors & John McEnroe (five times!). Versatile player with very quick hands, the owner of the fastest backhand slice I've ever seen. Confirmed his talent at Roland Garros '86 - he skipped the event in six consecutive editions because didn't like to play on clay, and advanced to the semis ousting one of the even legends - Guillermo Vilas after a [memorable four-set thriller](#). Trivia: two sensational teenagers won their maiden titles against him at age of 17 and 16 respectively (Boris Becker at Queens Club '85 and Michael Chang in San Francisco '88).

Biggest titles (2 majors):

Australian Open 1981 and 1982

KUERTEN, Gustavo (Brazil, 1976)

1.

Kuerten is a German descendent, his paternal great-grandfather name was "Kürten" while maternal great-grandfather "Thümmel". I don't know if it's accidental, but Kuerten as a young pro made his first trip to Germany to play qualifying rounds in Hamburg (ATP) and Dresden (Challenger), he failed on both occasions, it was 1995. The following year he made a transition from a Challenger to a main-level player, but without spectacular results. Actually when the French Open '97 kicked off, Kuerten was among many, secondary young South American players (without a Davis Cup tie in which Brazil lost to the United States, he would be virtually unknown outside his continent), who hadn't drawn particular attention. Everything changed after his [third round match](#) against an arguably best clay-courtier of the 90s Thomas Muster. The Austrian was far away from his invincibility of the years 1995-96, but he was still a Top 5 player, and one of the main favourites to the title. Kuerten [66], who had never won three main-level matches in a row before, finally did it, stunning the former champion in a short 5-setter. When the Brazilian won another round against Andrei Medvedev after a very similar 5-set encounter, out of nowhere, he became a favorite to the title because the draw was wide open. Admittedly in [the quarterfinal](#) he faced a defending champion Yevgeny Kafelnikov, but the Russian, generally better adjusted to hardcourts, was poorly playing before the event on clay, and his advancement to the quarterfinals wasn't expected at all. Another five-setter (third in a row), and Kuerten prevailed again by a two-game margin in the decider. The last two matches he won easier, dispatching in the final the two-time French Open champion - Sergi Bruguera, who similarly to Kafelnikov, wasn't expected to be seen in the second week. "I did every shot perfectly," Kuerten said after the final. *"Today was my best match of the tournament. I didn't think, 'Wow, it's a final and I have to win.' I just play like I practice. I was pretty relaxed."* Kuerten conquered the hearts of the French public and tennis fans all over the world with his "samba" tennis. As opposed to previous French Open champions of the 90s, very efficient clay-courtiers (Jim Courier, Muster, Bruguera), he didn't win his matches wearing opponents down with amazingly consistent heavy top-spins off the forehand side; he displayed an all-court game with much better serving, more variable backhand and points obtained at the net. Before Kuerten, there were three triumphs of inexperienced players in paris (Bjorn Borg '74, Mats Wilander '82 & Michael Chang '89), but in each case the shocking champion was a tennis prodigy, and great things to come had been foreseen for them. Kuerten was very refreshing, soon afterwards he confirmed that his game-style suited to the hardcourts as well when he reached the Canadian Open final & Cincinnati quarterfinal trashing Michael Chang & Andre Agassi after the same one-sided scoreline (6-3, 6-1). The end of the 90s was rather disappointing, but the years 2000-01 brought something even better than could be anticipated when "Guga" shocked the tennis world in Paris, namely he became the best player in the world and spent 43 weeks on the top, 31 more weeks than such a great champion like Boris Becker! Kuerten secured the no. 1 in the end of 2000 in the nick of time (surpassing Marat Safin), and lost this position in similar circumstances one year later to Lleyton Hewitt. *"As a tennis player, nothing could be higher than becoming No. 1 at the [Tennis Masters Cup], beating Pete and*

then Andre back-to-back. This is the highlight of my career by far." the Brazilian stated. When he enjoyed the best period of his career in 2001 (between Roland Garros and US Open when he won three titles) it seemed almost impossible that he wouldn't open the year 2002 as no. 1, but including the US Open quarterfinal he suffered 11 defeats within 12 matches! He was struggling with a hip injury and decided to undergo a surgery on Feb 26, 2002 in Nashville (Tennessee). After the comeback Kuerten continued his career for another six years, but his fantastic footwork, allowing to freely hit the ball off both wings, was damaged. In the years 2002-04 there were sporadic good results, some great matches, but Kuerten couldn't deal with keeping the high level over a few day-by-day matches. The last three years were miserable, Kuerten was a shadow of his previous self despite the relatively young age. In 2006 for instance he played just two matches losing them both to players, who combined won in their careers one match fewer than Kuerten three times within one event. Kuerten played his career last match on Philippe Chatrier in Paris (had skipped nine consecutive majors), the court where he felt the best outside his native country; he lost in straight sets to Paul-Henri Mathieu, then drew a heart inside the court, something he had done for the first time seven years before miraculously surviving a match against an inspired U.S. journeyman Michael Russell (b. 1978). *"In terms of emotions, it's the finest moment of my career. Nothing compares to that moment,"* said Kuerten. *"It's the match – the one that I would take with me if I could choose only one. My connection with the fans was so strong... This heart was my way of thanking them for their support and for the emotions that we were going through together at that moment."*

Biggest titles (3 majors): Roland Garros ([1997](#), [2000](#), [2001](#)) and [Masters 2000](#)

LAPENTTI, Nicolas (Ecuador, 1976)

6.

There is one particular thing about Lapentti - his ability to win matches when he created a match point chance. I don't know any other player with similar experience at the main level with such a great ratio of matches won from match point down to matches lost squandering a match point. It's a 16-2 record over the course of 15 years of his career. Key Biscayne '98 marked his painful defeat to Slava Dosedel 6-3, 6-7, 4-6 despite holding six match points (two months later lost to Dosedel again in Prague 6-3, 3-6, 2-6 leading 3:1 in the 2nd set), a few months later he was beaten by Scott Draper in Cincinnati (4-6, 6-4, 5-7) that time blowing one match point, and it's really remarkable that to the end of his career twelve years later, he was always winning once a match point for him was created (excluding Challenger '06 in Montevideo where Guillermo Canas defeated him saving a match point). It's some sort of magic because in the meantime there occurred really complicated situations when it seemed obvious he had to lose this type of match. The best examples come from 2003: first in St. Polten when in the second round he squandered a match point at 5:4 in the 3rd set against Irakli Labadze, and found himself at 2:6 in the tie-break to survive 5-7, 7-6, 7-6; a few weeks later at Wimbledon he squandered a double match point in the 3rd set against Jamie Delgado, then saved one MP at 3:5 in the 5th set, and three more MPs as a receiver in the following game to survive the decider 7-5! Lapentti had won dramatic five-setters of all sorts, being close to losing them 0-3,

1-3 or 2-3. Generally when the scoreline indicated 5-all in the 5th set, you could assume that Lapentti would finish as a winner. It's also something that wasn't taken for granted because at the beginning of his career, Lapentti lost 6-8 in the 5th sets to Daniel Nestor & Marcelo Rios during Davis Cup encounters. At the Australian Open '99 he rewrote the script having beaten 8-6 in the 5th set [Karol Kucera](#) (after intentionally dropping the 4th set since from a 0:3 deficit) - perhaps the most important win in his career because gave him an advancement to the semifinal of a major - it never happened again. So after the Kucera encounter, Lapentti won 7 out of 10 matches when the score indicated 5-all in the deciding set. The Ecuadorian belongs to a narrow group of players who won 30 five-setters at least, but it'd be misconception to think that he was almost always winning tight matches given his awesome records in five-setters and MP-matches. He lost plenty of tight matches of all sorts, simply his magic somehow worked once he had a match point for himself. Lapentti was a smart player, he hadn't a finishing stroke from both sides, hadn't big serve or amazing volley skills, but all types of shot he adjusted on a pretty high level to his tennis repertoire and was using them adequately to a situation. He had this unique intelligence in his eyes to analyze the whole match in its progress to choose the right shots at the right time, and maybe apart from the required luck, it was a significant skill which helped him to win so many dramatic matches...

LARSSON, Magnus (Sweden, 1970)

10.

Very skillful player with inclination to choose unconventional solutions. His two main assets: serve and forehand. He had a great potential, displaying it in 1991 when defeated in the 3rd set tie-breaks, the two best players in the world then: Boris Becker (Adelaide) and Steffen Edberg (Monte Carlo). Winning deciding tie-breaks was his domain in the first few years on the tour; in Estoril '93 he lost to Karel Novacek (6-7, 6-4, 6-7) his first match after winning twelve matches of this type in a row at the main-level. Larsson was a threat for the best players in the world of the early 90s, but he needed to wait until 1994 for his breakthrough. He advanced to the [French Open semifinal](#) winning an incredible match against the tournament sensation Hendrik Dreekmann, saving six match points in a 3rd set. That result allowed him participation in the season-ending Grand Slam Cup in Munich - the tournament of his life. Larsson, fresh after helping Sweden to beat Russia in the Davis Cup final, defeated the two best players of the 90s (Andre Agassi, Pete Sampras) as well as two other top players (Stefan Edberg, Todd Martin) and earned \$1.625 million dollars for a four-match effort. It was plausible he would lose his motivation repeating David Wheaton's case. Larsson continued his great form in 1995. He hadn't achieved anything spectacular, but in the middle of the season he was a strong candidate to play at Masters. Unfortunately on June 15, 1995, he broke his leg in an exhibition match in Sweden against Jan Gunnarsson. That injury sidelined him for six months, he dropped in the ranking and never regained his 1994-95 form, playing for another eight years. His movement was a bit limited, but the combination of miscellaneous serve and powerful forehand, made him a dangerous player mainly indoors. After a six-year drought, he won his last title in Memphis '00. There was a hope of restoring his career when the following week he reached the Copenhagen final eliminating a young Roger Federer, but the broken leg reminded itself. On

August 14, 2000 he required another surgery to his right knee, and missed almost one year of competitive tennis. The years 2001-02 meant a slow going towards the end, in his last major Larsson played very good tennis taking a favorite to the title (Lleyton Hewitt) to five sets.

Biggest titles: Davis Cup 1994, Grand Slam Cup [1994](#)

LECONTE, Henri (France, 1963)

5.

In retrospect, looking at five different generations of French players of the Open Era, it seems that the one playing in the 80s was the best: Yannick Noah (1960), and two younger left-hander players - Leconte (1963) & Forget (1965) - Noah as the only French player won a major, Leconte played a major final, Forget disappointed at majors overall, but he won two Mercedes Super 9 titles in 1991 and he won a match that gave France the Davis Cup triumph the same year (Leconte highly contributed to that title). Leconte marked his existence on the tennis map as someone worth following in November '82 as he claimed his maiden title in Stockholm, defeating in the final one year younger (already French Open champion) - Mats Wilander (Leconte had saved three match points in the third round vs Tomas Smid). That success caused Leconte's appearance in the Davis Cup final, but he lost an important rubber to Gene Mayer. The years 1986-88 were the best in Leconte's career, in those years Leconte played 7 of his 16 finals and he was a real force in the most important tournaments which was finalized with the French Open '88 final. The Frenchman had won three five-setters before the final, and after losing the opener to a rock solid Wilander, he ran out of gas. On 12 May 1989, he underwent the first of three operations on a herniated disk. The year 1991, when he was 28 year-old, initiated a bad period which ultimately led to his retirement, however, the end of that year was sweet. Noah - at the end of his career became the Davis Cup captain - appointed Leconte to play the second rubber of a tie against the United States, and it was right on the money - Leconte, ranked no. 159, not having won a match for five months, stunned Pete Sampras and the following day he helped Forget to beat one of the best doubles pairs at the time - Ken Flach / Robert Seguso, easier than anyone could have expected. Leconte, struggling with his disk, surprised two times more: first at the French Open '92 when as a 'wild card' [200] advanced to the semifinal, then in Halle '93 when claimed his last title as a player ranked no. 141, outplaying in the last two matches Top 10 players (before the event, Leconte had a 2-8 record for the year). He finished his career in his favorite tournament - French Open '93, just like sixteen years before when he had played there his first main-level match, he lost to a Swedish guy (to Hans Simonsson in 1980, to Thomas Johansson in 1996). Leconte left the Centre Court in tears with flowers, and all of a sudden he appeared as a 'wild card' two weeks later in Rosmalen - he lost to Kenneth Carlsen, and it was ultimately the last match in his professional career at the main-level (later that year he played two more Challengers). The chubby Frenchman had very short service motion, similar to Roscoe Tanner's serve. Leconte was an all-round player, successfully implementing serve-and-volley style on all surfaces. He possessed exceptionally fast hands, especially his backhands were sensational at times, really incredible how fast he was able to play with a short swing. Very emotional player, who enjoyed

interacting with the crowd finding inspiration in the loud atmosphere. Chanting "Henri! Henri!" - this is what he loved playing in France, it could have elevated him to another level. One of the greatest examples of it comes from his fourth round match of the [French Open '90](#). On Centre Court he faced Andrei Chesnokov, who was playing tennis of his life then, having won Monte Carlo & being a runner-up in Rome. Chesnokov had won 16 of his 17 matches and as a French Open semi finalist a year before, he was among the biggest favorites to win the title - Leconte almost outplayed him in straight sets under two hours. The Soviet player took the control of the sets 3 and 4, but Leconte responded in the decider with 'all or nothing' attitude - he was attacking the net on every possibility as a server and receiver, and he won the set 6-3; among 29 points he obtained as many as 16 from his winners!

Biggest title: Davis Cup 1991

Biggest lost final: Roland Garros [1988](#); Davis Cup 1982

LENDL, Ivan (Czechia, 1960)

1.

Definitely the best player of the 80s, an icon of that decade, although in the early 80s it wasn't certain that Lendl would establish himself as the king of tennis. Admittedly he was branded a top player at the turn of the 70s and 80s, but he had a problem to confirm his tremendous potential at majors while no one knew that the king of the times - Bjorn Borg - would quit soon. Lendl had obtained two important titles before the end of January '82 (Davis Cup '80 & Masters '81), but each young player who advances to the Top 5 not having won a major title, knows he should do it for his legacy. Lendl waited a few years longer than ten years younger Andre Agassi, who at similar age will have comparable successes a decade later. Lendl succumbed in his first four major finals, especially the fourth defeat was odd because he lost the Australian Open final to Mats Wilander, whose appearance in that final wasn't expected since he had been labelled as a clay-court specialist. Lendl was on his way to suffer a 0-5 record when faced his biggest nemesis of the 80s - John McEnroe. The American was in terrific form that year, he had defeated Lendl a few times (also on clay) prior to their final in Paris, and easily took the first two sets. The 24-year-old Lendl was already very experienced at the time, and did exactly what seemed his destiny already at the beginning of 1982 when he had won 44 consecutive matches, majority of them indoors. Lendl reached the top of the tennis pyramide in 1985 when he defeated McEnroe again, that time in the US Open final. It marked a moment when just one year older American, who was more successful in the mid 80s, suffered some mental problems and shockingly withdrew from the circuit for seven months without being injured - he never came back to the form he had displayed in the years 1984-85. Lendl lost his arch rival, Borg was already sidelined three years and his comeback highly unlikely, yet two new challengers appeared on the horizon - teenage serve-and-volleyers from Northern Europe - Stefan Edberg & Boris Becker. These two fair-headed guys and a bit older Mats Wilander, were Lendl's toughest opponents in the late 80s, replacing McEnroe & Jimmy Connors, who had been Lendl's most demanding adversaries in the first few years on the tour. Jimbo won their first eight encounters (not dropping even a set!), yet he stopped to be a threat for Lendl in 1984 -

the final in Tokyo it was the last time when the man from Illinois defeated the Czechoslovak. At the time Connors led 13-5 in their H2H, after Tokyo only Lendl was leaving the courts as a winner, as many as 17 times (!) and during that astonishing streak, he was close to losing just once (Masters '84)... Lendl was the first great champion who put enormous emphasis on physical preparation. First of all, under the guidance of dr. Robert Haas, he changed his diet in the early 80s. "I started having enough energy to get my feet in position for shots I was always lunging at before," said Lendl at the time. He included more pasta, soup, vegetables, fruit and water to his diet - and scarcely an ounce of red meat. To combat his mental issues, Lendl began working with psychologist Alexis Castorri, who suggested taking ballet and aerobics classes. Even though Lendl won his first major with the help of Wojtek Fibak (still an active player then), who'd encouraged Lendl to use much more often top-spin backhands instead of keeping the ball in play with slices, he replaced the Pole with a former great Aussie player - Tony Roche (b. 1945) - they had something in common (poor record in Grand Slam finals: Roche finished with 1-5 while Lendl had a 1-4 record at the time), furthermore Roche was a left-hander, and it helped Lendl to better understand the game of his biggest rivals at the time (Connors & McEnroe). *"With Tony I had someone who could help me see how a left-hander saw the court,"* Lendl said years later. He finished four seasons as the best player in the world, but the years 1985-87 it was a period when his reign couldn't be questioned. He also finished the year 1989 as No. 1, but in my mind that year belonged to Becker - the German won two majors (he defeated Lendl en route to his Wimbledon & US Open titles) and led his nation to the title defense in the Davis Cup - he won many vital rubbers during the '89 edition, thus if the points had been awarded for those matches (like it was in the years 2009-15), he would have finished the season at the top. Lendl's domination was most emphasized at the US Open '87 when he claimed the title defeating in back-to-back matches his three toughest opponents of the first half of the 80s (McEnroe-Connors-Wilander). Just like the king of the 70s (Borg), Lendl based his tennis on powerful serves and forehands, but as opposed to the Swede, the Czech was using modern equipment allowing him to hit the balls flatter and faster. Lendl's serve was quite intriguing, very tactical shot - he was changing the pace of it constantly depending on the situation, also Lendl's slow getting into the match was his trademark. He didn't care too much in the first 3-4 games, playing in just 70-80% mode; it was enough to usually control the rest of the set from '3:1' or '2-all' scores. When I watch Lendl's archive matches, his forehand on the run down the line gets my special attention; I think he was able to play that particular shot better than anyone in history. He had plenty of opportunities to play it time and time again because until Lendl's retirement, all players were attacking him, either because of their natural serve-and-volley gamesyles or because they couldn't stay with him on equal terms from the baseline. Lendl, as a player who grew up in the 70s, treated attacking the net on faster surfaces as something obvious. But there was a big difference between playing on carpet and grass. Indoors, Lendl could attack the net on his terms, but on grass he was applying regular serve-and-volley tactics because if he hadn't done that, his opponents would have attacked him with cheap-and-charge, and passing them wasn't as easy as on carpet due to irregular bounces. According to today's standards, Lendl was a very good volley player, but his skills in the 80s weren't good enough to conquer the most prestigious title. He was very dedicated to do that someday, especially towards the end of his career; for instance in 1990 he skipped the entire clay-court season preparing for grass, and almost succeeded - he won the preceding

event at Queens Club, easily defeating the three-time Wimbledon champion (Becker), and took advantage of a beneficial draw to reach the semifinal easier than ever in the past. Unfortunately for him, being two matches away from the coveted title, he faced Edberg, who just entered the best period of his career, and as a natural grass-court player, eliminated Lendl without serious troubles... Thanks to his great physical preparation, Lendl was still dangerous when he turned 30, but he was gradually losing with higher frequency and the season 1992 clearly indicated the fall down in tennis hierarchy: his biggest rivals of the late 80s (Edberg & Becker) were still relatively young while a new generation of American youngsters (Pete Sampras, Agassi & Jim Courier - he never won a set against Lendl in four meetings) took the reins of government; there were also other young players born in the 70s, who could harm Lendl with their fast serves & forehands unseen a decade before. The Czech (became an American citizen in July '92) was trying everything he could to stay in touch, but his major appearances of the years 1993-94 were rather abysmal. Lendl lost in the second round of the US Open '94 to Bernd Karbacher (4-6, 6-7, 0-1 ret.) despite a 5:0 lead in the 2nd set and nine set points in the process. "It got stiff fairly early," Lendl said about the problems with his back. "It's the same thing. It has been going on for a while." The man, whose career was characterized by fantastic results in New York (he continuously played the US Open finals in the years 1982-89 and Masters finals in the years 1980-88), soon afterwards decided that it was the best place to finish his career. Lendl didn't announce official retirement, but never appeared again as a professional player, in fact he disappeared in the public eye for many years, enjoying time outside the courts, not caring too much about the diet anymore. After almost two decades in the shadow, Lendl came back to the tour as a coach of Andy Murray in 2011 - and kept this position until 2017 with a break in 2015. Thanks to the Scot, Lendl partially fulfilled his dream of winning the Wimbledon title (Murray triumphed there in 2013, also three years later for the second time). I assume that titles + junior Wimbledon title of 1978, cannot compensate the 80s when he was fully fit & dedicated, yet didn't win the title with his own hands; Becker (defeated Lendl three times) and Edberg (defeated Lendl once) were great, but Pat Cash - looking in retrospect - was beatable, maybe he played a match of his life in 1987 when he faced Lendl in the final...

Biggest titles (8 majors):

Australian Open [1989](#), [1990](#)

Roland Garros [1984](#), [1986](#), [1987](#)

US Open [1985](#), [1986](#), [1987](#)

Davis Cup 1980

Masters [1981](#), [1982](#), [1985](#), [1986](#), [1987](#)

Biggest lost finals (11 majors):

Australian Open [1983](#), [1991](#)

Roland Garros [1981](#), [1985](#)

Wimbledon [1986](#), [1987](#)

US Open [1982](#), [1983](#), [1984](#), [1988](#), [1989](#)

Masters [1980](#), [1983](#), [1984](#), [1988](#)

LJUBICIC, Ivan (Croatia, 1979)

3.

Because of the Balkan war in the early 90s, he emigrated with his parents to Italy where he began his serious tennis journey. Perhaps the traumatic war experiences contributed to the hair loss & actually the entire career he was bald. His teenage life was coincidental with Goran Ivanisevic being one of the best players in the world, because of that Ljubicic stylized his serve on the one of Ivanisevic - the foot of his frontal leg didn't touch the surface in the first phase of preparation. The big serve allowed him to become a regular ATP player at the turn of millenia, but other shots required a lot of practice. A rather one-dimensional Ljubicic was quite often a victim of dramatic defeats. Enough said - in the year 2002 (extending to the Aussie swing of 2003) he lost as many as seven encounters holding match points (20 in total!). There were also dramatic 2-set or 4-set defeats (most famous at the US Open '01 in four tie-breaks to the defending champion Marat Safin). Ljubicic was dangerous for all the best players, but he seemed to be someone capable of losing everything tight what was possible & his return game wasn't the only problem - the most severe case comes from the Aussie Open '02 when he lost to Wayne Ferreira despite 6-4, 6-4, 5:1 & 5:3(40/15) - with this serve? Unbelievable! The hard work finally paid off in the years 2005-06. Ljubicic showed off his improved version, with stable backhand and good volley skills, so important for players who serve very well. In the first quarter of 2005 Ljubicic reached three hardcourt finals and quite funny he lost them all to Roger Federer, but twice making the things complicated (especially in [Rotterdam](#)) for the almost unbeatable at the time man from Switzerland. It was a huge boost of confidence for the 26-year-old Croat who shortly after the third of those finals, stunned the United States in the first round of Davis Cup. Ljubicic defeated not only higher ranked Andre Agassi and Andy Roddick, he also - partnering Mario Ancic - overcame the Bryan brothers who had won 15 straight Davis Cup sets at the time. It was the beginning of the sensational conquering of the Davis Cup (in the final against even more unexpected Slovakia). Before it happened, Ljubicic had been the hottest player of Autumn '05 winning 16 matches in a row and almost another one which could have meant his third straight indoor title (he led 2-0 in sets vs [Rafael Nadal in Madrid](#)). Also to Nadal, Ljubo lost his lone [Grand Slam semifinal](#), in Paris, so at the venue least expected. Admittedly he was not a serve-and-volley specialist, but he could be easier expected in the Wimbledon semifinal on the assumption the tie-break ratio would be good for him.

Biggest title: Davis Cup 2005

MARTIN, Todd (USA, 1970)

4.

I watched that almost two-meter guy for the first time at the [US Open '92](#). At the main arena, during the night session he lost to one year younger, but much more experienced Pete Sampras; my overall impression was that Martin should have won, simply the crucial points separated them. I was surprised how a 22-year-old player with such a good serve, good net coverage and exquisite returns entered the Top 100 for the first time just before the US Open.

The following year confirmed Martin's big potential, he moved from no. 90 to 13 notching good results on each surface (including American clay; on clay in Europe he played only in Paris). Martin was a top 10'er in the years 1993-97 having defeated all the best players in the world in those years, but the lack of winning at least one big title, somehow spoiled his career. A serious elbow injury forced him not to play for eight months, he dropped from no. 12 to 81. Generally speaking clay was Martin's worst surface, yet he won his arguably biggest title on that surface after a two-year break from the previous title - [Barcelona '98](#). What's more astonishing, he convincingly defeated in Barcelona six players who could say "clay is my fave surface". Martin was a hell of a fighter, he came back nine times from 0-2 in sets, but he also suffered almost unimaginable two defeats on Centre Court at Wimbledon: against fellow Americans: [MaliVai Washington](#) (1996) and Andre Agassi (2000), Martin lost those matches despite double break advantage in fifth sets. With his serve? Admittedly his height was a bit misleading (big head), anyway he knew how to win on serve games quickly with a mix of aces, service winner & volleys. He could be even a leader in the stats of the fastest servers for a while as he struck 220 kph in Paris-Bercy (1993), the contemporary record was 5 kph slower, Martin's serve landed outside the service box though. Well-liked among other players, in 1998 he was chosen a president of ATP. It was the time of his second opening; he couldn't be as consistent as before the injury, but as a veteran he reached his second Grand Slam final - US Open '99, in which he led 2-1 in sets vs Agassi.

Biggest lost finals (2 majors): Australian Open [1994](#), US Open [1999](#); Grand Slam Cup [1995](#)

MASSU, Nicolas (Chile, 1979)

9.

The first steps on the tennis court, Massu did under the guidance of his maternal Jewish-Hungarian grand-father. Massu (the Lebanese/Palestinian origin of the father's side) enjoyed a successful career as a junior; when Marcelo Rios became the best tennis in the world in 1998, journalists were already talking about his successors - Massu & Fernando Gonzalez. In terms of the ranking, Rios' younger compatriots achieved less, but Massu among these three guys is the only one who won one of the biggest titles in tennis - the Gold medal at the Olympics in Athens which opens the discussion "who is the best player in Chilean history?" (Gonzalez won the most matches, and reached the most major finals). The story was absolutely incredible because Massu not only triumphed in singles, he also (partnering Gonzalez) won the gold medal in doubles, surviving both finals in dramatic five-setters. Within 24 hours Massu went beyond the tennis area, his story will be remembered and mentioned in wider context in the upcoming decades - in the history of sport. In the last two matches of that event, Massu defeated the American players for whom reaching the final stages of the Olympics meant career-best result as well, but nothing can be depreciated in Massu's triumph because earlier in the event he had defeated two former Nos. 1 in the world (Gustavo Kuerten & Carlos Moya). Massu arrived in the Greek capital having lost eight consecutive matches on hardcourts. How he managed to win two gold medals is unbelievable because it's his lone hardcourt title in singles and the only one in doubles overall! The week of unforgettable miracles... Pertinacious

player, always fighting to the end, he won many matches from a deep hole (especially in 'the best of three' format), a type of guy who wanted to spend as much time on the court as possible - the longer the match, the better for him. This attitude didn't fully pay off at majors, it's quite remarkable that despite his mental toughness he had a negative record in majors, even in Paris. In the 00s no other player was involved in so many long matches, he loved to stretch breaks between his serves to maximum (25 seconds in ATP & 20 seconds in major events then). After many years of being associated with clay-courts, he advanced to the final in [Madrid](#) (indoors). That result certainly helped him to build confidence on hardcourts, and the manifestation of it, the tennis fans witnessed during his glory days in Athens. Trivia: Massu played two longest four-setters, both in Davis Cup rubbers; first in 2007 when he lost to Dudi Sela 3-6, 4-6, 7-6, 4-6 after 5 hours 7 minutes, then two years later when he overcame Stefan Koubek 6-4, 4-6, 6-4, 7-6 after 5 hours 14 minutes.

Biggest title: Olympics (Athens [2004](#))

MAYOTTE, Tim (USA, 1960)

7.

A man who has one of the worst H2H records in the Open Era: 0-17 vs Ivan Lendl. The initial phase of their rivalry didn't indicate it'd be such a disaster. In the second round of the US Open '82, Mayotte found himself within three points of eliminating Lendl in a two-day duel. He also led 2:0 in the 5th set, was serving very well (19 aces), but ultimately lost on the sixth match point. *"One of the highlights of my career,"* Mayotte explained *"Missed an opportunity to boost my confidence."* In his previous major (Wimbledon), Mayotte reached the first of his two major semifinals, defeating three seeded players. That year turned him into a solid player in the tennis elite for the rest of the 80s. Paradoxically Mayotte's first title (Delray Beach '85) remained his biggest, despite claiming another eleven titles. He was almost 25 when got his maiden title, and it happened in a very bizarre event, which later transformed itself into the so-called "fifth Slam" held at Key Biscayne. It's absolutely remarkable that in that big tournament, Mayotte [45] didn't need to beat any seeded player, it was an event in which every player he faced from the fourth round onwards, already was satisfied with career best result. In retrospect Mayotte's title is a bit more valuable because in the second round he ousted Boris Becker... the 17-year-old German at the time was participating in his just 15th main-level event and no-one expected he would become a Wimbledon champion a few months later. *"I remember what Borg said when he won Wimbledon,"* Mayotte said after ousting Scott Davis 4-6, 4-6, 6-3, 6-2, 6-4 in the three and 1/2-hour final. *"It's part preparation, part effort and part luck."* With the victory, Mayotte earned \$112,500, more than he won in all of 1984. Three years later Mayotte was relatively close to getting tennis immortality playing the Olympic final (tennis for the first time officially at the Olympics), but he lost to Miloslav Mecir in their only meeting. *"It's strange because here, the emphasis is on medals instead of 100 percent on winning,"* Mayotte said with a silver medal draped around his neck. *"So there is consolation in getting to the medal group. The ceremony was fantastic, it's such a different way of doing things."* Hopeless against Lendl, the big-serving Mayotte was a difficult opponent for all the best players who appeared on the tennis scene in

the 80s, defeating guys like John McEnroe, Stefan Edberg, Mats Wilander as well as American golden kids (Andre Agassi, Pete Sampras, Michael Chang). At the Australian Open '90, Mayotte lost to Sampras almost a five-hour marathon 10-12 in the deciding set, committing a double fault on Sampras' match point - only for one year it was the longest encounter played in Australia. Fast surfaces (grass, carpet) were the most natural environment for Mayotte. The year 1991 meant for him a sudden downhill, nonetheless on court no. 1 at Wimbledon, he stunned Michael Chang in five sets saving four match points in the 4th set. *"It was the most fun I've had in a long time,"* he said. *"I really didn't come out here expecting too much – I just wanted to have fun."* Mayotte could be expected as a winner, but the way in which he did it was quite stunning. The teenage Chang had been already established as a specialist of matches lasting longer than three hours, who survived eight consecutive five-setters. Mayotte defeated him for the third time in their third meeting though (all at Slams). Mayotte never played another match of this magnitude, announcing a decision of retirement early in 1992.

Biggest lost final: Olympics 1988

MECIR, Miloslav (Slovakia, 1964)

4.

When I think: who was the best Open Era player to never win a Grand Slam title (?), my thoughts go to Mecir. A simplistic solution to answer this question would be to analyze the guys who played the most major finals not winning any of them. This is a group of two-time major finalists: Kevin Anderson, Alex Corretja, Kevin Curren, Steve Denton, Todd Martin, Mecir, Cedric Pioline & Robin Soderling. Three players (Corretja, Martin & Pioline) won much more matches than Mecir, Corretja was also ranked higher, so I'd be reasonable to speculate choosing between Corretja & Mecir. I favore Mecir due to his all-court versatility. Corretja played both his major finals on clay, Mecir on hard, yet on two different venues; the (Czecho)Slovak played semifinals at all majors while Corretja didn't reach a semifinal outside France. Their biggest titles? Corretja triumphed at 'Masters' '98 in Hanover, ten years earlier Mecir got a gold medal at the Olympics in Seoul. of course it's not easy to weight both titles on the same scale because Corretja needed to face (at least in theory, but in practice too) all the best players in the world while Seoul of 1988 didn't gather all the best guys as the first official Olympic event, yet Mecir needed to win six 'best of five' matches. Well, another good comparison is their other biggest titles. In the 80s there wasn't still something like Masters 1K, yet the prestige was actually the same - Corretja won those tournaments twice (Rome, Indian Wells), so did Mecir (Key Biscayne, [Indian Wells](#)). And here's one important factor - in the years 1987-89, Key Biscayne was known as the "fifth Grand Slam" because the champion needed to win seven 'best of five' matches. I'd even argue that Mecir's title claimed in Florida '87 is more valuable than Edberg's Australian Open title of the same year (in Melbourne the seeded players had 'bye' in the first round). When I ponder about the most prestigious events it looks like this (without subtle nuances):

- Grand Slams
- "Masters"

- Olympics
- Masters 1K
- WCT Finals/Grand Slam Cup

- the rest of main-level events with a gradation depending on the prize money mainly

Ok, so before the introduction of the Grand Slam Cup in Munich 1990, in the 80s a similar function (an indoor event gathering the best & "the best of five" format each round) belonged to the World Championship Tennis which was annually held in Dallas. I praise the Munich event more, but Corretja didn't even play a semifinal there - Mecir won [Dallas in 1987](#), having defeated Mats Wilander, Andres Gomez & John McEnroe; two of those three players belonged to Top in men's tennis then. There's one more thing - competitiveness against the best players in the biggest tournaments. Admittedly what Corretja has achieved in Hanover '98 cannot be underestimated, but at majors he didn't beat either Sampras or Agassi (albeit played very good five-setters against them in New York), in turn Mecir in the 'best of five' had defeated all the best players in the world of the late 80s. Mecir won 20 of 23 matches against Swedish players (the biggest collective force in men's tennis at the time!) during 18 months of the years 1985-86. Especially his 7:4 record vs Wilander is very intriguing. To me, Wilander was the best tactician of the 80s (yes, it was him, not Brad Gilbert;), nevertheless he couldn't find a solution facing the awkward Mecir. The most bitter defeat of those seven comes from Wimbledon '88 - in retrospect: if Wilander had claimed that title, he would have enjoyed the best Open Era season... was outplayed [3-6, 1-6, 3-6](#) by Mecir in the quarterfinal (their last meeting by the way). Mecir could be a pain in the ass for all top dogs; against big servers he could retrieve more than others, facing Wilander, he could outplay the patient Swede on the baseline with more acute angles. In terms of technique he was unique - big guy, but not a big server, his upper body was unusually longer so he was moving like a player - let's say - 10 cm shorter. He was a baseliner, but his volley technique was faultless, so no problem for him to apply serve-and-volley when the situation required it. He knew how to dismantle his opponents, they needed to change (or at least modify) their tactics in order to beat him. After many years, this is how Wilander recalls Mecir: *"Best anticipation of any player in our generation for sure. The most flexible... and then crazy good hands. He is the best player in the world to not have won a slam, for sure. No question in my mind. He should have won three or four."*

Biggest titles: Key Biscayne [1987](#), Olympics (Seoul 1988)

Biggest lost finals: US Open [1986](#), Australian Open [1989](#)

MEDVEDEV, Andrei (Ukraine, 1974)

4.

Medvedev's career was fast... In 1990 he won the Orange Bowl as a 16-year-old (defeating Pilar Pérez in the final; he didn't appear on the main scene), so facing two year older boys. One year later he was ready to play at the main-level and reached the semifinal in Geneva where he lost to Thomas Muster. The year 1992 he began in April and notched valuable results; he won three titles, including Stuttgart Outdoor at the Rochusclub with the strongest draw in the tournament history. The teenager, ranked no. 100, needed nine wins in a row to rise the trophy

(three qualifying matches, six in the main draw), defeating four seeded players: Alexander Volkov, Stefan Edberg, Muster & Wayne Ferreira in the final after five sets, having squandered a match point at 5:3 in the third set. Pundits began talking about him as a potential No. 1 in the world. The series of injuries dashed the plans. More or less during clay-court season '95, Medvedev stopped his development, it's difficult to explain what happened, my loose theory is that he grew up too fast, already in his early 90s he began to bald, but the same happened to other players (Andre Agassi, Nikolay Davydenko, Ivan Ljubicic) who enjoyed the best times of careers approaching 30. There was even a week when Medvedev dropped to No. 99 and paradoxically then he played the event of his life at Roland Garros. Neither Pete Sampras nor Gustavo Kuerten were able to defeat him before the final in which he was leading 6-1, 6-2, 4-all against Agassi when the American hit the line with his second serve on mini match point. Perhaps a few centimeters separated Medvedev from a straight set victory. That moment completely changed the momentum and the Ukrainian lost in five the most important match of his tennis life. Medvedev cried afterwards, his namesake was crying too - tennis melodrama created by two young, but already bad men. Medvedev stated that he regained the required self-confidence to play again at the highest level and another Grand Slam final would be a matter of time, however, one year later he was totally outplayed in the fourth round by Magnus Norman, who was on his way to reach the only major final... Obviously, over the years Medvedev was the most sufficient on clay-courts where he had more time to play his flat groundstrokes & dropshots, but he had skills to make some damage on other surfaces too - everywhere advanced to the finals, at Wimbledon '94 played one of the tightest matches in the tournament history against the legend of those courts - Boris Becker; on carpet in Paris '93 he somehow survived four consecutive matches against players better suited to indoor conditions to be destroyed in the final by [Goran Ivanisevic](#)..... His mother Svetlana was a coach in Kiev - there small Andrei & his sister Natasha started to play tennis. Just like the older sister, he finished prematurely, i.e. a few years before turning 30, but before it happened he managed to participate in more than 200 events, hence it's tough to say he hadn't played enough to experience everything that tennis at the highest level has to offer. Trivia: in 1998, within a few months he defeated Ivanisevic twice saving match points in deciding tie-break sets, first at Indian Wells (7-6, 2-6, 7-6), then in Monte Carlo 4-6, 6-2, 7-6); despite "only" 11 titles, he collected 4 Masters 1K titles, three of them in Hamburg ([1994](#), [1995](#) and [1997](#)).

Biggest lost final: Roland Garros [1999](#)

MEDVEDEV, Daniil (Russia, 1996)

2.

I considered him as a potential no. 1 at some point in the decade of the '20s after I watched him defeating Novak Djokovic in the [Cincinnati '19 semifinal](#) when in the 3rd set he was constantly hitting second serves with the speed of his standard 1st serve. "This guy has balls other youngsters have not" I thought... Actually the Russian didn't make a particular impression on me until the Summer/Autumn of '19. Then, out of nowhere, he won 29 out of his 32 matches, and two of those three defeats he experienced against the best player of the season - Rafael

Nadal (including a fascinating US Open final). Admittedly Medvedev was a Top 10 player, but after Wimbledon '19, it'd be easier to predict his dropping in the ranking than his advancement because quite at the time he had lost five straight matches. And then, starting from Washington (lost the final to Nick Kyrgios in two tie-breaks), something changed in his mind - he became an unemotional winning machine. Already at the beginning of the 2019 year he showed improvement as a server, but that's all, so his amazing streak can be explained in this simplistic sentence "all the pieces of the puzzle fit together": he found his way to play better at the vital moments of sets & matches, while his awkward game was basically the same. By this I mean his shots are far away from fluidity as well as he movement all over the court. He's very fast though, and even if he hits the ball uncleanly, it somehow finds its way to drop inside the side of the opponent. I think his main strength it's his arrhythmic style, he's a "two-faced player" considering his service and return games. He likes to play in fast pace, risking his second serve a lot which makes sense with his height, so at times he holds in a nick of time like the best servers, and then as a receiver he turns into a player ~20 cm shorter working hard on the baseline, retrieving many balls when he seems to be finished. *"He's super solid. He doesn't miss. It's like playing against a wall,"* David Goffin characterized Medvedev's style after losing to him in the Cincinnati '19 final. *"Just playing cross, cross, wait for the ball. His pace is not too fast, not too slow. It's quite a special pace to play against him. And then you receive bombs coming from his serve, and then he doesn't miss."* Colorful personality, outspoken, he's open to try different things being aware that the end justifies the means. Given his defensive skills and good mentality it's strange that he still hasn't won a match at Roland Garros (in four appearances) and had a 0-6 five-set record before defeating Filip Krajinovic 3-2 recently in Melbourne. My insight into Medvedev's strategy is that he wants to impose the leading position from the beginning. Analyzing his scorelines, I'd argue that he's well prepared mentally & physically to deliver his best tennis only for three hours. It seems not sufficient to perceive him as a champion of majors and the future no. 1. He not only never come back from a 0-2 deficit, he has also never won a match when dropped the first set and trailed in the second, and we're talking about the player who already turned 25 (even on the assumption today's "25" doesn't mean "25" from the previous decades in terms of expectations how long a player may keep the highest level of his tennis). At the turn of the years 2020-21 Medvedev emulated his top performance of the Summer/Autumn '19; he was defeating many players in a row, including Top 10ers, there were 20 matches won in a row, and then came the Australian Open final against Novak Djokovic. Medvedev trailed only 5-7, 1:3* when he showed signs of frustration and discouragement. He may stay in the Top 5 for a while, but if he doesn't start winning Slam matches being in trouble soon, he may end his career as a two-time Slam runner-up, joining the extensive list of players.

Biggest title: Masters [2020](#)

Biggest lost finals: US Open [2019](#), Australian Open [2021](#)

MURRAY, Andy (Scotland, 1987)

1.

When I ponder on Murray's stellar career, I ask myself "how many major titles he could have won if he had defeated Novak Djokovic 5-6 times more". They haven't met for four years, the Serb leads 25:11 in H2H, but what's more important, he has beaten Murray in their all five meetings in Melbourne as well as in both Parisian clashes (all those matches were played in the semi- and finals). The Djokovic-Murray rivalry reminds me of the one co-created by Goran Ivanisevic & Pete Sampras almost two decades earlier. These are two rivalries of players born in the same year (1971 and 1987), in which - at least in my opinion - the one possessing a bit more tools, and also coping well with tight situations at a very good percentage, somehow couldn't find the medicine for his biggest nemesis. These rivalries show how physical and mental aspects are important when two almost identical players stand face to face, the physical one especially in the Djokovic-Murray rivalry. I noticed over the years when they were facing each other regularly, that the Scot could play on equal terms with the Serb for 2.5 hours more or less, afterwards he couldn't keep the same level of intensity, whilst Djokovic was always prepared to be involved in punishing baseline exchanges constantly for four hours. It was especially noticeable in their three four-setters they played at majors between Australian Opens 2013 & 2015 (in the meantime [US Open '14](#)). In all those three matches tie-breaks were exchanged in the opening two sets, then another two sets meant one-way traffic. Admittedly the Scot found his way to defeat Djokovic in a five-setter once, extremely important for himself US Open '12 final when he raised his first Grand Slam trophy being defeated in four previous final attempts, but the scenario of that final was very similar to those three four-setters: first two sets tight, they lasted more than two hours, and then Djokovic dominated his peer. The one vital difference - in the US Open '12 final, Murray managed to take both opening sets, and it allowed him to control the rest, he was outplayed in sets 3 and 4, not giving everything, Djokovic had to do so, thus in the decider Murray was relatively fresh, and prevailed 7-6, 7-5, 2-6, 3-6, 6-2 equaling record for the longest final played at the US Open, I consider that victory as the most important in his career. *"After the third and fourth sets it was tough mentally for me... Novak is so, so strong. He fights till the end in every single match and I don't know how I managed to come through in the end. It was close to five hours and I've had some really long and tough matches. I just managed to get through."* said Murray, he celebrated that success in very untypical fashion, crouching at the intersection of baseline and doubles sideline... the man at the verge of the world, in that moment he fulfilled his dreams about winning a major title. He reasonably waited for that moment actually four years. At the end of 2008, when the Roger Federer-Rafael Nadal rivalry had already been established, Murray seemed to be a bit closer to them than Djokovic. The Serb had already won his maiden major title (Australian Open '08), but Murray simply seemed to be a better, more complex player in the second half of that season. Between Wimbledon '08 and Australian Open '09, he defeated Djokovic twice, Federer thrice and Nadal once (in the [US Open semifinal](#); I think Murray played in that match the best tennis of his life) which put him in eyes of many not only as a main contender not only for the title in Australia, but also to become the no. 1 in the world... in the fourth round Murray [suffered a loss](#) to an inspired Fernando Verdasco, who had then become a national hero clinching the Davis Cup final '08. Murray had to wait four and seven years respectively (first Grand Slam title and

reaching the top of the pyramid) for those achievements which had been anticipated from him already when the year 2009 kicked off. As opposed to several players who reached no. 1, to be quickly forgotten as a leader, Murray did it in great memorable style: the year 2016 belonged to him. It was a year when Federer stopped playing after Wimbledon, while Nadal was struggling with his form and his body (that year he was eliminated from tournaments several times in the rounds when it seemed actually impossible; withdrawal for the French Open third round included). Basically, Murray had one huge rival that year, instead of three, and dealt with him well - the Scot and the Serb met five times, Djokovic won thrice, but the most important match of the year, the season-ending final in London, took Murray... the only time in history happened that a match between two guys decided which one of them would finish the year as no. 1. *"It's a very special day,"* Murray during the trophy presentation. *"It's been a tough rivalry. I've lost many of them but obviously I'm happy I've got the win today. To finish the year No. 1 is very special. It's something I never expected."* The pursuit of finishing the year at the top was crazy, after the US Open the Scot played the Davis Cup semifinal (lost the longest match he ever played, to Juan M. Del Potro), then five events and won them all; the winning streak was extended to the year 2017, being ultimately finished at 28 (his last meeting against Djokovic?) Murray paid the price for the enormous effort of overcoming own physical limitations. He lost [the fourth round](#) at the Australian Open '17 to Mischa Zverev; I assume that before the match the vast majority couldn't have thought that the older Zverev would win one set at least, not only because at the age of 30 he had never went so far at majors, also because of his serve-and-volley style - Murray used to be merciless facing similar opponents. But on that day, his body felt the burden of the previous season, he was one step slower and it made the difference in the end. It was the beginning of Murray's downhill, soon afterwards he lost matches to a few inferior opponents in early rounds (Vasek Pospisil, Albert Ramos - [incredible loss](#)). He partially regained his form in the mid-season advancing to the semifinal of French Open (lost there one of the best major semifinals I've seen, to [Stan Wawrinka](#)) and [Wimbledon's quarterfinal](#). Following those five-set defeats, Murray's career collapsed like a house of cards. It's been almost 4 years later, and in the meantime he has played just 18 main-level tournaments, thus more or less the number of events expected to play within one season in case of someone of Murray's calibre. There was a period (Spring of '19) when it was possible that Murray wouldn't return at all after he underwent a surgery to his right hip. He still believes he may be competitive again, but I have my doubts, it's mainly based on his abysmal performances at majors last year when he had no chance in three-setters against Wawrinka (Paris) and Felix Auger (New York).

Biggest titles (3 majors):

Wimbledon [2013](#), [2016](#); US Open [2012](#)

Olympics [2012](#), [2016](#); Davis Cup [2015](#), Masters [2016](#)

Biggest lost finals (7 majors):

Australian Open [2010](#), [2011](#), [2013](#), [2015](#), [2016](#);

Roland Garros [2016](#)

US Open [2008](#)

MUSTER, Thomas (Austria, 1967)

1.

Speaking percentage-wise, Muster's best Slam was Roland Garros (71% of wins), but at Australian & US Opens he played as many quarterfinals as in Paris which is quite surprising. It's less surprising if we look closer at Muster's ten years in Paris beginning in 1989 when he had played Australian Open semifinal and advanced to the Key Biscayne final (Ivan Lendl was an end station twice). That year he simply couldn't play after a car accident (hit by a drunk driver; side ligaments in his left knee). In 1991 he lost the first round to the best player of the decade - [Pete Sampras](#). The years 1992-93? Twice halted by the ruler, at the time in Paris - Jim Courier. 1994 - another tough draw, very demanding second round win over [Andre Agassi](#) and a sensational defeat to [Patrick Rafter](#), who later became the best player in the world so that match has a different perspective with time. 1996? Fourth round defeat when Muster was supposed to defend his title, but ousted by an inspired [Michael Stich](#). That year the sunny conditions generally helped big servers and Stich took advantage of the weather. 1997? Again sensational, third round loss to [Gustavo Kuerten](#) who... wins the event and two more titles in Paris. Finally 1999, and the first round defeat to finish career, to Nicolas Lapentti, who was playing tennis of his life that year. And we have only three advancement to the quarterfinals; first in 1990 when Muster lost in the semifinal to Andre Gomez having defeated the Ecuadorian a few weeks before in Rome, the title in 1995 when Muster was an absolute favorite, yet almost lost in the last eight (Albert Costa), and the quarterfinal in 1998 (defeated by Felix Mantilla) when was already prone to lose matches on clay, and no-one could have been surprised if he had lost in the first week. *"Muster reminds me a lot of Guillermo Vilas because he hits the ball so hard,"* Gomez said after the upset loss in Rome '90. It was also my impression when I was watching Muster in the 90s, he was playing in a way allowing me to suspect that he based his game-style on the Argentinian. Great athleticism, a lot of topspin off both wings manufactured with the left-hand, and also good touch at the net - these attributes they shared. Muster was a workaholic, he needed that to come back to his previous shape after the Key Biscayne accident. He was famously pictured hitting tennis balls in a special chair, with his left leg in a cast. Six months later, he returned and went onto be named the ATP's Comeback Player of the Year. The enormous effort he put into returning to his top form, paid dividends in 1995 - that year Muster was absolutely phenomenal on his beloved clay - he collected twelve titles, eleven of them on the dirt. It's absolutely extraordinary that en route to half of them he was one point away from defeat (won seven match point down matches in total that year). His dedication to win as many titles as possible, created for him a chance to become no. 1 in the world, which ultimately happened the following year when he wasn't playing with the same efficiency on clay, yet improved on faster surfaces, finally even winning some matches on hated grass (his record at Wimbledon? terrible 0-4, in the years 1988-91 he didn't even bother to make a trip to England). *"My No. 1 in 1996 was based on my 12 tournament wins in 1995... I don't know how many people can say that, measurably, they have been No. 1 at something, the best in the world. I loved that moment."* said Muster. He wanted to prove to the two best players of those times (Andre Agassi & Pete Sampras) that he could compete with them everywhere. Muster began to operate closer to the baseline at the end of his career, attacking the net more often (like he'd used to do in the late 80s) and the year 1997 was his best as far as hardcourts are

concerned ([Australian Open](#) semifinal, [Key Biscayne](#) triumph, final in [Cincinnati](#)), but he lost his feeling of clay, and that year he won just 9 matches (lost 9 too) on that surface while in the two previous years enjoyed fantastic 65-2 (1995) and 46-3 (1996) records there. When Alex Corretja stunned him 7-5, 6-1 in the Gstaad '95 first round, it meant Muster's first loss after 35 consecutive wins (40 on clay). Making stats of Muster's matches I've noticed he was prone to play lobs despite not doing it very well, his return was so-so, on the backhand side usually just blocking. It may explain his modest H2H records against serve-and-volleyers, he had weak reflex and often instead of trying to pass his opponents he was playing defensive lobs. A 0-10 Head-to-Head vs Stefan Edberg is brutal, but there are also poor records against other similar players: 0-3 vs Rafter, 2-3 vs Stich. Moreover tied records against serve-and-volley big servers like Goran Ivanisevic & Richard Krajicek, they all were able to beat Muster even on clay.

Biggest title (1 major): Roland Garros [1995](#)

McENROE, John (USA, 1959)

1.

If anyone compiled both singles and doubles, looking for the best tennis player in the history of modern tennis, it would be John Patrick McEnroe. The American of Irish origin born in Germany (after one year he moved to New York with his parents), has gone down in the history of sport not only as an outstanding player with unconventional technique, but also as someone completely unpredictable in his behavior on the court. McEnroe first caught the attention of a wider audience in 1977. He went through the qualifying rounds of Wimbledon and there he advanced to the semi-finals. Nobody had done it before, and no one has reached the Wimbledon semi-finals having so little experience - McEnroe played only the sixth main-level tournament in his career! A year later, as a 19-year-old, he made his way to the world's top, winning four events in the fall. His position in the world of tennis was established at the turn of the 70's and 80's, when he co-created excellent duels with the best tennis players in the world at that time, Jimmy Connors & Bjorn Borg. Especially the rivalry with the Swede captured the imagination of the fans. McEnroe & Borg met nine times in the finals, and their final skirmish at Wimbledon '80 featured the sport's history. Borg was leading 2-1 in sets, 5:4 (40/15) and serving, yet he lost the set after the most famous tennis tie-break lasting 20 minutes! In the fifth set they were holding up to 7:6, when Borg passed McEnroe on the eighth match point and fell on his knees in a triumphant gesture. The meeting lasted 3 hours 53 minutes. A year later, McEnroe had repaid Borg in the Wimbledon final, snapping a 41-match winning streak of the Swede at the All England Club courts. A few months later, McEnroe won the US Open final against Borg and became the first tennis player since the 1920s to win three consecutive titles in New York. Soon afterwards Borg ended/suspended his career prematurely, but BigMac's new, exceptionally challenging rival, Ivan Lendl, emerged. It was at the hands of the Czech that McEnroe suffered perhaps the saddest defeat in his career at Roland Garros '84 when there was a great opportunity to do one of the toughest tasks in tennis - triumphing in Paris constantly attacking the net (Stefan Edberg was also quite close five years later). A few words about McEnroe's devastating loss... June 1984, after a series of 39 victories in a row, in the Roland

Garros final McEnroe met Lendl, whom he had defeated in that season before the Parisian final as many as four times, including "a piece of cake" on three occasions. And in the memorable final, it looked like another smooth win through two and a half sets. Lendl, however, managed to win that meeting, although in each of the last three sets, McEnroe was only two games away from the victory. Never again has an offensive tennis player been so close to winning the French Open. A few months after that painful defeat, McEnroe took his revenge on Lendl, outclassing him in the US Open final. BigMac was 25 years old and already had seven Grand Slam titles on his account, and probably no one thought that he would not improve his achievements in majors. At the end of 1984 he was still young and almost unbeatable - his win/loss record of the season extraordinary, 82-3! The year 1985 was pivotal in McEnroe's career though - he failed to win any Grand Slam event and felt weary of tennis, at the same time two great youngsters emerged, Boris Becker & Stefan Edberg. After a sensational defeat to Brad Gilbert at Masters '85, but played in January 1986, McEnroe suspended his career for seven months. During that time, he married an actress Tatum O'Neal, with whom he has three children (Kevin, Sean and Emily). After his return, he did not manage to regain his former glory, although he was still dangerous, claiming a few quite big titles (Dallas '89 - the biggest after the sabbatical period). After the 1987 US Open, he again had a seven-month hiatus - that time, however, partly not voluntarily - he was disqualified for two months and fined 17.5 thousand dollars. Offended by the tennis authorities, he extended his absence for five more months and immediately after his return he won the tournament in Tokyo (April 1988)! McEnroe was losing more and more often and with higher frequency he was displaying unsportsmanlike behavior. At the Australian Open '90, he was finally disqualified against Mikael Pernfors after he'd offended line judge, head judge and supervisor. During the tournament in the Paris hall, Bercy (1990) he did not even shake the hand of Jakob Hlasek with whom had won a title in doubles a year before. Usually players calm down the older they are, not McEnroe, his behaviour was more controversial over the years. He announced the year 1992 as the last season of his turbulent, yet beautiful tennis career. As a farewell, he once again flashed a wonderful game at Wimbledon. He reached the semi-finals in singles and triumphed in doubles along with other serve-and-volley artist Michael Stich after the longest doubles final in history (5-7, 7-6, 3-6, 7-6, 19-17 against Jim Grabb / Richey Reneberg), lasting 5 hours and 1 minute. Officially played his last singles match in Munich '92 (Compac Grand Slam Cup), but more than a year later, he made his cameo in Rotterdam losing to a very solid Magnus Gustafsson 2-6, 6-7. McEnroe began the match trailing 0:4, since then to the end of the match he was playing like he didn't finish his career. In the same tournament, along with Boris Becker, McEnroe won two matches advancing to the semifinals where he was beaten by Jeremy Bates, and... Jonas Bjorkman, who will become McEnroe's partner twelve (!) years later during two tournaments. Bjorkman & McEnroe played two events together in 2006, the Swede was already at the end of his career then, but still considered as one of the best doubles players in the world. They triumphed in San Jose (February) but lost in the Stockholm quarterfinals eight months later. "I'm surprised that it went to the final tiebreaker, but the right team won," the 47-year-old, with a head full of grey, McEnroe told reporters after the San Jose final. "Jonas carried the weight. When I came here, I thought we could either lose in the first round or win the whole thing." In 1999, he joined the elite International Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport. That same year, he became a US Davis Cup

coach. He led the team to the 2000 Davis Cup semi-finals, but after a miserable 0-5 defeat to Spain, he resigned and his function was taken over by his younger brother Patrick.

Biggest titles (7 majors):

Wimbledon [1981](#), [1983](#), [1984](#)

US Open [1979](#), [1980](#), [1981](#), [1984](#)

Davis Cup 1978, 1979, [1982](#), 1992 (doubles)

Masters [1978](#), [1983](#), [1984](#)

Biggest lost finals (4 majors):

Roland Garros [1984](#)

Wimbledon [1980](#), [1982](#)

US Open [1985](#)

Masters [1982](#)

MOYA, Carlos (Spain, 1976)

1.

Full name: Carlos Moyá Llompart. Moya left the tennis circuit unfortunately in the shadows, and it's a pity because he has considerably contributed to modern tennis... I wish he hadn't announced his retirement at the end of 2008 or hadn't done as other notable players like Stefan Edberg, Marat Safin or Patrick Rafter - a farewell season. In the last two years of his career, during the struggle with a foot injury, Moya was actually non-existent at the main level, only ten tournaments, four wins... Remembering that he had already one major title and one final at the age of twenty-one, I'd say he finished his career as an underachiever, but on the other hand, who could expect in 1996 that this 20 year-old long-haired clay-courter would become No. 1 player in the world one day in March '99? First of all, he was an example of a player who maximally adjusted his game-style to abilities, sometimes it was ridiculous how he was trying to play forehands from the backhand side, but somehow it worked very efficiently thanks to brilliant footwork! Obviously with forehand alone he couldn't achieve so much, he used to be a big server at times and a very clever volleyer. And he used his net skills on faster surfaces wisely, in some sense beginning a new era in the Spanish tennis - before Moya actually every Spanish player was a synonym of a clay-court specialist... Moya achieved a lot on hardcourts and indoors, but never adjusted his game to grass, and I think it's more a matter of his return games cause he simply hadn't time to prepare himself properly to powerful forehand shots from his left side. The alleged clay-courter Moya built his name defeating Boris Becker twice within a few months on two different surfaces. First he did it in Paris-Bercy '96 (2R, carpet!), then in the [Australian Open '97](#) first round. The second victory over the defending champion on Australia's main tennis arena, had a big impact on the rest of Moya's career. *"Playing against him gives me extra motivation,"* admitted Moya. *"Becker is one of the greatest players in tennis history."* Suddenly he became a fan favorite, especially for teenagers, with his oversized Nike clothes, headband and Babolat racquet - he definitely helped to popularize the brand which had been primarily known for strings before. Expectations were high since the second round, and he rose to the challenge advancing to the final where he got a lesson from Pete Sampras. There was a big gap between them, Moya admitted it, but already ten months later defeated the American in

Hannover-Masters, and when Moya advanced to No. 1 he surpassed Sampras on the top... he held the top spot for two weeks (only Patrick Rafter was shorter on the top among the 26 ATP ranking leaders of the Open Era): *"I always believed that winning a Grand Slam was the best thing that could happen to you. But this [being No. 1] surpassed that. There were a lot of players that wanted to dethrone Sampras. There was pressure. And for me, it was the only chance."* Trivia: Moya is a record-holder in the most winning consecutive matches when a deciding third set tie-breaks was required; he won 17 matches of this kind in a row in the years 2002-08 before losing 7-6, 6-7, 6-7 to his fellow Mallorcan, Rafael Nadal in something what at the time was a record-ting three-setter in terms of the duration. For the past few years, Moya has been Nadal's coach. Nadal on Moya: *"Moya was a pioneer in this sport. He deserves everybody's recognition. He has done very significant things in the world of tennis. He was No. 1 in the world, a difficult thing to achieve, won the biggest tournaments... He has contributed greatly to Spanish sport."*

Biggest titles (1 major): Roland Garros [1998](#), Davis Cup [2004](#)

Biggest lost finals (1 major): Australian Open [1997](#), Masters [1998](#)

NADAL, Rafael (Spain, 1986)

1.

September 11, 2001, popularly known as 9/11 - memorable date for the Western World, especially for the United States due to a series of four coordinated terrorist attacks which resulted in almost 3,000 fatalities. It's a special day in Nadal's story of conquering the tennis world. He was 15-year-old, and played his first Futures match losing to seven years older compatriot Guillermo Platel, who never even won a match at the Challenger level, 6-2, 5-7, 2-6 squandering unbelievable 13 match points! A heartbreaking beginning of a tennis journey for a boy from Mallorca who had been anticipated as a promising youngster. In May that year, in an exhibition match in Mallorca, he replaced his mentor Carlos Moya, and defeated a former Wimbledon champion, Pat Cash (he was four years on his retirement at the time). The loss to Platel wasn't completely accidental, in the first few years on the tour, Nadal didn't show signs of his great mentality. Already in his first 22 main-level events he had lost three matches wasting multiple match points, a set leading 5:1, two matches with the same 6-7, 3-6, 6-7 scoreline, and two matches despite leading 5:2* in deciders. At the age of 18, Nadal conquered his first title (Sopot), but the route to the title was rather easy, a few months earlier he had defeated Roger Federer 6-3, 6-3 in Key Biscayne, so he he was rather giving an impression that the potential is big, but the kid doesn't deal well in tight situations. If I have to indicate a match which turned Nadal's career, it would be the second rubber of the Davis Cup final against the USA. Nadal faced Roddick in front of a record crowd. Roddick could still realistically think about regaining the position of the best player in the world at the time, he was known as a superior player when playing tie-breaks was required. Nadal won 6-7(6), 6-2, 7-6(6), 6-2, but at the time, based on Nadal's previous results, the last two sets lost "6-7(6), 2-6" by him, couldn't surprise, especially that at US Open '04, he was destroyed by Roddick on Arthur Ashe Stadium in their first encounter. *"I think he can be a great champion,"* Moya said about his protegee. *"He's the kind*

of guy that likes to play these kinds of matches. So I really trust him. I believe in him." Spain claimed the trophy for the second time, and Nadal was a little hero even though he didn't win a clincher. That victory accelerated his development. In 2005 he won back-to-back titles for the first time ([Costa do Sauípe](#), [Acapulco](#)) before losing [the Miami final](#) to Federer, despite being close to beat the best player in straight sets! That final it was more a matter of tiredness than inability to close the matches out. Soon afterwards, Nadal won three European clay-court titles in a row, much bigger than those in America. Within five months he moved from no. 51 to 5 (!) and for the first time in history occurred a bizarre situation when a player debuting in a Grand Slam event, was a favorite to the title! (Nadal skipped the event in the years 2003-04 due to injuries). He lived up to expectations, triumphed in Paris for the first time, and no-one was able (Federer included) to win two sets against him, the runner-up was close, but Nadal fought off a bunch of set points in the 4th set. The new star was born, all tennis fans realised that Federer, who established himself as the best player of the previous two years, will have a very challenging opponent in the years to come, much better than Lleyton Hewitt, Roddick & Juan C. Ferrero combined. Even if it wasn't so obvious in May '05, it would be confirmed at the season's end. Following his maiden major, Nadal won two big titles in surroundings different from clay ([Montreal](#) on hardcourts, [Madrid](#) indoors), in both events having defeated several Top 20 players. Many years later Andre Agassi said about facing the youngster for the first time (Montreal final): *"I've never seen anyone move like that on a tennis court."* Indeed, Nadal's movement was second to none. Marcelo Rios had perhaps the best anticipation before Nadal, but the Spaniard's athleticism was far superior, the teenage Nadal not only was able to foresee where the ball was going, he could hit winners from positions majority of very good players couldn't hit the ball at all! With his amazing forehand top-spins, played high above the net-court, and unseen defensive skills before, Nadal was labeled "clay-courter", many people expected that with his style of running all over the place and putting enormous amount of energy into almost every rally, he could be finished at the age of 25 at most, after winning the biggest titles only on clay. Nadal had other ideas, already at the time he was trying to become one of the best players in the world in singles, he did not shy away from playing doubles (i.a. US Open '04 semifinal, partnering Tommy Robredo). It was a smart move because Nadal was not only improving his volley skills, he also developed a very efficient slice serve on ad-court, essential for left-handers. Although Nadal as a fresh player no. 2 in the mid 00s, didn't serve many aces, he developed a pattern of easy holds obtaining many points directly, especially on ad-court when right-handed opponents were standing on the other side of the net. He was very modest, saying that Federer was the best, but their mutual meetings were telling otherwise - Nadal was able to regularly beat Federer on clay, but lost to him in their first two Wimbledon finals. Nadal was patient, he kept improving all the details, over the years his serve was better as well as his volleys and overheads (I consider Nadal's backhand-volley as one of the best shots in history), he adjusted his game to faster surfaces standing close to the baseline, and it paid off in the third consecutive Wimbledon final against Federer. Nadal defeated the Swiss after an almost 5-hour thriller in fading lights, despite blowing chances to win it in three and four sets; he touched the peak of tennis pyramide then, and his dedication was soon reflected in the ATP ranking, after winning the Gold medal at the Olympics in Beijing, Nadal became the best player in the world at the age of 22. At the same two younger players marked their high aspirations (Novak Djokovic, Andy Murray), and the years 2008 initiated the so-called Big 4, the rivalry of

four players at the highest level lasting eight years, longer than any other quartet had created something similar before. The year 2016 brought a sudden twist, Nadal and Federer suffered injuries, the Spaniard dropped to no. 9, the Swiss to no. 17. It seemed the end was near, in 2017 though, they both came back to the top while Djokovic and Murray suffered injuries! Currently Federer is sidelined, his future vague, so I'd say that the Nadal-Djokovic's rivalry at the highest level already lasts 14 years (!), since Miami '07 when Djokovic defeated Nadal 6-3, 6-4 in their third meeting, suggesting that he may interrupt the Federer-Nadal long time reign, anticipated two years before. Regardless of how it will end, one thing is sure - Nadal's record on clay will be untouched, especially his mind-blowing 13 French Open titles; when he triumphed in Paris for the 7th time in 2012 it was already astonishing because for many years no-one could even imagine to tie Bjorn Borg's six titles obtained in the years 1974-81, each another title is beyond linguistic capabilities expressed with adjectives. This year, Nadal turns 35, and he will be an overwhelming favorite to capture another title in Paris, given the way he won for the 13th time last year in the "corona season". The event was moved from May to October, the weather was ugly which caused the courts were slower than usually (Nadal prefers fast clay-courts because his furious spins do more damage), besides the stands were empty which in theory could made an impact on the Spaniard who had played on Philipp Chatrier numerous matches in completely different atmosphere... Nothing disturbed him, he won seven matches without dropping a set, only a boy named Jannik Sinner was relatively close to stealing a set from him, something even the arch-rival Djokovic couldn't do. Nadal has already shown a couple of times that he raises like a Phoenix from the ashes. Not counting a few poor season-ending performances, apart from the mentioned year 2016 when Nadal couldn't win a title between April '16 and April '17, the Mallorcan had suffered a serious setback in 2012 - after a shocking defeat to Lucas Rosol at Wimbledon '12, he didn't play for seven months, and after the comeback he arguably lost to the weakest opponent counting his all finals (Horacio Zeballos in [Vina del Mar](#)), his haters could prophesy the downhill, amazing that it was eight years ago, in the meantime he won US Open thrice and played three finals in Australia. One thing that significantly changed since Nadal's sensational defeat at Wimbledon '12, it's his efficiency in the third major. In the years 2006-11 he played five finals at Wimbledon, but none ever since. Nadal's early departures from London were somewhat expected after Rosol's disaster. In the years 2012-17, Nadal didn't even play a quarterfinal on grass, but in the last two Wimbledons (the event not held in 2020) he reached the semifinals, losing to two other greatest players of all-time, thus I cannot be even sure that he wouldn't put himself in a position to play a Wimbledon final again. More or less since the times Nadal's coach, uncle Toni, has been replaced by Moya (2017), Nadal serves better, which is the most important on grass (arguably return as the second most important shot), so if he wins matches 3-0 and 3-1, why not? For many years, when Nadal was in his 20s he had an aura of the most reliable five-set player. It was changed when he lost to Djokovic in Australia '12, in the longest final in history (almost six hours). Entering the final, Nadal had a 15-3 record (two defeats to Federer, [one to Hewitt](#)) and when he levelled at two sets apiece, he celebrated it on his knees, never before or after I've seen doing that at the moment different than winning a match point... he led 4:2 (30/15) in the decider, but lost the match and his five-set record is only 7-10 since then, his last two quarterfinal defeats in Australia to Dominic Thiem ([Nadal's tighest four-set loss](#)) and Stefanos Tsitsipas may worry his most devoted fans. Nadal lost those four-hour matches losing all three

sets when both players were relatively close to the finishing line, thus it seems that he cannot do anymore something that he had been known for, namely played his best when it matters the most after a few hours of struggle. In terms of pushing himself to the limit within matches he cannot overcome transcendancy anymore facing ~ten years younger opponents. The '00 decade belonged to Federer, the following decade belonged to Djokovic. If the tennis Gods want to be righteous, they should give the Spaniard the edge over his two greatest rivals. Nadal with 21 Slams, Federer with 20, Djokovic with 19 or 20 when they all are on retirement? Keeping in mind the style in which Nadal won the last Roland Garros, I can imagine this scenario. The only trophy which is missing in Nadal's career it's the season-ending title, he played two finals in London (missed the event six times as a Top 10 player).

Biggest titles (20 majors):

Australian Open [2009](#)

Roland Garros [2005](#), [2006](#), [2007](#), [2008](#), [2010](#), [2011](#), [2012](#), [2013](#), [2014](#), [2017](#), [2018](#), [2019](#), [2020](#)

Wimbledon [2008](#), [2010](#)

US Open [2010](#), [2013](#), [2017](#), [2019](#)

Olympics (Beijing [2008](#))

Davis Cup 2004, 2009, [2011](#), [2019](#)

Biggest lost finals (8 majors):

Australian Open [2012](#), [2014](#), [2017](#), [2019](#)

Wimbledon [2006](#), [2007](#), [2011](#)

US Open [2011](#)

Masters [2010](#), [2013](#)

NALBANDIAN, David (Argentina, 1982)

3.

I don't think about him "the best/most successful player of the Open Era without a major title", but it's legitimate to call him that way comparing players born in the 80s. Distinctive & bold competitor anyway - no doubt about it. He could afford himself to play on every surface on his own terms. It's a domain of exceptionally gifted players, who possess all shots in their repertoires - he was one of them. Obviously he will be remembered as someone with terrific two-handed backhand, but I'd like to pay close attention to his one-handed skills; usually "double-handed guys" don't play sliced backhands and volleys with Nalbandian's finesse. I wish he won Davis Cup once, I think he deserved it leading the team to the 2006, 2008 & 2011 finals, defeating very good players in those finals (especially the 2008 final was very unfortunate for the Argentinians). On the other hand he was the only guy beside Alex Corretja & Nikolay Davydenko to win 'Masters' not having a major title under his belt - I consider his triumph in Shanghai as some kind of miracle in regard to the progress of that final and the man he had beaten there... I remember at the end of 2003, I expected he would be the best player of the 00s. Then came a [quarterfinal meeting](#) against Roger Federer at the Australian Open '04 - the Swiss won in four sets, improving their H2H to 2:5 (eventually 11-8). You never know what would have happened if something in the past had been slightly changed. My casual thought is

that it was the key match to the careers of both players... Three times in his career Nalbandian had moments of tremendous glory. For the first time at Wimbledon '02 when as unseeded player he advanced to the final with actually non-existent experience on grass; then in Shanghai '05 when he triumphed in the year-end championships defeating Federer, who was on a 35-match winning streak and on the verge of magnificent comeback to notch his 36th match won in a row; for the third time in 2007 when in Autumn he claimed the two biggest indoor events of the regular season ([Madrid](#) & [Paris](#)), defeating in both events Federer & Rafael Nadal as well as a young Novak Djokovic (in Spain).

Biggest title: Masters [2005](#)

Biggest lost finals: Wimbledon [2002](#), Davis Cup 2006 & 2008

NISHIKORI, Kei (Japan, 1989)

4.

One of the best players of the previous decade; in terms of mental and technical abilities, I put him at the same level as Novak Djokovic & Andy Murray. From my point of view the serve separated the Japanese from the biggest titles the Serb & the Scot collected. Nishikori is also a bit unlucky in a broader sense because with his skills, he deserved to win at least one Masters 1K title or "Masters" (took part in four editions) - unfortunately for him, in the Masters 1K finals he always faced the best guys in the world: twice Rafael Nadal and twice Djokovic. Nishikori had his big chance when he advanced to the US Open '14 final, because in the final he faced Marin Cilic, whom had beaten a couple of times before (also in New York), but that year, the Japanese won very demanding five-setters against [Milos Raonic](#) & [Stan Wawrinka](#) as well as a tricky four-setter against [Djokovic](#) and in the final he run out of gas. Without the bronze medal obtained in Rio, Nishikori could be considered as an underachiever. Nishikori was the youngest titleist of 2009, he joined in some sense Djokovic & Murray (both born 1987) as well as Cilic & Juan Martin del Potro (both born in 1988). Behind Nishikori, for many years no-one younger appeared, who could threaten the Big 4, until Alexander Zverev marked his name in 2017 as someone who would conquer the biggest titles and overthrow the best guys. What I really like about Nishikori it's his ability to control the final outcome. There were many matches when he was wisely calculating that there was no point to fight for a set, or he was quite disinterested in games as a receiver, being focused on saving energy for his own service games. He mastered this skill, because many times he seemed like someone physically exhausted, yet at the end of those matches he was able to deliver his best tennis. Short-time memory it's also something in Nishikori's arsenal I praise a lot, similarly to Murray, he never seemed to be upset blowing a lead at the end of a set; you can usually feel that when they lose a 5:3* (40/30) lead for instance to be at 5:6, the odds to win the tie-break were still on their sides. From a technical point of view, something that always seemed a bit strange to me was Nishikori's return position. He's been putting his left leg in front of him, somewhat blocking his body balance to play the backhand - his great shot, quite often more efficient than the forehand. I only suppose that it's a matter of his early days when his forehand was much better and the servers he faced were incomparably less hurting him to the professional days, and his specific position meant to attack

the opponents' serves with a top-spinning forehand (the teenage Nishikori was playing forehand with much more spin), and at some point of his development, no-one put attention to change his leg position, giving him fractions of a second to put more balls in play when his opponents serve down the T on deuce-court or out-wide on ad-court.

Biggest lost final: US Open [2014](#)

NOAH, Yannick (France, 1960)

3.

The only French champion in the Open Era, one of the best players of the 80s so I want to look closer at his game-style which was quite peculiar. In some sense Noah was like a hybrid of Pete Sampras, Rafael Nadal & Stefan Edberg, in some sense (!), if he had all their ingredients within his game we would perhaps talk about the best player in history! Let's put the things in order:

- in the 80s, Noah belonged to the Top 5 best servers in the world, his offensive overhead, played in the service boxes was exquisite, I'd juxtapose this stroke only with Sampras & Roger Federer, Noah introduced to tennis slam-dunk smash, so beloved by Sampras, the Frenchman was much taller than Sampras & Federer which made him even tougher to lobbing with top-spins

- Noah was a serve-and-volleyer, his offensive backhand was better than forehand, he used to play chip-and-charge a lot... natural associations with Edberg

- Noah was a phenomenal athlete, his court-coverage was excellent all over the place & he was very emotional, it reminds me of Nadal

Sometimes I think about the value of specific players if the rules were slightly changed, for instance "how dangerous Noah would be if he could play only ground-strokes with just one serve?" I assume he could easily disappear in mediocrity. His ground-strokes couldn't hurt anyone in basic exchanges, but he was like a jazz-man, he could improvise a lot, in the positive sense of this word. Noah could successfully attack the net behind a semi-lob forehand or behind a sloppy backhand dropshot because his net-coverage was so impressive (he wasn't afraid of diving on any surface). One question which bothered me for some time: why Noah as a serve-and-volleyer didn't play even once in the Wimbledon quarterfinal (just 6-6 record in the event, skipped it many times). I think there are two major issues: one is the movement (Noah loved to slide on clay, he couldn't emulate his natural movement on grass), the other one is Noah's backhand; as I mentioned earlier, in my opinion his backhand was better than forehand, but he was playing offensive backhands with extreme grip, there was no time on grass for it. Noah, deprived of his natural movement, and unable to get as many points with his backhand as on other surfaces, could only count on holding the serve and waiting for mistakes of opponents at crucial stages of sets and matches, but it didn't happen. His serve wasn't as efficient as on other surfaces; the explanation of it isn't easy, I can assume he simply didn't enjoy grass at all & moody attitude prevented him from holding the serve 10-15 times in a row on a regular basis. Like father, like son: there must be something special in veins of the Noah's male lineage that a representative of the family in the next generation keeps the sport tradition

at a high level, changing equipment & environment, still being focused on the ball of different sizes. Yannick's father Zacharie (1937-2017) was a professional footballer while Yannick's son Joakim (b. 1985) chose basketball and played in Chicago Bulls for many years. Quite astonishing how they reach height with respective generations: Zacharie (176 cm), Yannick (193 cm), Joakim (211 cm). *"The key to the match was the third set. I got cramps in my legs. I was very tight and nervous. It was the dream of a lifetime to win this match."* said Noah after immortalization which gave him the French Open '83 title. For other occasions to exceptional joy he had to wait until the following decade when as a captain of the French team triumphed twice (1991 & 1996) in Davis Cup.

Biggest title (1 major): Roland Garros [1983](#)

Biggest lost finals: Davis Cup [1982](#)

NORMAN, Magnus (Sweden, 1976)

2.

Norman, born in a family of professional athletes, could be perceived as a successor of the greatest Swedish players as a teenager because already as a 16-year-old boy, so at the time he began participating in junior events, got a "wild card" being unranked in Stockholm qualies, and defeated three opponents, including eleven years older former no. 25 - Peter Lundgren! In the first round Norman was trashed by Derrick Rostagno, but the ATP debut was very promising. Another two years were quite tough, Norman was playing in Satellites, then Challengers, his first two ATP events were separated by almost three years. Even though he didn't establish himself as another Bjorn Borg, Mats Wilander, Stefan Edberg or even Thomas Enqvist, he got recognition in the late 90s as a dangerous floater. He got attention especially during Roland Garros '97 when ousted Pete Sampras in the third round - the future showed that Sampras had already been beyond his best years on clay, but at the time he was among the favorites to the title. In the French Open-Wimbledon '97 combo, Norman showed mental toughness, defeating in dramatic five-setters the two fastest servers on the tour (9-7 in the 5th Greg Rusedski in Paris and 14-12 in the 5th set Goran Ivanisevic in London, saving four mini-match points at 11-all). In the latter match, Norman suffered problems with his heart, and underwent five-hour surgery on December 1st, 1997 to correct irregular heart rate. The surgery slowed down his progress, and he significantly dropped in the year 1998, but enjoyed arguably the biggest success of his life, triumph in the Davis Cup. Norman had big input to the success because he won a deciding rubber vs Slovakia in five sets (Karol Kucera), and opened the Davis Cup final against Italy with an amazing match against Andrea Gaudenzi, which he won in very lucky circumstances. That Davis Cup triumph initiated two great years in Norman's career and results adequate to those hypothetically expected from him in 1992 when he entered the ATP ranking: Norman won five titles in 1999, but modest results in the biggest events prevented him from the Top 10 advancement, then in 2000 Norman not only cracked into the Top 10, he also attacked the position of the best player in the world (it was at the time when Andre Agassi & Pete Sampras were finally tired after their exhausting rivalry of the 90s). Actually in Spring '00, Norman could feel that reaching the peak would be possible - in three big

events in a row (Rome, Hamburg, Roland Garros) Gustavo Kuerten was the end station; first he defeated the Brazilian in the Italian final, then lost to him a quarterfinal in Germany, and lost also a 4-set thriller in the Parisian final, arguably the most exiting 4-set major final in history thanks to memorable 4th set when Norman playing at the highest level of concentration and physical dedication, saved ten match points before ultimately losing it. The tension was so high, that during the post match ceremony, Norman's was blinking, like he couldn't control the nerves. Perhaps that match decided that in the end of the year, it was Bralizian who enjoyed being number one in the world. Norman instead, experienced a gradual downhill. In the years 2001-02 he was still fearsome, but never came back to his aura of the two previous seasons, and the year 2003 meant a sudden collapse. The 27-year-old Norman, suffered ten defeats in a row (not counting qualies, yet including a Challenger), and some of those defeats were disastrous, like for instance 1-6, 3-6 to a Greek journeyman Konstantinos Economidis (b. 1977). It was a season when Norman was trying to get in shape after surgeries of his hip and knee in the years 2001-02. A first round loss to Jean-Rene Lisnard (b. 1979) at the US Open '03 meant the cup of bitterness was filled to the brim. Norman, who was usually dealing very well with tight situations at the end of matches, escaped from a straight set defeat, and had a match point serving at 5:3 in the decider, but ultimately lost 6-7 to the inferior opponent. Afterwards he played just two more events and announced his premature retirement, not believing that knee & hip would stop bothering him. After the retirement, Norman established himself as one of the most respectable coaches, significantly improving results of his compatriot Robin Soderling, then helping Stan Wawrinka to switch from a Top 20 player without any bigger titles, to a multiple Grand Slam champion.

Biggest title: Davis Cup [1998](#)

Biggest lost final: Roland Garros [2000](#)

PANATTA, Adriano (Italy, 1950)

4.

The oldest player introduced to this book, a typical representative of the first generation of the Open Era players. He turned 18 when tennis shifted from its amateurish structure to the professional. He made his debut in Rome and the capital of Italy was a special tournament for him for the rest of his long career - he was playing there every year until the last year on the tour (1983), but triumphed just once, in 1976. At Foro Italico he played many memorable Davis Cup matches, helping Italy in advancement to the final four times within five editions (1976-80). The year 1976 was absolutely amazing compared to all others. Panatta won two biggest events on clay (Rome & Roland Garros), and in both he was one point away from defeat already in the first rounds! In Rome he survived eleven match points (ten on return) against Kim Warwick [3-6, 6-4, 7-6(8)] trailing 1:5 in the 3rd set, in the semifinal he eliminated Harold Solomon (6-2, 5-7, 4-5 ret.) in exceptionally bizarre circumstances (the American had won five games in a row and was one game away from victory when retired even though he wasn't injured, simply couldn't accept the decision of the umpire awarding Panatta the first point of the 10th game - after arguing he got a point penalty and left the court at 0/30); in the final after four tough sets,

Panatta ousted Guillermo Vilas, considered as the second best clay-courter of the times behind Bjorn Borg, whom Panatta - also in four sets - dismissed at Roland Garros in the quarterfinal. Panatta won the final again in four sets (Solomon), and just like in Rome, paradoxically the toughest match he'd experienced in the first round having defeated Pavel Hutka, a journeyman from Czechoslovakia (2-6, 6-2, 6-2, 0-6, 12-10) withstanding a match point in the decider being in a position to lose the point and the match. That year Panatta became the Davis Cup champion, he led Italy to the title winning many rubbers in singles & doubles (different format in the 90s, Italy needed to win six ties instead of four, characteristic for the following decades), including the most important ones: decisive fifth rubber against John Newcombe in Rome (semifinal) and singles & doubles rubbers to give Italy an insurmountable lead 3-0 over Chile in the final (Santiago). Ultimately Panatta finished the season as No. 6 in the world, but if points were awarded at the time for the Davis Cup, he could have finished the season a few places higher. Emotionally he could feel himself as the third most important player of the season, only behind the legends & icons of the decade (Jimmy Connors & Borg). Panatta was one of Borg's toughest opponents, but he was struggling against Connors, defeating him just twice in eleven encounters. Very interesting was their meeting at the US Open '78 - Panatta in his only fourth round in New York, led 5:4 (30-all) on serve in the decider when Connors played one of the most memorable passing-shots in the tournament history miraculously producing his fifth match point - the last one (won it 4-6, 6-4, 6-1, 1-6, 7-5). Panatta was an artist, he was able to produce the most aesthetically pleasant tennis of the 70s, manufacturing winners of all sorts. Similarly to ten years younger Yannick Noah, despite great volley skills, Panatta was always struggling on grass, at Wimbledon he reached just one quarterfinal at the twilight of his career, and surprisingly lost to Pat Dupre, for whom it was the biggest win of his tennis life.

Biggest title (1 major): Roland Garros 1976, Davis Cup 1976

PHILIPPOUSSIS, Mark (Australia, 1976) 8.

The son of a Greek father and an Italian mother. The year 1999 was the best in his career, he managed to achieve something only Michael Stich (1993) had almost done before, namely he highly contributed to claiming three titles for Australia (Hopman Cup, World Team Cup and Davis Cup) winning 3, 3 & 3 matches in singles of respective competitions; besides he collected the biggest of his eleven titles as he triumphed at [Indian Wells](#). Huge disappointment came at Australian Open that year, Philippoussis lost in the fourth round, and never reached the quarterfinal in his home tournament. That year he was perceived, perhaps the only time in his career, as one of the favorites because in his previous major (US Open '98) he had reached the final. Philippoussis' second major final came in a rather unexpected period, when he was struggling with injuries and dropped in the ATP ranking to no. 48. Similarly to his previous best Slam, he survived an amazing quarter final: at US Open '98 against [Thomas Johansson](#), at Wimbledon '03 against [Alexander Popp](#) (b. 1976)... The tall Australian made some noise for the first time in 1995 as a 19-year-old lad. In his just fifth ATP event, Philippoussis [272] reached the final in [Scottsdale](#) as a qualifier having defeated four much higher ranked opponents, then

he played a good match in the final against the former no. 1 Jim Courier. Philippoussis received "wild card" at Key Biscayne and reached the third round - those two results (and a final in Bologna) catapulted him within a few months from Top 300 to Top 100. His serve was tremendous, never before a teenager was serving with such intensity, in Autumn (Kuala Lumpur) the Australian established a record in number of aces - 44 against Byron Black, in three sets! He took the serve to the next level, not known even for Goran Ivanisevic, who had been serving below 40 aces in five-setters in the mid 90s. Brad Gilbert, the coach of Agassi, said the future would belong to Philippoussis. His serve was phenomenal, his technique at volleys very good, the strokes of both sides inconsistent, yet powerful, giving him plenty of points. It seemed like a full package. The 20-year-old Philippoussis played perhaps a match of his life at night session during the Australian Open '96, it backed up Gilbert's claims: in the match of Greek descendants, Philippoussis eliminated the main favorite to the title [Pete Sampras](#) in impressive three sets. The following match of the Australian it was a disaster, he lost 2-6, 2-6, 2-6 to Mark Woodforde! Without two Davis Cup clinchers, Philippoussis could be perceived as an underachiever, certainly he had tools to win one major at least. He was a novelty at the late 90s with his uncompromising tennis, and the will to risk like no-one else before; in some matches he used to serve constantly around 200 kph regardless of the score and the class of his opponents, always believing that his destiny depended only on him. *"When I was on the court, I played. When I trained, I trained hard. But as soon as that thing was over, I switched off and enjoyed my life,"* Philippoussis said many years after retirement. He used to spend plenty of money on fashionable cars and didn't restrain himself from a nightlife. *"The greats have almost no life, and that's the reality of it. They're obsessed, you need to be obsessed with everything about what you're doing."*

Biggest titles: Davis Cup [1999](#) and [2003](#)

Biggest lost finals (two majors): US Open [1998](#), Wimbledon [2003](#)

PIOLINE, Cedric (France, 1969)

5.

Arguably the best Frenchman in the 90s, but not the crowd favorite; I remember his Toulouse '93 final when he lost to two-months older Arnaud Boetsch - almost the entire stadium was cheering for Boetsch while neither of the Frenchmen came from the south of France (they both were born in cities approximate to Paris). In contrast to other best French guys born in the 60s (Yannick Noah, Guy Forget, Henri Leconte & Boetsch), he hadn't won any professional matches as a teenager, thus it was tough to expect he'd achieve very good results. In my opinion the turning point in Pioline's career came at the US Open '92 when as a 23-year-old man he lost a tough four-set match (3 hours 22 minutes) to the best player at the time - Jim Courier (he will defeat Courier on the same court [one year later](#)). Pioline built confidence upon that loss. Soon afterwards he reached his first final (Lyon), followed by a sensational advancement to the Monte Carlo final. He was unlucky in the finals, needed to play as many as 148 main-level events to finally claim his maiden title (Copenhagen) on the 10th final attempt - in the nine lost final he was a clear favorite just once - and he was blown away from the court

by super-serving Jonathan Stark in Bolzano. Ultimately he finished his career with five titles, the last one the most valuable - [Monte Carlo '00](#), admittedly he didn't beat anyone from the top, but all six defeated players had already established recognizable positions in the tennis world... Dwelling on his game-style it is worth mentioning that perhaps the toughest shot in tennis (excluding trick shots), namely backhand overhead, could be considered as his trade-mark. The son of volleyballers (mother from Romania) had jumped using both legs in his genes, his overhead maybe wasn't as spectacular as Sampras', nevertheless it was a very efficient shot. Other basic shots were good, Pioline could apply serve-and-volley style reaching Wimbledon '97 final as well as defensive style reaching the French Open '98 semifinal. Trivia: Pioline, just like Miloslav Mecir, quickly lost his both major finals to the best player of a decade... Mecir lost to Ivan Lendl (the best player of the 80s) at US Open '86 & Aussie Open '89 while Pioline to Sampras (the best player of the 90s) at US Open '93 & Wimbledon '97. The Lendl-Mecir finals combined lasted 3 hours 54 minutes, the Sampras-Pioline finals 3 hours 38 minutes.

Biggest lost finals (2 majors): US Open [1993](#), Wimbledon [1997](#)

RAFTER, Patrick (Australia, 1972)

1.

It was a strange career with a couple of unexpected twists:

- 1) sudden improvement - there was absolutely nothing special about him in the first two years since his ATP debut, Rafter was not only unimpressive at the main-level (lost his first seven matches), he also didn't impress at Challengers winning just one title, at the age of 21 he looked like another ordinary serve-and-volleyer, there were plenty of them in the 80s, and all of a sudden as a player ranked 139, he reached the Indianapolis semifinal eliminating i.a. Pete Sampras after an all tie-break 3-set thriller surviving ten break points in the final set, it was a game changer, soon afterwards Rafter collected wins over other top players (Jim Courier, Michael Chang, Ivan Lendl, Thomas Muster as well as Goran Ivanisevic & Andre Agassi at exhibition events)
- 2) disappointing slump - he became a popular figure in Australia, signed good contracts with Reebok, and when it seemed that his advancement to the Top 10 it'd be a matter of time, he experienced two, relatively poor two years (1995-96)
- 3) resurgence - in Autumn '96, Rafter won the biggest at the time exhibition event in Hong Kong, and instead of going to Europe trying to play qualies in big events (Stuttgart & Paris), Rafter decided to finish the season to have more time for the 1997 preparation; it was a very good decision, admittedly Rafter disappointed the local fans in Aussie tournaments like in two previous seasons, but won a dramatic five-setter against Cedric Pioline in the Davis Cup first round, and said it was his best performance ever, the upcoming months rather confirmed that statement - Rafter began achieving these results that were expected from him two years earlier - finals in ATP events, first Grand Slam semifinal, finally something what seemed even a bit above his potential - the Grand Slam triumph (US Open '97)

4) premature retirement - during his best years (1997-99), Rafter was an example of great athleticism, unfortunately suffered an injury just before the US Open when he was a two-time defending champion... bitter defeat to Pioline (this time he led 2-0 in sets) changed the trajectory of his career, he lost his aura of the best hardcourt player, but on grass was still very good, played two Wimbledon finals... in 2001 he decided it'd be his last season even though he was only 29 and playing very good tennis, he was ranked No. 8 at the end of the year when he played his final match in the Davis Cup final vs Sebastien Grosjean... no one before him decided to quit being ranked so high.

Biggest titles (2 majors): US Open [1997](#) and [1998](#)

Biggest lost finals (2 majors): Wimbledon [2000](#) and [2001](#)

RAONIC, Milos (Canada, 1990)

3.

In my opinion Raonic has pushed his career to the limits. Quite often in my mind, I was comparing him to another very tall player born in 1990 - Jerzy Janowicz. I think that the Pole was playing all the basic strokes better (except the serve, but the speed was quite comparable), yet his achievements are nowhere near to Raonic's. The Canadian was a big thinker on-court, and supposedly off-court too. He was changing coaches like gloves trying to find the right solutions to add something new to his game. In short he has done everything he could, to achieve more than was anticipated from him judging by his technical skills. In my eyes, a one-dimensional player, a serve-bot as some people labelled him on the Internet. When he made his breakthrough in 2011, I was watching him carefully seeing in him a potential to do some damage against the Big 4 (and indeed, his initial H2H record against Andy Murray had been very optimistic - 3:1 before the clever Scot figured out how to increase his chances of breaking Raonic's serve and took the following eight meetings). I had noticed that Raonic based his service games on a pattern of increased focus in crucial moments, as he was trailing 0/30 or 15/40 for instance. In those moments, serving on deuce-court he could serve with a higher percentage of the 1st serve in, usually out-wide (cautiously yet uncomfortably for the receiver): if it hadn't given him the point directly, he would have played inside-out forehand as a response to the opponent's average return. So he was running his backhand around a lot because it's been a very poor shot in his repertoire, perhaps worse than the one of John Isner. My intuitive assumption is that Raonic had good ratio of games won facing break points, something opposite to Janowicz, who was very impatient, and in his case facing a breakpoint meant the loss of the game in 3 out of 4 games (quite often in a consequence of a double fault), I guess. The brainy Raonic hired coaches who should have helped him to improve his baseline game as well as those guys who were responsible for the net-game. This combination of trying different things paid the dividend in Raonic's best year - 2016; he advanced to the Wimbledon final defeating the even's legend [Roger Federer](#) in five sets in the semifinal, and a semifinal at Masters when he lost one of the longest "best of three" matches in history, concluded in a dramatic tie-break vs Murray (7-5, 6-7, 6-7 after 3 hours 38 minutes).

Biggest lost final (1 major): Wimbledon [2016](#)

RIOS, Marcelo (Chile, 1975)

1.

Full name: Marcelo Andrés Ríos Mayorga, nickname "El Chino". I can honestly say that there were not many players as gifted as the Chilean. Left-handers are in minority, so it's easier to underline their particular skills - in John McEnroe's case it was his volley-game, Goran Ivanisevic's serve was incomparable to anyone else, Rios delighted in the second half of the 90s with his baseline game: the two things made him so special - anticipation and creating exceptionally tight angles. When he improved his serve, he was able to make fools off his rivals - they had to run from corner to corner while he was standing in the middle of the court. Andre Agassi could do the same, but the American needed more power to enforce his style; Rios could do this breathlessly. At the best time of his brilliance, which happened in March '98, Rios triumphed in two big events ([Indian Wells](#), [Key Biscayne](#)) becoming the first South American man to reach No. 1 in the world! It was already at the time tennis was very athletic, so his ascendance to the throne seemed impossible when he'd been claiming smaller titles in the preceding years. But the year 1998 was special; Pete Sampras finally felt tired after several years of his dominance while Agassi was coming back after his sabbatical 1997 year... *"Winning this, and beating Agassi in the final, the former No. 1, I can't ask for more,"* said Rios, who didn't start playing tennis until he was 11 but became the No. 1 junior in the world six years later. *"Being the best player in the world for Chile is something like not normal; I feel really proud."* Soon afterwards Rios began to struggle a couple of years with injuries (hamstring strain, stress fracture in his back, thigh, hip, tendinitis in his right knee and groin), and he never regained his '98 form remaining the only player who was No. 1 in the world not having won a major. In 2015, Rios demanded the title for his lone Grand Slam final (Australian Open '98) because the champion Petr Korda was suspended due to doping later that year. Despite a rather unfriendly attitude on and off the court, Rios inspired younger generations of Latin America players, and paved the way for his compatriots Fernando Gonzalez and Nicolas Pietrangeli, who became distinctive players in the first decade of a new Century. *"I don't have a relationship with Chino,"* Gonzalez explained a few years ago. *"I've never had it. Never. There was no good vibe, not bad either."*

Biggest lost final: Australian Open [1998](#)

RODDICK, Andy (USA, 1982)

1.

He was the next big thing in the American tennis after the decline of the "golden generation" born in the early 70s. His emergence onto the tennis scene was thundering, as soon as he appeared in the ATP ranking (2000) he was the strongest player at the American challenger circuit; just twelve months since he had obtained his first ATP points, he managed to beat two former Nos. 1 in back-to-back matches (Marcelo Rios, Pete Sampras) in straight sets!

Unquestionably the new star was born. Of course, as the most promising player of the United States, he benefited from being an American in climbing onto the tennis ladder, receiving 'wild cards' in numerous prominent events, but he took advantage of it emphatically. His energy was admirable, actually he had based his game just on two strokes: serve and forehand, but those strokes were working so magnificently that he didn't need to seek other solutions to win consecutive matches wherever. One-dimensional players tend to find themselves in tight situations more often than others, it was Roddick's case too, but no problem for him, his self-confidence was so huge that every time he was close to lose his serve at crucial stages of sets or matches, he was able to hit an ace, a service winner or a serve good enough to finish a rally immediately with a powerful forehand. He progressed rapidly, needing only 58 ATP tournaments to have won titles on every surface. His physical preparation was awesome, it manifested most profoundly during the American summer swing in 2003, as he was guided by Brad Gilbert (his coach 2003-04) won Indianapolis, afterwards [Canadian Open](#) and [Cincinnati](#) within two weeks... no-one repeated it until Rafael Nadal in 2013, and what's praiseworthy, A-Rod won those 'Masters' tournaments when six wins were required on both cases, not five as it's currently been in case of the highest seeded players, which makes that effort one of the most impressive tennis achievements in the 21st Century. The elevated Roddick was a main favorite to claim US Open '03 and he didn't disappoint the USTA and local fans, albeit his route to the title was extremely tough given the quality of opponents (excluding his third round scuffle). Roddick became the best player in the world soon afterwards in the consequence of a phenomenal hard-court summer (won 27 out of 28 matches in seven weeks!). The sky was the limit... At the time it seemed impossible to suppose that US Open '03 would be his first/last major title. In my opinion a key to Roddick's later regressing is connected to the Masters 2003 semifinal (Houston) – Roddick was fresh and sharp, but Roger Federer cut him to ribbons on Roddick's favorite American hardcourt in front of the Texanian supporters. The following years confirmed it wasn't an accident, the Swiss simply figured out a medicine for Roddick's impetus, overwhelming him with his own best weapon: Roddick's serve, so effective on a regular basis, yet not a threat for Federer at all; in turn Roddick had a bitter pill to swallow – Federer used to serve against him better than against anyone else. Well, who lives by the sword, dies by the sword... It's really tough to calculate how many important titles Roddick would have won if Federer hadn't found an anesthetic, anyway he lost to the Swiss four major finals, two Masters Series finals, and a few other semi- or quarterfinals in prestigious tournaments, which established the most lopsided "Head to Head" between players who reached No. 1 in the world. During those quite painful years, Roddick became a more complex player though, he developed a variety in his serve, improved volley skills, adapted a stable backhand slice – everything in vain – no matter whether he had a mentor in his box (Jimmy Connors 2006-08) or a great tactician (Larry Stefanki 2008-12) the final outcome of confrontations against Federer was the same; even when he was optically better, "tennis Gods" were against him (Wimbledon 2009). Roddick in his late 20s, turned from an energetic beast, interacting positively with the crowd, into a heavy-sweating moaner, arguing pointlessly with umpires. In the meantime, emerged younger and fitter guys like Nadal, Djokovic, Murray, Monfils and Berdych, each of them beating Roddick on several occasions, sometimes harshly, especially in the last twelve months of Roddick's career. Those defeats, and the fact of wasting a status of a Top 10 player after nine years, caused Roddick's decision to retire. He wasn't anymore able to compete with the best

guys in the world, certainly it was a big blow for someone who aspired to get the biggest titles. *"It's been a road, a lot of ups, a lot of downs, a lot of great moments. I've appreciated your support along the way. I know I certainly haven't made it easy for you at times, but I really do appreciate it and love you guys with all my heart. Hopefully I'll come back to this place someday and see all of you again."* said the 30-year-old Roddick [27] after his farewell match at US Open '12, arguably the second best player born in the early 80s (behind Federer), who played the entire 00s.

Biggest title (1 major): US Open [2003](#); Davis Cup 2007

Biggest lost finals (4 majors): Wimbledon [2004](#), [2005](#), [2009](#); US Open [2006](#); Davis Cup [2004](#)

ROSSET, Marc (Switzerland, 1970)

9.

Similarly to David Wheaton, to me Rosset is a heavy underachiever as far as the 90s are concerned. He could belong to the strict elite with his potential, he could participate in a few "Masters" events, maybe he could become a Grand Slam champion. In Wheaton's case it was Munich '91 - an event which caused the lack of motivation for the years to come, Rosset celebrated the biggest success of his life a few months later when he triumphed at the Olympics in Barcelona. Since 1990 Rosset was considered as one of the most promising youngsters, but he was disappointing, especially at majors, so rather no-one could expect that in the "best of five" format, the lazy Swiss would advance to the medal zone, especially that in the third round Rosset was supposed to face Jim Courier, a man who had won Rome & French Open that year. The scoreline was much more shocking than the fact Rosset left the court as a winner: 6-4, 6-2, 6-1. Asked if it appeared to him that Courier gave up toward the end, Rosset nodded and said: *"Yeah, I think so. The first set was pretty close, then I won the second. When I broke him to go up, 4:0, in the third, he didn't try hard anymore. He was just trying to get the points over with."* Regardless of Courier's mental problems in Summer '92, it must have been a huge confidence booster for the 22-year-old Rosset, who won another three matches against dangerous opponents, and kissed the most precious medal. Generally it was an amazing year for Rosset, in doubles with fellow Swiss (Jakob Hlasek) he won his only major title in doubles, and actually only these two players helped Switzerland to reach the first Davis Cup final, in which Rosset defeated the best player in the world, Courier, once again, that time in a dramatic five-setter. That year gave Rosset much more than he could wish for when the season 1991 was finished because that year he didn't reach even one ATP final having won two titles as a teenager, and towards the end of the year, he was losing quick matches indoors to average players, despite possessing one of the fastest serves. Watching Rosset many times in the 90s, I usually had an impression that he was treating tennis like a good entertainment; he used to interact with the crowd, liked to be applauded for his football skills... his two most basic shots (serve & forehand) were in loose Top 10 of the 90s, so even when he didn't try too much, those two shots won for them plenty of matches. Sometimes his serve was very problematic because the nonchalant Rosset, similarly to Goran Ivanisevic, had an inclination to risk the second delivery a lot... the best example comes from Stuttgart '93. In the 3rd set against Michael Stich,

Rosset led 5:4 (40/15) and committed two double faults in a row, evidently trying to fire an ace in the end, and lost 6-7, 6-3, 5-7! Two years later Rosset avenged that loss, upsetting Stich 3-6, 7-6(11), 7-6(8) in the Halle final; in the 2nd set Rosset saved three match points in the tie-break at *5:6, 7:8 & 9:10... in the 3rd set he escaped from *5:6 (15/40), saved another MP in that game & the seventh (last one) at *6:7 in the decisive tie-break! After 1992, Rosset played his best tennis just twice, and on both occasions it happened in Paris, first at Paris-Bercy '94 when he reached the final on carpet, then at Roland Garros '96 when advanced to the semifinal - in both events having defeated several top players. Towards the end of his career, he was playing mainly in Challengers, so something rather not seen from older players who felt the atmosphere of the biggest tennis arenas. Especially interesting was a Challenger held in Prague '03 - Rosset won the title with the last two wins after identical scorelines (7-6, 6-7, 7-6). Trivia: Rosset won the most matches in a row in 200, when he claimed back-to-back titles indoors (Marseille & London) - after them he lost four matches in a row.

Biggest title: Olympics (Barcelona [1992](#))

Biggest lost final: Davis Cup 1992

RUSEDISKI, Greg (Great Britain, 1973)

4.

It was 1992 when I heard for the first time about Rusedski. He was 19-year-old, his fellow Canadian (also left-hander) Daniel Nestor just one year older. They had very similar experience at the main-level with one huge difference (Nestor stunned Stefan Edberg in the first round of Davis Cup '92, and almost eliminated Sweden barely losing to Magnus Gustafsson in a deciding rubber). Nestor was no. 235, Rusedski no. 153 when they entered the Canadian Open '92 - Agassi outplayed them in round 2 & 3 respectively. The lanky, tall youngsters were introduced as new faces of Canadian tennis, a similar future was ahead of them, in theory. Soon afterwards, Rusedski developed one of the fastest serves in the world and made incomparable progress in the ranking, Nestor cannot complain about his career too, because he became one of the most successful & longest playing doubles specialists. Rusedski advanced to the Top 100 in 1993, in his first Wimbledon he played a tight four-setter against one of two biggest specialists on grass Stefan Edberg, and it was a confidence-booster; in his following event, Rusedski got the title (Newport) - in the last two matches, he played five-tie-breaks in six sets. It was clear that he would be very tough to break on faster surfaces, nonetheless, the luck from Newport wasn't easily transferred to other courts. Rusedski was actually known as a super fast server for another four years, but his ground-strokes, especially backhand were only average, so he had to put a lot of effort to improve his volley & forehand to increase the probability of breaking better players & winning vital tie-breaks against them. On the day following his only (among 27 in total) [clay-court final](#), Rusedski changed his nationality, from Canadian to British thanks to English mother. He could count on special treatment during English grass-court season, but the years 1995-96 didn't take his career to another level, he was still losing tight matches more often than winning them. The year 1997 it was his breakthrough, actually that year he did more than could have been anticipated when he had

won his maiden title in Newport '93 - within twelve months from a Top 50 guy who was overcoming his own record in fastest serves, Rusedski became no. 4 in Autumn! The new-born Brit was successful indoors, on grass and on hardcourts (with pinnacle at the US Open '97 when he reached the final, and had an open match against one year older Patrick Rafter, who had enjoyed very similar '97 season, turning from a Top 20 aspirant to one of the best players in the world). Rusedski stayed in Top 10 for more or less two seasons, in the meantime he began to work with Tony Pickard, who was jobless after Edberg's retirement. Pickard helped Rusedski to improve his backhand, but they separated after Wimbledon '98 when the British player retired in the first round and accused his coach of forcing him to take part in the event despite an injury. Sven Groeneveld replaced Pickard, and with the Dutchman, Rusedski celebrated his two biggest titles ([Paris-Bercy '98](#) & Munich-Grand Slam Cup '99 in the last edition of that luxury event). Rusedski earned \$1.3 million for his four matches won in Munich, admittedly it was \$0.7 million fewer than the champions of the years 1990-92, but still a huge amount of money, comparable to that had won Masters champions in the 90s. It was like winning the lottery for Rusedski, he couldn't expect to participate, but as many as five players withdrew and he entered the main draw! Shortly afterwards he added to his resume a title in Vienna trailing 0-2 in sets to Nicolas Kiefer (two years after blowing a 2-0 advantage against Goran Ivanisevic [in the same event](#)), but since the beginning of 2000 he wasn't the same, so I cannot exclude that like in cases of David Wheaton & Magnus Larsson, winning the Grand Slam Cup title could have a negative impact on his motivation. In singles, Rusedski finished his career with a Davis Cup win after saving a match point in the 5th set (Sergiy Stakhovsky), so it was a fitting end for a guy who was constantly involved in tight situations.

Biggest title: Grand Slam Cup 1999

Biggest lost final (1 major): US Open [1997](#)

SAFIN, Marat (Russia, 1980)

1.

A prototype of a new player, quite characteristic for the 21st Century - a tall man who comfortably moves on the court. I was really impressed watching his first big win (over Andre Agassi, [French Open '98](#)). A few months before I saw him destroying Jim Courier for fifty minutes (Safin led 6-0, *4:1 before losing in five) in the Davis Cup first round. It was played on a hardcourt, shorter rallies, I didn't notice then his extraordinary skills in defence. Prior to Safin's appearance, the players of height +190 cm were automatically associated with limited, rather awkward movement. I cannot say anything bad about Safin's volley skills, but from scratch it was clear he would construct the majority of his points from the back of the court everywhere. At the time it wasn't obvious that the serve-and-volley tennis was in retreat because Pete Sampras was still the best in the world while more natural serve-and-volleyer Patrick Rafter, won the US Open twice. Back to Paris '98; the qualifier Safin stunned Agassi, in the second round he won another five-setter (against Gustavo Kuerten) and a new star was born. Many months that followed, brought disappointment though. Safin was often losing in the first or second round, and he became known as a player who was destroying more racquets than

Goran Ivanisevic (the Croat was struggling a lot at the time with his form), a new bad boy. Something unbelievable happened to Safin in the European clay-court swing of Spring 2000. He had begun the season with five tournament defeats, when arrived in Barcelona he was ranked no. 35 with a poor 4-11 record for the season. And all of a sudden he claimed back-to-back titles (the second one in Mallorca) initiating the best seven months of his tennis life. In that period the 20-year-old Safin collected seven titles and almost finished the years as the best player in the world - only the final of Masters won by Kuerten gave the Brazilian the edge of the Russian. Remarkable that for another nine years (actually five) of his career, Safin won the same number of events (7) as during 3/4 of the 2000 season! It's not easy to explain - not knowing all factors off the courts - why Safin didn't keep his status of the best player born in the 80s at least in the first half of the 00s. Perhaps the enormous success (mainly manifested by triumphing at the US Open '00 after trashing Sampras in the final) was so unexpected juxtaposing with the disappointing 1999 season, that decreased his motivation to train hard. Judging by his skills, he could have certainly been for the early 00s someone like Jim Courier a decade before; meanwhile that what achieved Courier in the early 90s was ten years later distributed between Safin, Lleyton Hewitt & Andy Roddick, before Roger Federer - like Sampras more or less ten years earlier - overwhelmed them all. Safin's first serious setback came in the city where he transformed his career from serfdom to kingdom - Barcelona. It was the year 2003. Safin retired in the final. His left wrist bothered him. Counting that final, he lost all his seven matches to the end of the season and dropped from no. 8 to 86 when stunned the tennis world in Melbourne advancing to the final after three four-setters and three five-setters. Safin tied Harold Solomon's record (Roland Garros '76) for the most sets played in the Grand Slam fortnight - 30 - and his tiredness was visible during the final. He lost it quickly to Federer, who had begun his rule over the tennis world on that day and it lasted more than four years before he was overthrown by Nadal at Wimbledon '08. Safin of the years 2004-05 it was someone who can lose to anyone as well as someone who enjoying a good day can beat the best players in the world, and it happened in successive rounds of the Australian Open '05. Safin kicked off the event destroying an unknown Serbian boy... Novak Djokovic; in the semifinal survived a match point ([vs Federer](#)) and in the final the partisan Australian crowd, he defeated in four sets the local favorite Hewitt. It was Safin's swan song in some sense. He was just 25-year-old, playing more mature tennis than at the US Open '00 (his serve and his volleys were better), but didn't win another title for another five years. The years 2006-08 were disappointing, nevertheless at Wimbledon '08 he advanced to the semifinal, against defeating Djokovic in straights and their H2H has been finished at 2-0 for Safin since then. Inability to win a title for several years forced his decision to quit after the farewell '09 season. For the ~30-year-old Safin that season was less profitable than the 1996 farewell season for the 30-year-old Stefan Edberg. Throughout his career Safin was a player whose matches we can compare to the Russian roulette, plenty of luck was involved in his dramatic matches - he could win tight matches over the elite players as often as lose them to inferior players, but in the year 2009 he was almost losing everything tighter, at Roland Garros even to such a casual player like Josselin Ouanna (his main-level record just 9-17) after one of those matches you can theoretically lose once (6-7, 6-7, 6-4, 6-3, 8-10) - for Safin it was the second loss of this kind following his defeat top max Mirnyi more than five years before (6-7, 6-7, 6-1, 6-4, 9-11). Safin was losing that year everything tighter until his last tournament held at Paris-Bercy. In the first round he saved three match points with

three aces to beat the French bony-journeyman Thierry Ascione. In the last match of his career, Safin lost to Juan Martin del Potro, and perhaps it was Safin's best match of the season because the Argentinian was fresh after triumphing at the US Open, and he was mirroring Safin in terms of the posture and abilities; he was perceived then as a potential leader of the men's tennis in the years to come which never happened, but it's a different story...

Biggest title (2 majors): US Open [2000](#), Australian Open [2005](#); Davis Cup 2002 and [2006](#)

Biggest lost finals (1 major): Australian Open [2002](#) and [2004](#)

SAMPRAS, Pete (USA, 1971)

1.

He was an extraordinary tennis player, a great athlete, the best one of the 90s. At the time considered by many tennis experts as the greatest player in history. Sampras' parents Georgia and Sam were children of Greek immigrants (Sampras mother was born in Greece, she emigrated from her homeland in the 1960s). Pete grew up in the settlement of Rancho Palos Verdes, California, and never visited the country of his ancestors, however, on the Eve of the 21st Century he said that would finish his career during the Olympics in Athens 2004 . He started playing tennis at the age of 3 hitting the ball against the wall. On his 14th birthday, his father gave him two videotapes of the matches of the Australians Rod Laver and Ken Rosewall as a gift. "I watched these tapes several times a day. Their style of playing, especially Laver, fascinated me. I wanted to play like him!" he said. Influenced by Laver's game, Pete decided to switch from two-handed to one-handed backhand and use similar tactics as the grand champion - rushing the net. Career course at a glance: his first major success was in 1988, reaching the semi-finals in Schenectady. A year later he reached the final of the doubles tournament in Forest Hills along with Jim Courier and won a title in Rome (these two results helped them in advancing to Masters '89 - remarkable given they both would become the best players in singles just a few years later!). In the same year he made his first big "scalp" - at the US Open in five sets he defeated the title defender Mats Wilander [5]. He committed a double fault on his first match point. "Then everything went up to my throat with nerves. Fortunately, it ended well." - said Sampras, who would be in similarly dramatic circumstances a dozen of times in his career. March '90 it was time for the maiden title - in a place where he made his debut two years earlier - Philadelphia. He defeated Andres Gomez in the final. "I don't know why there is so much hype around Andre Agassi, Michael Chang and Jim Courier? Sampras is better than them!" - said the defeated Ecuadorian. Half a year later, Pete was a sensation at the US Open. Seeded with number 12, he defeated i.a. a future No. 1 Thomas Muster, then two great champions in back-to-back matches (Ivan Lendl and John McEnroe) and then he defeated Agassi in the final (Sampras will beat Agassi in their another two New York finals), thus becoming the youngest winner in the history of the U.S. championship (19 years and 28 days). In November of the same year, he took control over the first edition of the Compaq Grand Slam Cup (Munich), thanks to which he earned 2 million dollars in a week (unimaginable amount of money for any Grand Slam champion in the 80s). The astronomic financial success didn't spoil him, yet he disappointed several times in the '91 season. He lost, for example, the

Mercedes Super 9 finals of Cincinnati and Paris-Bercy (to Guy Forget). Soon after, he made a bad debut in the Davis Cup, losing both singles in the final match (beaten by Forget yet again!). In 1992, he recorded his first title on a clay court - Kitzbuhel. (In general, clay turned out to be the most difficult surface for him. Despite many efforts, he did not win Roland Garro.) He won as many as three tournaments in the season being a point being eliminated. On April 12, 1993, he became the eleventh ATP number one in history after triumphing in Tokyo after phenomenal display of versatile tennis. In June '93 he won the most prestigious tournament in the world - Wimbledon for the first time (it was expected from him already in the years 1991-92). "I can kind of appreciate what it takes to win a Grand Slam. In my mind this is the biggest one in the world, and now that I've done it I feel as happy as I've ever felt." he said. He won 85 matches that year, the most since Lendl, who grabbed 107 wins in 1982... He was the first tennis player in history to serve more than 1000 aces in a season (1011 in total). It was a year of his full maturity, the serve, the forehand, the volley - everything was way above the average, the year could have been even more successful if he hadn't lost several matches being within a few points of winning them. In 1994, he won 10 out of 11 finals and was the first tennis player since Lendl (1987) to maintain the "Number 1" position for the calendar year. He triumphed in the Australian Open for the first time, although in the second round only two points separated him from the defeat to 19-year-old Yevgeny Kafelnikov - the Russian was leading 5:4* (30-30) in the fifth set. In April 1995 his trainer and friend, former pro Tim Gullikson died of brain cancer. It was a huge setback mentally which contributed to a very weak season on clay-courts. Pete became a member of the Society for Fighting Cancer (ACSPAC) - he declared to pay \$100 for each ace served to the society's account. Again he was the best in the stats of untouchable serves - this time he sent 974 aces. He also supported the Vitas Gerulaitis Youth Association and the Arthur Ashe Society for Fighting Aids. In the years 1996-97 he won two Grand Slam tournaments in a row, but Magnus Norman prevented the chances to claim four major titles in a row, something what was expected from Sampras since he triumphed at Wimbledon '93: no-one had done it in the 70s and the 80s, but people were expecting it from Sampras, obviously the dirt didn't belong to his natural environment, but he played the quarterfinals in Paris a couple of times, claimed a title in Rome '94, so in the years 1994-97 his triumph in Paris couldn't be shocking. The 1997 season Sampras ended for the fifth year in a row as No. 1, thus matching Jimmy Connors' achievement of the years 1974-78. Players, journalists and the organizers of ATP tournaments chose him (on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Professional Tennis Association) as a quarter-century best tennis player. In 1998, he broke the Connors record and won Wimbledon for the fifth time, thus catching up with Bjorn Borg. The following year he improved the Swede's result; the victory in Wimbledon '99 came with great ease (only one four-set match!). For health reasons, he limited the number of tournaments. At the end of the year, he was dethroned in the leader's position by his greatest rival Agassi, with whom he co-created 34 matches throughout his career. 2000: by winning Wimbledon (seventh time!) he set a new all-time record - 13 Grand Slam titles (overcoming Roy Emerson's 12 titles). After winning the match point in the final against Patrick Rafter, he cried looking at his parents who hadn't visited Sampras' matches since junior times. It was a very special moment in history, the game was so even in the 90's that it was believed that Sampras' record wouldn't be beaten and he would win Wimbledon many more times. Very strange from the perspective of 2021 when three active guys (Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal & Novak Djokovic have won more

major titles). The 2001 season was completely unsuccessful. For the first time in eleven years, he didn't win a tournament, signs of getting older were visible already in the 90s when Sampras lost his hair on the top of his head. The serve was still great, but his movement nowhere near to the mid 90s, and that's partly explanation that his solid backhand turned into his hole, especially on clay-courts (Sampras' defeats in Paris of the years 1998-02 were surprising, in those years he had a 3-5 record, and two of those matches he barely survived in five-setters facing players he should have defeated in straight sets. He was also not successful beginning his US Open '02 campaign. From the beginning of this tournament, Sampras played like he was in his best years and went through the event undefeated in fantastic style, beating his eternal rival Agassi in the final. *"To beat a rival like Andre, in a storybook ending, it might be nice to stop,"* he said. *"But I still love to compete. I'll see in a couple of months where my heart is and my mind. My head is spinning."* After this unexpected success, 31-year-old Sampras in 2002 did not appear in any tournament anymore. A year later, he announced his official retirement, he finished his career better than any other great champion in history.

Biggest titles (14 majors):

Australian Open [1994](#), [1997](#)

Wimbledon [1993](#), [1994](#), [1995](#), [1997](#), [1998](#), [1999](#), [2000](#)

US Open [1990](#), [1993](#), [1995](#), [1996](#), [2002](#)

Masters [1991](#), [1994](#), [1996](#), [1997](#), [1999](#)

Davis Cup [1995](#)

Biggest lost finals (4 majors):

Australian Open [1995](#)

US Open [1992](#), [2000](#), [2001](#)

Masters [1993](#)

Davis Cup 1991, 1997

SANCHEZ, Emilio (Spain, 1965)

7.

Full family name: Sánchez Vicario. Emilio, the older brother of Javier, who was a good professional player too. It's difficult to explain why the older brother achieved much more. As opposed to the McEnroe brothers who had completely different personalities & game-styles, and a bigger age-difference (John 7 years older than Patrick) put them to different tennis eras (John was a transitional player between wooden & aluminium rackets), the Sanchez brothers were actually playing at the same time facing the same opponents. Their game-styles were almost identical, and suited to something that could be called in the 80s "Spanish school" - one-handed backhands, plenty of slices, clay as the most natural environment, good technique overall, allowing to apply serve-and-volley tactics. Emilio had something indefinable, something that helps to beat players theoretically better - he had defeated Ivan Lendl, Boris Becker & Stefan Edberg, so the best players when he was in his prime while Javier lost to them all his matches. Javier's trivia: he lost to Edberg twice after the same scoreline (6-2, 6-7, 2-6); first in Stuttgart '92 blowing two match points, one year later in Monte Carlo being two points away

from victory. Javier could be jealous of his older brother, he copied him with everything, yet it wasn't enough to get either his ranking or his biggest title (Rome '91). At least at Slams they were at the same level - two quarterfinals for each of them. In Javier's case, quite surprisingly both quarterfinals occurred in New York, not in Paris which seemed more probable. Emilio's curiosity: in both his major quarterfinals (1988) he was stopped by Mats Wilander (the best in the world then) after almost identical matches... 7-6, 6-7, 3-6, 4-6 in Paris and 6-3, 6-7, 0-6, 4-6 in New York blowing set points in both cases to lead 2-0 in sets. It's funny that those two matches repeated the pattern they had established one year earlier at Wimbledon - then Wilander prevailed 2-6, 7-6, 6-3, 7-5. Emilio was the captain of the Spanish Davis Cup team for three years; his tenure there culminated in Spain's 2008 Davis Cup victory. He resigned as captain after the win.

SMID, Tomas (Czechia, 1956)

11.

The best Czechoslovak player for a few years at the end of 70s (between the reigns of Jan Kodes & Ivan Lendl). With more than 500 wins at the main-level he's the only player who didn't enter the Top 10, yet is introduced by me to the Top 100 best players of the Open Era (two years in a row he played at Masters, 1983-84 because it was a time when the play-off format was proposed, allowing to participate more players than traditional "8"). A distinctive feature of Smid's career is the lack of at least one Grand Slam semifinal; he played just two major quarterfinals (lost them both to Lendl). Without the Davis Cup 1980 triumph, Smid could be considered as an underachiever. In the DC '80 final he defeated in the opening rubber Adriano Panatta 3-6, 3-6, 6-3, 6-4, 6-4 and it was the key to the Czechoslovak triumph that year. Very solid Smid throughout his quite long career, generally dealt badly with the best players at his prime (0-7 record vs Jimmy Connors, 0-11 vs John McEnroe - always beaten badly by BigMac and 1-10 vs Lendl; the only win against 21-year-old Lendl in Frankfurt after saving two match points). In doubles Smid won two majors (both with John Fitzgerald) and Masters '87 (with Miloslav Mecir) - en route to the French Open & Masters (London) titles, Smid had defeated the Edberg/Jarryd pair after amazingly dramatic matches, especially the London '87 'round robin' match was sensational: Smid along with Mecir came back from 0:4 in the 4th set & 3:5 (two match points) in the 5th before surviving 2-6, 7-6, 1-6, 7-6, 7-5! Mecir/Smid defeated Edberg/Jarryd a few days later again in the semifinal - it was the only edition when the officials used a random method to make the semifinal pairings. Two years after retirement from singles (played another three years in doubles), Smid was coaching Boris Becker, who was the best player in the world then. Trivia: Smid is a record holder in number of games (85) played in a Davis Cup rubber (World Group). In the 1985 semifinali Frankfurt he lost to Michael Westphal (1965-1991, died due to AIDS) after 5 hours 29 minutes 8-6, 6-1, 5-7, 9-11, 15-17! The extraordinary scoreline could be a consequence of one of the most bizarre incidents - at 5-all in the 3rd set the carpet was destroyed after Westphal's volley. The surfaces needed repair and Smid perhaps lost his focus.

Biggest title: Davis Cup 1980

SODERLING, Robin (Sweden, 1984)

4.

Soderling is the last Swedish player who mattered. Beginning with the great Bjorn Borg in the 70s, the Swedes had constantly players who could reach quarter- & semi-finals of the biggest events; it was clear that Soderling (28 years younger than Borg) would be the last big Swedeish name for longer, unspecified time. Soderling was rather awkward, his game at the net I'd describe as "wooden", one-dimensional, but there was sheer power in his basic strokes. As far as players born in the 80s, Gonzalez seemed to possess the fastest forehand, Marat Safin the fastest backhand, but Soderling could deliver the fastest shots off both wings combined. His serve was also very powerful, the first serve above 200 kph on average, the second serve above 170 kph. With these tools Soderling could do some damage, but the early years on the tour indicated his mental instability, he was prone to lose dramatic matches more often than winning them. Moreover, he felt himself the best indoors, when the acoustic is louder and perhaps it gave him better mental state as he heard the noise of his strokes, more intimidating the opponents. Unfortunately for him, no major is played indoors (first nine finals under the roof), thus for a few years he remained among those players who had potential to do something big, but couldn't. Everything changed in 2009 when Magnus Norman became Soderling's coach. Norman hadn't Soderling's power, but reached No. 2 in the world thanks to tactical skills and total dedication to improve every detail in his shots. He convinced Soderling to work on the weakness (the net-game) and helped him to prepare different tactical plans depending on the opponent. Under the Norman's guidance, Soderling enjoyed the best two years of his tennis life (2009-10), he reached two French Open finals, and paradoxically he defeated the champions of those events, but not in the finals: stunned [Rafael Nadal](#) in the fourth round of 2009 to lose the final to Roger Federer, another year he stunned Federer [in the quarterfinal](#) (with 0:12 in H2H only to be beaten by Nadal in the final). At the end of 2010 Soderling split with Norman, but continued to play tennis from the previous two years. The beginning of 2011 was great, he claimed three titles in his first four events. Admittedly he didn't reach another final in Paris, but the task was exceptionally tough, he faced Nadal again, that time in the quarterfinal. After a rather sensational defeat to Bernard Tomic at Wimbledon, Soderling on the home soil in [Bastad](#), played the event of his life which would be the last in his career. Soderling won easily four matches, blowing away the Top 10 players Tomas Berdych (71 minutes) & David Ferrer (67 minutes). *"It has been a dream week,"* said Soderling [5] after the final, *"I feel really good. Now finally, my body feels good. I struggled a little bit with some injuries the past couple of months."* The 175th and last main-level event in Soderling's career... The Swede was 27-year-old at the time, he seemed to be in great shape having won four titles in 2011, but soon after Bastad he began to struggle with mononucleosis, an illness that forced him to withdraw from the US Open '11 at the last minute. In the following four years he believed he would return to competitive tennis, but ultimately announced his retirement from professional tennis on December 23, 2015.

Biggest lost finals (2 majors): Roland Garros [2009](#) and [2010](#)

SOLOMON, Harold (USA, 1952)

5.

For the generation of guys like Bjorn Borg, Jimmy Connors & Guillermo Vilas, Solomon was someone like David Ferrer for the generation of Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal & Novak Djokovic. Solomon of Jewish origin, defeated all the best players who played on the turn of the 70s & 80s except Borg (Head-to-Head 0-15) meanwhile the thirty years younger Ferrer defeated all the best guys of the 00s & 10s except Federer (Head-to-Head 0-17). Both Solomon & Ferrer based their tennis on great physical preparation, tenacity, exceptional resistance and "never say die" attitude. All those assets helped Solomon to keep one of the best 5-set records of the Open Era (18:6). Admittedly as a pro Solomon was ~7 cm shorter than Ferrer, but in the 70s ~180 cm meant more or less the same as ~185 cm in the times when Ferrer was usually dealing with much taller opponents. Ferrer had a better career overall (mainly thanks to his Davis Cup appearances), but some of his numbers are very similar to Solomon's: 27 vs 22 titles, 66% vs 63% of matches won, 3 vs 5 highest ranking, also the best Slam result - French Open final (Ferrer in 2013, Solomon in 1976). Solomon was a specialist of moonballing, his backhand was rock-solid, helped him a lot in passing opponents who had no patience to be involved in neverending rallies with the short man from the U.S. capital. Because Borg was patient and had a much better service, Solomon couldn't stand against him and their rivalry is one of the most one-sided comparing elite players. At a time when Solomon seemed to be in great shape, he lost two Slam matches to Borg after the same embarrassing result (2-6, 2-6, 0-6). A few years after retirement he continued his tennis journey being a coach of many well-known players, females mainly.

Biggest lost final (1 major): Roland Garros 1976

STICH, Michael (Germany, 1968)

2.

The second best German player of the Open Era, behind Boris Becker, but his first few years on the tour didn't indicate it would be like this. The 80s and the 90s, meant the times that all the best guys of those decades, established themselves as successful players already as teenagers. Stich was an exception. When Germany won two Davis Cup titles in the years 1988-89, the core of the team created Becker and Carl-Uwe Steeb (both from Baden-Württemberg - southern region of Germany - both one year older than Stich)... the man from Pinneberg (Schleswig-Holstein, northern Germany) didn't even play a rubber in eight ties (Eric Jelen & Patrick Kuhnen were considered as doubles players who might have replaced the leading singles guys), he didn't quit school. It was so unlikely that the fifth best German of those golden years would lead Germany for the third Davis Cup title in 1993! Stich marked his existence on the tour in February '90 when triumphed in Memphis as no. 80. He won six matches but didn't beat anyone special, the highest defeated opponent it was Andrei Chesnokov [19], not known as an indoor specialist. *"It's a great feeling,"* Stich said about collecting his first title. *"I don't really know what happened out there. But I'm sure I'll recognise*

what happened some days from now. There aren't that many German players who have won Grand Prix titles. Maybe I'll get some recognition," And he got! A few weeks later Niki Pilic nominated him for a Davis Cup tie in Argentina; Stich lost in five sets to Martin Jaite as well as their 5-set second round encounter at Roland Garros (4 hours 46 minutes - one of the longest matches of the year). Even though Stich amazingly improved in the following years, that loss to Jaite featured the weakest aspect of his tennis - inability to play the best tennis as a match goes over a 3-hour mark... Stich didn't play another impressive event in 1990, but during the US Open for instance, he showed his big potential forcing Ivan Lendl to fight hard for a 4-set victory. *"He pushes and pushes, and then he sneaks in on an unusual shot,"* Lendl said. *"He puts a lot of pressure on you that way."* The classical serve-and-volleyer was on his way to become more patient improving his groundstrokes. The breakthrough came in January '91 - Stich advanced to two Australian finals (Adelaide, Sydney) followed by a third round at Australian Open when for the second time he played a match on the Grand Slam main arena, losing a tight 4-setter again, that time to the best server at the time - Guy Forget. Stich kept his form after the Australian January, a series of good results, highlighted with unexpected clay-court semifinals ([Hamburg](#), [French Open](#)) led him to the tournament of his life - Wimbledon. Within six months he turned from a Top 50 to Top 10 player, but he wasn't considered a favorite to the title, and then a miracle occurred in the fourth round. After losing a 4th set to Alexander Volkov 1-6, he trailed *1:4 (30/40) in the decider - as Stich later said, he'd accepted his defeat and fearlessly hit his second serve - it was an ace. Stich held, also another serving game, but Volkov leading 5:3 (30/15) was on his way to close the match out... he played his nonchalant volley and a few centimeters separated him from a double match point. Stich recalls in 2020: *"I hit a forehand passing shot that hit the top of the tape and just went over his racquet. He was at the net, and it landed on the sideline. Then I got the break and, I'm not sure since it's almost 30 years ago now, but I think I didn't lose a point afterwards. I won my service game, I broke him to love and then I served out to love again and won 7-5 in the fifth."* I remember that Volkov grabbed his head with both hands in disbelief. Why did he take it so seriously? He was unbroken since the end of the 3rd set, I don't know, he was a very strange player. Anyway, he acted like the combination of Stich's net-cord and sideline (after his forehand the ball was going into the doubles valley) decided the entire match. Stich continues his memorial: *"Definitely in your subconsciousness it creates something like, 'You should have been out, but you're still here so just relax!'. When I was relaxed and I felt good about myself, then the timing was right, the timing was good, and things seemed to be easier for me."* Stich was so relaxed that defeated the three best players at the time in another three matches (Jim Courier, Stefan Edberg & Becker in the final). Very peculiar was the match [vs Edberg](#). Never before a player who won in a 'best of 5' format, failed to break an opponent's serve. It will happen several times in the future with serve-bots, but at the time it was underlined in all tennis news. Stich brought a novelty to tennis in the 90s, with that match and with another major skirmish, vs Richard Krajicek at the [Aussie Open '92](#) - they played a tight five-setter with only three breaks of serve. The future will deliver similar matches, but at the time it was unprecedented. Stich belonged to the group of players in the early 90s (along with Pete Sampras, Goran Ivanisevic & Krajicek) who could hold the serve for a very long time perfecting their serving skills on faster surfaces. Stich defeated them all in dramatic all-serve-and-volley battles at indoor finals in 1993 (Stuttgart, [Stockholm](#) and Frankfurt) becoming the first player of

the Open Era to win at least 30 tie-breaks within a season. He was also involved in dramatic matches against two other great servers of the time (Forget at Hopman Cup - hit 31 aces in that match, never before seen to hit as many aces in just three sets and [Becker at Wimbledon](#)). The year 1993 was remarkable for Stich, he was not only playing very well everywhere, he was also involved in as many tight situations as no-one before, and played as many matches representing his country as no-one before (15 in singles: 3 Hopman Cup - title, 4 World Team Cup - runner-up, 8 Davis Cup - title).

Biggest titles (1 major):

Wimbledon [1991](#); Masters [1993](#); Davis Cup 1993

Biggest lost finals (2 majors):

US Open [1994](#), Roland Garros [1996](#)

Grand Slam Cup [1993](#)

VERDASCO, Fernando (Spain, 1983)

7.

"It's the most exciting victory of my life. Playing for my country, against the best players, it's a dream." said Verdasco after his Davis Cup clincher against Jose Acasuso that gave Spain its second trophy in the most prestigious tennis team competition. Known for several years as a dangerous floater, Verdasco did in the decade of the 00s the same what had done before him Nicolas Escude, Mikhail Youzhny & Mario Ancic - the players from a level of major semifinals who won clinchers for their countries: France, Russia & Croatia respectively. The 25-year-old Verdasco hadn't even played a major quarterfinal, but soon he confirmed that winning a Davis Cup clincher was worth a semifinal in one of the four biggest events. In late December of 2008, Verdasco went to Las Vegas where he was training very hard on his physical preparation with Gil Reyes, the former fitness coach of Andre Agassi. The hard work during the month when many players rest, paid off. Verdasco began the 2009 year in sensational form, admittedly he lost a Brisbane final to Radek Stepanek, but avenged that defeat a few weeks later destroying the Czech 6-4, 6-0, 6-0 in the Australian Open third round! The Spaniard advanced to the fourth round dropping just twelve games in three matches, no-one before him went through the opening three rounds so convincingly. In the following two rounds Verdasco ousted higher ranked [Andy Murray](#) (one of the main favourites to the title) and [Jo-Wilfried Tsonga](#) (the 2008 runner-up) playing spectacular tennis, I remember that I had an impression at the time, that Verdasco was playing tennis comparable to Marcelo Rios when the Chilean won back-to-back titles in Indian Wells & Key Biscayne becoming the best player in the world. I mean the easiness of hitting the ball off both wings in all directions creating very tight angles. Verdasco had much better serve than Rios though, especially his flat serve down the middle on ad-court was exceptionally impressive. He could keep his opponents in uncertainty because his sliced serve was working very well, so his 160 kph serve out-wide could have been as efficient as his 220 kph bomb if the opponent had chosen a different direction to return the ball. In the semifinal Verdasco faced Rafael Nadal, and the two Spanish left-handed created [an amazing match](#), overcoming the record of the longest match played in Melbourne (Becker d. Camporese in

1991). In the 00s there were several unexpected Aussie Open finalists almost every year: Arnaud Clement (2001), Thomas Johansson (2002, champion), Rainer Schuettler (2003), Marcos Baghdatis (2006), Fernando Gonzalez (2007), Tsonga (2008). Verdasco was very close to joining the list, perhaps he played a match of his life against Nadal, won only one point fewer (192 vs 193) and the point which separated them was actually Verdasco's double fault on the third match point. The old demons caught the new versions of Verdasco, for many years he belonged to the narrow group of players serving often more double faults than aces, against Nadal the service ratio wasn't negative though. Verdasco was continuing his very good form in the following few months, impressing with consistency in every tournament, winning 2-3 matches before losing to the best guys in the world. Those defeats showed that something was missing in his game, perhaps that loss to Nadal was quintessential. It's been twelve years since Verdasco's best period, he's still active and respectable (lately became a father and missed several months on the tour), over the years cemented his position of a guy who may lose to an inferior player, but entering the big arena against higher ranked opponents would positively stimulate him to give his best. Trivia: Verdasco skipped the Australian Open '00 ending streak of 67 straight Grand Slams played - the second longest all-time behind Feliciano Lopez' 74. Along with Lopez, Verdasco won a Davis Cup clincher in 2009 making him a unique player to do this in singles & doubles (before in the Open Era the feat achieved only the icons of the game: Stan Smith, John McEnroe, Boris Becker & Stefan Edberg). Full name: Fernando Verdasco Carmona...

Biggest title: Davis Cup [2008](#)

TANNER, Roscoe (USA, 1951)

4.

In the 70s Tanner was a prototype of a new player: "all-server". He raised the significance of the serve to a new level. He's considered as the first guy who'd served 140 mph (225 kph), twenty years before it officially happened. His height (183 cm) isn't impressive in the third decade of the 21st Century, but forty years ago he belonged to the tallest players born in the 50s, he was a bulky left-hander with broad arms, so he was giving an impression that he could serve from a higher level than his height would indicate. His serving technique was quite peculiar because he was hitting the ball on the rise, at the top of the toss, and he could hit the ball curved which not all players were able to do at the time. In the late 70s he was the toughest opponent for the top guys - they knew that when his serve was on, breaking him it was a very tough ask, and holding wasn't easy either because he didn't give any rhythm with his awkward baseline game. The almighty Bjorn Borg was a victim four times (twice as the best player in the world), one of his most bitter defeats came at the US Open '79. Borg had won Roland Garros & Wimbledon (defeating Tanner in five sets in the final) and was on his way for the third title, but Tanner stunned him 6-2, 4-6, 6-2, 7-6 in the quarterfinal snapping a 31-match winning streak of the Swede. It was a magnificent night for Tanner, he put the serving Borg on constant pressure and even a straight set victory hung in the air as he led 3:2* (40/30) in the 2nd set. One point separated this four-set thriller from a one-sided four-setter: Tanner blew two match points

serving at 5:3 in the 4th set, but he kept his cool & played a perfect 7/2 tie-break. Tanner served only 4 double faults and had 11 aces, three in one game and many on crucial points during the 2-hour-26-minute match. That game when Tanner didn't convert match points was extraordinary, after one of his furious serves the net had to be fixed... Tanner defeated Jimmy Connors (four times) & Guillermo Vilas, twice Ivan Lendl & John McEnroe. Tanner's second win over McEnroe was his last big one, it happened in Richmond (6-3, 5-7, 6-2)... McEnroe was a ranking leader with six consecutive easy wins over Tanner, who was already 32 years-old.

Biggest title (1 major): Australian Open [1977](#)

Biggest lost final: Wimbledon [1979](#)

THIEM, Dominic (Austria, 1993)

3.

Currently the best player (by experience and gathered results) in the world beside Rafael Nadal & Novak Djokovic. The Austrian is the only man born in the 90s who has defeated them many times as well as Roger Federer. Thiem has defeated both Nadal & Djokovic in dramatic "best of three" and "best of five" matches which is very significant in perspective of pondering his chances of winning another Slam(s) in 2021. He hasn't defeated Federer yet in the 'best of five' meeting, yet given the Swiss will turn 40 this year, I can easily imagine Thiem defeating him even in Federer's favorite Wimbledon. The first major for the Austrian came at the US Open '20 in empty stands due to coronavirus. Perhaps it helped him as well as the fact he didn't face any of legends en route to the title because in his three previous finals (two in Paris, one in Melbourne) the legend meant his final station. Thiem has already developed as a player over the years. Prior to 2019 he had been known as a clay-court specialist, "clay court prince" (he lost three consecutive matches to Nadal in Paris, a semifinal, then two finals), Thiem has been more successful on hardcourts since he began a cooperation with the double gold medalist Nicolas Massu. [Indian Wells '19](#) was Thiem's first big title. He was a bit lucky because after three short matches, Gael Monfils gave him a walkover in the quarterfinals (third walkover in their mutual history, Thiem received two of them), so the Austrian had plenty of energy before his last two matches. That result didn't surprise me though, I had noticed before Thiem's great second serve which may be such a powerful weapon on hardcourts. There was no major champion among players born between 1988 and 1993. It seems that Thiem is lucky that he's distinctively younger than Nadal & Djokovic whilst a few years older than the best players born at the end of the 20th Century. I mean he had more opportunities to play against the legends, also when they were at the peaks of their careers, which gave him great experience, yet he's still relatively young - it allows me to imagine he'll be still competing at the highest level when Nadal & Djokovic will finally be outside the Top 10, not being able to conquer Slams. I assume Thiem may advance to No. 1 (winning another majors) in the next 2-3 years, not sure about his Wimbledon chances. He doesn't like to play serve-and-volley, he hits the ball the hardest after higher bounces when he has time to make big swings, thus certainly his game doesn't naturally suit grass, however, he has won one grass-court title, and defeated Federer then, so who knows...

Biggest titles (1 major): US Open [2020](#)

Biggest lost finals (3 majors): Australian Open [2020](#), Roland Garros [2018](#), [2019](#)
Masters [2019](#), [2020](#)

TSITSIPAS, Stefanos (Greece, 1998)

5.

It was probably July 2016 when I was playing with my Greek friend (Giorgos) in Crete and he told me that after so many years, Greece had finally a good prospect - an 18 year-old Tsitsipas. There was a Greek player who participated in a few Grand Slam events in the 00s (Konstantinos Economidis), but his highest ranking was just no. 112, so it was nothing for a 10 million nation with such a long history of Gods, philosophers and other interesting personas. My friend Giorgos told me, Tsitsipas would be a Top 100 player easily. He must have been something like 330 at the time. Cool. I watched Tsitsipas the following year when he lost the first round in Rotterdam to Jo-Wilfried Tsonga (February '17). The Greek was trying to break into the Top 200 then. Another time I saw him when he defeated Richard Gasquet in the second round of Doha in January 2018 which meant his career-best result then. I noticed his good movement, but certainly he didn't impress me. I thought something like "with this soft topspin backhand he couldn't achieve anything special, he's just a worse version of Grigor Dimitrov". I was wrong. Just a few months later, as someone still not being fully adopted as an ATP player, he reached the final in Barcelona and did it defeating four higher ranked players, including an impressive 6-3, 6-2 over one of the biggest clay-court specialists - Dominic Thiem. In Summer that year, Tsitsipas reached another final (losing to [Rafael Nadal](#) again) - Toronto; en route to the final he defeated i.a. Thiem (again!), Novak Djokovic and [Alexander Zverev](#) (being very close to losing sets 2 & 3). Two wins in 2019, over Roger Federer at [Australian Open](#) and Nadal in [Madrid](#), caused me to perceive him as one of the most gifted players born in the 90s. *"Roger is a legend of our sport, so much respect for him. He showed such good tennis over the years. I've been idolising him since the age of six, and it was a dream come true for me just being on Rod Laver Arena facing him. Winning at the end, I cannot describe it."* Tsitsipas said after the Federer victory. *"It means the world. I'm really happy that I proved myself today. I played one of my best games this year. I'm really happy that I'm fighting, I'm in the zone. I'm enjoying tennis at its fullest potential. It's really nice to be able to play this way. Today's victory is just an unbelievable feeling."* about the Nadal victory... He confirmed his aspiration to overthrow the greatest players triumphing in a season-ending championship in London (just a year before he had won [Masters under-21](#)). So his progress in the ATP ranking was praiseworthy in the years 2015-19: 576-210-91-15-6. Ascending like this could have allowed him to expect to attack no. 1 in the following season. Nothing like that happened in the peculiar 2020. Tsitsipas' ranking wasn't threatened, but at majors he just equalled his best performance reaching the semifinal in Paris, the same in the first Slam of this year in Melbourne. Andrey Rublev looks to me as someone whose abilities are limited to major quarterfinals, Tsitsipas may be struggling to get the major final. He plays and thinks about the game similarly to Federer, but all his strokes are slightly worse than those performed by the

Swiss when he was younger. Tsitsipas' career also depends on how long Djokovic and Nadal stay around. He positively surprised me with an outstanding five-set win over Nadal at Aus Open '21, but this match and his second round victory over Thanasi Kokkinakis took its toll, the Greek was deflated in [his semifinal](#) against Daniil Medvedev, who seems to be his toughest opponent for now with great retrieving skills. Tsitsipas' serve is very good, but he cannot rely on this shot entirely like Federer, he works hard on his groundstrokes, but they seem to me still not sharp enough to save him when the serve doesn't function ideally. I really like only Tsitsipas' forehand down the line when he hits the ball on the rise, it's his most reliable shot, if he cannot apply it time and time again, his baseline game turns to be vulnerable.

Biggest title: Masters [2019](#)

TSONGA, Jo-Wilfried (France, 1985)

5.

A son of Congolese father Didier and French mother Évelyne (née Rosier). He is an example of someone who entered the luxury tennis saloons out of nowhere, but it'd made sense if we dug deeper into his first steps on the tour... China 2004: the 19-year-old Tsonga, US Open junior champion of 2003, receives 'wild card' to play in Beijing and defeats No. 6 in the world Carlos Moya 6-3, 6-3 in the first round! If someone who is unknown, ranked 209, eliminates a former best player in the world, there must be something special about him. It's confirmed more than three years later when Tsonga, participating in his just 16th main-level event, advances to the Australian Open final defeating i.a. Andy Murray & [Rafael Nadal](#). Between his sensational debut in Beijing and the career-biggest success in Melbourne, he struggled with many injuries (herniated disc & shoulder, moreover back and abdominal problems), because of that instead of becoming a regular ATP player already in 2005, for two years he'd been drifting between Challengers & Futures events before made a Challenger-ATP transition in 2007, making his face recognizable at the beginning of the year in Melbourne, winning a record-tying tie-break 20/18 vs Andy Roddick on Rod Laver Arena (the American won the match in four sets though). Mats Wilander belonged to a big group of pundits delighted by Tsonga's appearance at the Australian Open '08, the Swede even said that Tsonga would be better than Roger Federer... Relatively unknown players can hide their weaknesses and I think it was also Tsonga's case during that amazing Australian fortnight. The following years exposed Tsonga's backhand hole. I'd risk a thesis that Tsonga achieved more than you could expect from a guy with his backhand, mainly thanks to his very good mentality. Tennis is such a psychological game, admittedly it's not boxing, you cannot punch your opponent (maybe Tsonga would be good at this with his nickname "Ali", due to facial resemblance to the greatest boxer in history, Cassius Clay), but you can intimidate him (her), and this is what in my opinion Tsonga was doing very well throughout his career, especially in France, feeling the energy of the partisan crowd. I suppose the vast majority of players knew that in crucial moments, playing to his backhand was required, but only the best guys (Novak Djokovic, Nadal, Murray) could do this often (Djokovic needed to figure it out, initially Tsonga was one of his toughest opponents, and the great Serb lost to him 5 out of the first 7 meetings); others were making many mistakes or were playing too

softly, allowing the Frenchman of the African origin, running around his backhand to play big forehands, attacking the net, and gaining the points with crispy volleys or eye-catching overheads. There's no other player like Tsonga, who has won the record tie-break, the longest deciding 3rd set (25-23 against Milos Raonic, Olympics 2012) and one of the longest 5th sets (19-17 against John Isner, Wimbledon 2016).

Biggest title: Davis Cup 2017

Biggest lost finals: Australian Open [2008](#), Masters [2011](#)

VERDASCO, Fernando (Spain, 1983)

7.

"It's the most exciting victory of my life. Playing for my country, against the best players, it's a dream." said Verdasco after his Davis Cup clincher against Jose Acasuso that gave Spain its second trophy in the most prestigious tennis team competition. Known for several years as a dangerous floater, Verdasco did in the decade of the 00s the same what had done before him Nicolas Escude, Mikhail Youzhny & Mario Ancic - the players from a level of major semifinals who won clincher for their countries: France, Russia & Croatia respectively. The 25-year-old Verdasco hadn't even played a major quarterfinal, but soon he confirmed that winning a Davis Cup clincher is worth a semifinal in one of the four biggest events. In late December of 2008, Verdasco went to Las Vegas where was training very hard on his physical preparation with Gil Reyes, the former fitness coach of Andre Agassi. The hard work during the month when many players rest, paid off. Verdasco began the 2009 year in sensational form, admittedly he lost a Brisbane final to Radek Stepanek, but avenged that defeat a few weeks later destroying the Czech 6-4, 6-0, 6-0 in the Australian Open third round! The Spaniard advanced to the fourth round dropping just twelve games in three matches, no-one before him went through the opening three rounds so convincingly. In the following two rounds Verdasco ousted higher ranked Andy Murray (one of the main favourites to the title) and Jo-Wilfried Tsonga (the 2008 runner-up) playing spectacular tennis, I remember that I had an impression at the time, that Verdasco was playing tennis comparable to Marcelo Rios when the Chilean won back-to-back titles in Indian Wells & Key Biscayne becoming the best player in the world. I mean the easiness of hitting the ball off both wings in all directions creating very tight angles. Verdasco had much better serve than Rios though, especially his flat serve down the middle on ad-court was exceptionally impressive. He could keep his opponents in uncertainty because his sliced serve was working very well, so his 160 kph serve out-wide could have been as efficient as his 220 kph bomb if the opponent had chosen a different direction to return the ball. In the semifinal Verdasco faced Rafael Nadal, and the two Spanish left-handed created an amazing match, overcoming the record of the longest match played in Melbourne (Becker d. Camporese in 1991). In the 00s there were several unexpected Aussie Open finalists almost every year: Arnaud Clement (2001), Thomas Johansson (2002, champion), Rainer Schuettler (2003), Marcos Baghdatis (2006), Fernando Gonzalez (2007), Tsonga (2008). Verdasco was very close to joining the list, perhaps he played a match of his life against Nadal, won only one points fewer (192 vs 1993) and the point which separated them was actually Verdasco's double fault

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Biggest title: Davis Cup [2008](#)

VILAS, Guillermo (Argentina, 1952)

2.

Winning multiple Grand Slam titles is actually reserved for players who reach the top of men's tennis, however, two guys in different generations managed to claim a few Slams even though they didn't become no. 1 - I mean Vilas and Stan Wawrinka; the Argentinian won 4 majors in the 70s, the Swiss one major fewer in the 10s. The historic status of them both isn't similar though: Vilas is one of the icons of the 70s, beside Bjorn Borg and Jimmy Connors, while the inconsistent Wawrinka, during the years he stunned the tennis world three times, was never considered as a potential no. 1; he was always in the shadow of Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal Djokovic, and even in the shadow of Andy Murray, against whom Wawa has a very good H2H record. Vilas kept the status of a Top 10 player for nine years, and twice finished the season as no. 2 (it happened in 1975 & 1977). Is he the best player of the Open Era who never became no. 1. I have no doubts that he is. Let's look carefully at his best year (1977) comparing his results to other two titans of those times:

- number of titles: 16 Vilas, 12 Borg, 8 Connors
- number of major titles: 2 Vilas (Roland Garros & US Open), 1 Borg (Wimbledon), 1 Connors (Masters)
- win/loss record: 136-14 Vilas, 78-7 Borg, 69-11 Connors

On the assumption they were the three best players of the season, you don't need to be a rocket scientist to find out that Vilas was the best in 1977, then Borg, Connors third... but it was just the fourth year of the ATP ranking which was based on the average of a player's results and miraculously the final positions had this order: 1 - Connors (!), 2 - Vilas, 3 - Borg.

It's one of the biggest controversies of the Open Era, much bigger than Petr Korda's triumph at the Australian Open '98 allegedly under the influence of forbidden substances. Marcelo Rios, who lost to Korda, many years later, wanted to get the trophy - in vain. Also Vilas felt that he

should have finished the 1977 season as a tennis king - in May 2015 the ATP announced it had decided not to make the No. 1 position for Vilas officially. Vilas was playing like crazy in 1977, no-one has won as many matches as he did then. Especially the period after the grass season was extraordinary - 7 titles in a row (all on clay), then a loss in the Aix-en-Provence final to snap his 46-match winning streak and 53-match winning streak on clay (lost to Ilie Nastase in controversial circumstances), then five consecutive titles and a defeat to Borg in the Masters semifinal (held in January of '78). Unreal frequency of event appearances and compaction of matches; between July and October, Vilas was playing almost every day - his trips are also astonishing: for instance in September he wins two matches in the Davis Cup tie in Argentina (South America), then flights to Europe, plays two events week-by-week reaching the finals in both, then makes a trip to Western Asia and triumphs in Teheran, mind-blowing stuff, impossible two decades later when tennis became more physical and majority of players didn't want to play even three weeks in a row regardless of the stage they reached in a tournament preceding. Vilas is considered as one of the best clay-courtiers of the Open Era, actually the third best behind Nadal and Borg, but his great career kicked off on grass as he unexpectedly triumphed at Masters '74, held in Melbourne. He was 22, it was his first appearance in the season-ending championships. Keeping in memory Vilas' clay-court game, based on heavy top-spins and incredible patience, it's really remarkable that he won that event attacking the net behind both serves. Well, until the mid 70s serve-and-volley tactics was almost obligatory on grass, Borg & Connors were doing the same (the American won that year two majors on grass trashing Ken Rosewall on both occasions, attacking the net constantly). The year 1982 was the last one when Vilas was an elite player. Despite losing his status of a serious threat in the biggest events, he continued for another seven years, retiring from the ATP Tour in 1989. After one year break he decided to make a return in 1991, played on the Challenger for two years in the meantime receiving 'wild cards' to two ATP events, losing the first round in them both, but in Atlanta '92, playing the penultimate match of his career on the main-level, he had a match point against Alexander Volkov [18]. It's amazing that Volkov one year later will be a point away from losing to Borg when the Swede will be playing the last match of his career. The rivalry between two tennis legends whose careers Volkov ended in dramatic matches, was quite upsetting because Borg was doing everything a little bit better than Vilas. In the years 1976-80 when they both were at their prime, Borg defeated Vilas eleven times, three times in big finals (Roland Garros 1975 & 78 and Monte Carlo 1980) the Swede simply destroyed the Argentinian, not allowing him to win at least 4 games in a set counting 16 sets in a row!

Biggest titles (4 majors):

Australian Open [1978](#), [1979](#); Roland Garros [1977](#), US Open [1977](#)
Masters 1974

Biggest lost finals: Australian Open [1977](#); Roland Garros 1975, [1978](#), [1982](#)

WAWRINKA, Stan (Switzerland, 1985)

3.

Usually when I watch young players at the beginning of their careers, I know more or less what they would achieve in the future. I mean I think "this one should win one major, that one should advance to the Top 20" etc. and quite often I'm right within a minimum of that I had predicted. Wawrinka totally fooled me though, and he did it many times. When I was watching his advancement to the [Rome '08 final](#), I thought it was his career best result. He was 23 y.o. then, ranked 24, and defeated three former (and one future) Nos. 1, however, those former best players (Marat Safin, Juan C. Ferrero) were already behind their prime, so the Swiss didn't impress me. Later that year he helped Roger Federer in winning the gold medal at the Olympics in Beijing in doubles, so it was something not anticipated at all, but not very strange given Federer's amazing form in those years and Wawrinka's good skills overall with one-handed backhand above the average... Australian Open '14 - a tournament which completely rewrote the career of the Swiss. When he began it, his records against the best players in the world looked depressing: 14 straight defeats to Novak Djokovic, 0-12 vs Rafael Nadal, 1-13 Federer. He was already 29, so actually I was close to fulfilling my prediction from 2008. Wawrinka somehow managed to beat Djokovic [in the quarterfinal](#), and he did the same to an injured Nadal in the final. Quite shocking was his reaction too, he didn't lie on the court in disbelief, just raised his hand like many times before winning incomparably less important matches. *"For me it is the best Grand Slam ever,"* said Wawrinka holding the trophy. *"Last year I had a crazy match, lost it and was crying a lot after the match. In one year a lot happened. Right now I still don't know if I'm dreaming or not, but we'll see tomorrow morning."* I automatically associated that success with those achieved by Andres Gomez, Petr Korda & Thomas Johansson, the examples of players who had plenty of experience and suddenly at the latter stages of their careers, they won the sweetest trophies in tennis. Wawrinka's following major even confirmed my estimation - he lost in Paris already in round one, even though fully confident he'd triumphed on clay in [Monte Carlo](#) (his first Masters 1K title) which put him among the favorites in Paris. What he couldn't do in 2014, he achieved in 2015 - playing in quite specific shorts, he overpowered Djokovic in the Parisian final, he did the same to the Serb one year later in the final at the US Open - three major titles, and three claimed at different venues! A total shocker, Wawrinka known for many years as someone rather a bit behind guys like David Ferrer, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga & Tomas Berdych (each of them reached one major final) suddenly put himself in a rivalry against Andy Murray, the weakest link of the Big 4! Of course Wawrinka couldn't be compared to Murray in terms of major finals, but the Swiss has equalled the achievement of the Scot in the number of titles, and defeated him in the [French Open '17 semifinal](#) - one of the best five-setters I've ever seen, which allows to alternatively look at the best players of the 10s: Big 3, then Murray/Wawrinka, then the rest of the peloton (using the cycling terminology).

Biggest titles (3 majors): Australian Open, [2014](#), Roland Garros [2015](#), US Open [2016](#)

Biggest lost finals: Roland Garros [2017](#)

WILANDER, Mats (Sweden, 1964)

1.

Parallels between Wilander & Bjorn Borg's are staggering. Wilander was not only playing like his eight years older compatriot (with amazing baseline patience on clay; serve-and-volley on grass) winning the biggest titles, he also matured very early tennis-wise and burnt out at a very similar age. It was the year 1982 when Wilander replaced Borg as the potential king of clay. Borg had won the French Open title five times, and decided to suspend his career at the age of 25 - at the same time Wilander appeared in Paris for the first time among professionals, and as an almost 18-year-old boy claimed the title (Borg conquered Paris during his second French Open trip, being of the same age, more or less, in 1974). Wilander played four more finals in the French capital, and he was arguably the most successful clay-court player of the 80s (Ivan Lendl also won French Open three times in five finals; in their mutual meetings on Philipp Chatrier court it was tied 2-2, but I perceive the Swede as a more successful clay-courter given his contribution to the Davis Cup titles on the red surface). Jay Berger being asked in 1988 *"Is Agassi's forehand the biggest weapon in tennis?"*, he replied *"No, it's Wilander's brain"* (btw, they met twice & Berger won both matches easily!). I agree with that statement and think that Wilander could write a better "Winning Ugly" book than Brad Gilbert. When I watch Wilander's archive matches I don't see anything particularly interesting: the serve was just decent, groundstrokes rather moderate as well as Wilander's volleys. Of course everything at high level, but nothing impressive, the forehand was not aesthetically pleasant, actually nothing allowed to expect that this guy would win seven major titles (Wilander's two grass-court Australian triumphs of the years 1983-84, cannot be compared on equal terms to his five other GS titles). So where is the secret to Wilander's stellar career? Very likely in his mind as Berger suggested; Wilander knowing his all limitations, was able to perfectly construct his game-style, and also adjust it to his opponents. Wilander's once said that the legendary [Davis Cup loss](#) to John McEnroe of 1982, gave him more than plenty earlier wins. During that match, after losing the first two sets on a surface that suited McEnroe more, facing the partisan crowd too, the Swede decided to keep the first serve in as long as possible and it changed the trajectory of the match preventing McEnroe's cheap-and-charge attacks in returning games, and Wilander was within two games from winning the longest match in history at the time! One may say that he had a coach beside, regardless of the inventor of the tactical change, there's no doubt that Wilander could keep the concentration at the highest level for a long period of time. His physical preparation was great, he quickly improved his volley skills, accelerated the serve, and polished his backhand slice. His Australian Open '83 triumph wasn't less shocking than his first major title. He had been labelled as a clay-courter, yet within 1.5 years since the Parisian triumph, Wilander could already deliver a full package. It was very helpful in the years to come, nothing great as far as his strokes were concerned, but everything very good, and flexible thinking, constantly analyzing which tools to use and against whom, also changing it throughout the match depending on the situation. The US Open '88 final, a pinnacle of Wilander's career it's a great example of his highly strategic mind. It was a period when he was in great form, but losing the most important finals to Lendl. Even though on hardcourts Wilander was playing in rather defensive mode, he won that final with the help of a constant pressure on Lendl; in the sets 2-5 Wilander was regularly applying the serve-and-volley tactics despite Lendl's piercing

passing-shots. Over the years Wilander figured out that Lendl's backhand return wasn't aggressive, and was approaching the net, targeting only that wing; perhaps the tactics couldn't have been so efficient if the Swede had been doing that permanently... he was doing it wisely, intertwining with conservative serves to Lendl's forehand staying on the baseline behind them, moreover in that match, Wilander decided to keep the ball in play off the backhand side almost entirely with slices. You have to praise a player, who, instead of repeating the same strategy time and time again in vain, counting on luck, tries to propose something contrary to his own style. From purely technical level, I like in Wilander's game his passing-shots - he was hitting the ball much faster being attacked by opponents, with an attitude "from the baseline I can play in moderate pace longer than you, but if you want to attack me better do it with extreme precision, otherwise the ball will come at you much faster." The year 1988 was great - three major titles and Key Biscayne (fifth Slam) - one of the best seasons any player enjoyed in the Open Era, could have been even better if Wilander hadn't lost to his toughest rival ([Miloslav Mecir](#)) in Wimbledon's quarterfinal. There were still matches against more natural grass-court players ahead, but Wilander was in such a terrific form, that he couldn't be written off facing either Stefan Edberg or Boris Becker. After the UO final victory over Lendl, Wilander became no. 1 in the world, he was only 24, but it was already his eighth full season among professionals. *"It's the biggest victory I ever had,"* said Wilander after the final. *"Bigger than my first Paris (French Open) title. It meant so much. A Swede has never won this tournament. I'm going to be No. 1 now. It's definitely the biggest match I have ever played."* In the aftermath, he lost his enthusiasm to train hard, and the will to force himself to constantly think during matches. Never before or after, a player who reached the peak, experienced such a downhill like the Swede in 1989, well, it was still a good year by the standards of the majority of very good players (two major quarterfinals and helping Sweden to play seventh (!) consecutive Davis Cup final, yet for a multiple Grand Slam champion of a calendar year, it was a big failure. Another two years were even worse, in 1992 the disgusted and looking much older than the age would suggest Wilander didn't play at all, he needed to redefine his career. After the comeback in Summer of '93, he was playing more for personal satisfaction; he did something Borg hadn't unfortunately done in 1983. The pressure free Wilander surprised the tennis world twice in 1995 reaching quarter/semifinals in big American events (Key Biscayne & Cincinnati) winning four successive matches in them both. His attitude towards professional tennis perhaps was too careless - between two very good US appearances, Wilander was tested positive for cocaine with his good friend Karel Novacek). In his final '96 season, Wilander played his last ATP final (almost six years after the previous one), also that year he defeated Patrick Rafter, who would soon become one of the best players in the world. The final stages of Wilander's career weren't as nice and worldwide appreciated as in Edberg's case, but the farewell was much more tasty than in case of the third great Swede - Borg.

Biggest titles (7 majors):

Australian Open [1983](#), [1984](#), [1988](#)

Roland Garros [1982](#), [1985](#), [1988](#)

US Open [1988](#)

Davis Cup 1985, [1987](#)

Biggest lost finals (4 majors):

Australian Open [1985](#),
Roland Garros [1983](#), [1987](#)
US Open [1987](#)
Masters [1987](#)

YOUZHNY, Mikhail (Russia)

8.

Youzhny was born to Mikhail, a Soviet army colonel and Lubov, a professional tennis player. Military tradition stayed with him for the entire career, after winning matches he was saluting, covering his head with the "Head" racquet. Like a soldier, he had always short hair, but his style evolved over the years. In the first few years of the professional career he was playing backhand in very similar style to Bjorn Borg & Andrea Gaudenzi, so his swing was double-handed, yet in the last moment before hitting the ball, he was realising the left hand, and it was a difference comparing to the mentioned players who had been realising the left hand in the moment of hitting the ball, so they have to be considered as double-handed players. Youzhny was using a lot of slice, so it helped him to develop a more natural one-handed backhand. He achieved the best result of his career already as a young player. It was the Davis Cup '02 final against France, in Paris when Youzhny replaced Yevgeny Kafelnikov in the deciding rubber. The Russian lost the first two sets, but won another three becoming the first man in the Davis Cup history to achieve such a feat in the deciding fifth rubber of a final. He was close to the Russian Davis Cup team for a few years because in the Davis Cup '95 final he was working as a ball boy. The entire career, Youzhny cooperated with a Russian unemotional coach, Boris Sobkin, who said about his beginnings with Youzhny and his two years older brother Andrei (never played an ATP match) - *"Mischa was all the time breaking racquets and crying. Not so many coaches want to work with a boy with strong character like his. So, they could practise on one court for 15 minutes and then came a member so they must have left court immediately moving to another court. Ten minutes maybe 20 minutes later came another member and like this all day. There was something in Mischa's eyes, a sparkle, maybe, I don't know. Sometimes the eyes tell more than parents. Of course, I did not see Mischa a Top 10 player then. But I could see he had something special."* In 2002, the 20-year-old Youzhny won a big clay-court in Stuttgart, defeating Guillermo Canas in a five-set final trailing 1:4 in the final set. Certainly that triumph made an impact on Samil Tarpishev to give Youzhny a chance in a match that decided about the Davis Cup 02. Nick Bollettieri was praising Youzhny a lot, saying that a bright future was ahead of him. Youzhny - a complete player, of course he enjoyed a great career, advanced to the major semifinals twice (both in New York), but as someone who already as a 20-year-old player had won two dramatic five-setters in important finals, he could have achieved more, it seems. My thoughts go in two directions; the first, purely technical - Youzhny didn't possess a big serve, with his height he should have obtained more points directly behind the serve. I'm quite sceptical about the statistical category of aces, but the fact that he never served at least 20 aces being involved in 39 five-setters is quite telling; another important thing it's his abysmal record against Roger Federer - they faced each other 17 times, and just once (Halle '03 - their fourth meeting) Youzhny was relatively close to win - three points

away. There were only two finals between them (Dubai '07 & Halle '13), but you never know how successful Youzhny could have been in tournaments he lost to Federer at earlier stages, and how those wins could increase his self-esteem. Only one win separated Youzhny from a nice number of 500 main-level wins. Actually he was quite close to achieving that feat, he wanted to play his last tournament in Russian, and in St. Petersburg he lost a balanced three-set second round match to Roberto Bautista. Youzhny was 36-year-old then, lost a status of a Top 100 player after 17 years, with his style demanding to work a lot, I think it was a good decision to leave the chase for the win no. 500. Trivia: Youzhny defeated in two dramatic matches in two consecutive events Novak Djokovic; it happened in 2007, just before Djokovic turned from a gifted youngest to serious threat for Federer & Rafael Nadal. First in Marseille, Youzhny won 6-4, 4-6, 7-6 trailing 1:4 & 4:5 (0/30), then in Rotterdam, the Russian prevailed 3-6, 7-6, 7-5 saving match points in both sets (!), first in the tie-break, then at 4:5 (15/40) in the deciding set.

Biggest title: Davis Cup [2002](#)

ZVEREV, Alexander (Germany, 1997)

3.

After great 90s for the German tennis, when Boris Becker & Michael Stich were top players, and at the end of the 90s appeared the very gifted Nicolas Pietrangeli & Tommy Haas, for many years there was a drought. The best player born in the 80s - Philipp Kohlschreiber - didn't even reach the level of the third best German born in the 70s - Rainer Schuettler. And there's finally a German born youngster of the Russian origin Alexander "Sascha" Zverev. Already in his third main-level event, he [285, wild card] reached the semifinal of a big event (yet not as big as in the 90s & 00s) in his hometown - Hamburg. That was a prognostic that the 17 year-old boy was gifted, and despite being much taller than his older brother Mischa, preferring a different, defensive style. In the following two seasons, Zverev needed to work a lot on his serve, almost two-meter man should gain plenty of points with his serve, and Zverev managed to improve the most important shot in tennis. In 2017 he manifested as someone who would overcome the Big 3 claiming two big titles: in [Rome](#) (Novak Djokovic in the final) and [Montreal](#) (Roger Federer in the final). I was really impressed watching his final vs Federer. He wasn't broken, and committed just one double fault, risking his 2nd serve a lot (at a very good percentage of the 1st serve though - 69%). En route to the Canadian Open final, Zverev had ousted Richard Gasquet in the second round with a 6-3, 4-6, 7-6 victory withstanding three match points. Zverev led 5:4 (40/0) in the 3rd set vs Gasquet, then saved three match points at 5:6, including a 49-stroke rally on the second one, finishing it with a forehand winner! He entered the US Open '17 as one of the favorites to the title, a new star of men's tennis, long awaited savior, who would spoil the "never-ending" dominance of the Big 3. His striking clothing choice recalled memories of Bjorn Borg, who ruled tennis at the turn of 70s/80s in similar attire. I expected him to win the title drawing similarity to 20-year-old Marat Safin who triumphed in New York 2000: big serve, powerful strokes off both wings, the will to win. Borna Coric tamed Zverev's hopes as early as in the second round. Three years later Zverev has no major title under his belt, last

year his status of a potential new big champion was questioned by several defeats against theoretically inferior players. Zverev hired two fitness trainers: Jez Green, who previously worked with Andy Murray, and physio Hugo Grail, who was helping plenty of others as an ATP physiotherapist. There was a "romance" with former best players in the world, Ivan Lendl & Juan Carlos Ferrero, but all efforts still don't help the young German in playing his best tennis when it matters the most - in Grand Slam events. Zverev needed 12 major appearances to reach his first major quarterfinal, another seven to reach [the first semifinal](#). Certainly he has the potential of a Grand Slam champion, but has to find a way to win major matches 3-0 in the first week, to save the energy for the last three matches against potentially more demanding opponents. I noticed some similarities between his career and career of other tall guy with Russian surname - Andrei Medvedev; the Ukrainian was perceived by many as a future No. 1 and multiple Grand Slam champion, but finished his career with just one final, paradoxically in the tournament when no-one expected him to go so far.

Biggest titles: Masters [2018](#)

Biggest lost finals (1 major): US Open [2020](#)