

# Is Tennis Elbow *Passé?*

When Novak Djokovic, well known for his Gumby-like flexibility, walked onto the famed Monte Carlo Masters center court for his semi-final in April with a mummified-looking right wrist taped all the way up his forearm, it registered as the tipping point for the epidemic of wrist injuries on today's pro tour.

Obviously hampered, the Serb would not have nearly enough to overcome a resurgent Roger Federer, a tour elder at 32 and incredulously now #2 in tiny Switzerland, losing in straights on the majestic red brick dust. He then was forced to withdraw from the week's following event, the Madrid Open, as the 2014 French Open loomed.



Another one bites the dust. Hopefully in his case it's only a small taste of the wrist malaise that has steadily crept into the so-called "modern era" of professional tennis, particularly on, but not limited to, the men's side.

Back in the day it used to be about elbows when players, sans the off-court trainers, massage therapists, and nutritionists employed by today's big budget players, wielded heavy chunks of small-headed wood and metal sticks pitted against slower, heavier balls compared to today's lightweight cannons and juiced balls. No wonder.

Tony Roche, one of the world's best in Rod Laver's time, who eventually became one of Federer's early mentors, once famously sought out a Filipino faith healer to rid him of a debilitating tennis elbow that was threatening his game. Such was the quixotic state of solutions — surgery could be career-ending at that time — for the affliction of the day.

Of course backs and shoulders are, and have always been, at risk as well for anyone playing tennis. Maria Sharapova's comeback from what was thought to be career-ending shoulder surgery astonished both her peers and the pundits. And the new Swiss #1, Stan Wawrinka, took full advantage of Rafael Nadal's ailing back — the same infirmity that derailed Federer's entire 2013 campaign — in this year's Down Under slam final in Melbourne.

Hip problems have not been absent from the mix when it comes to ending great runs and even careers. Both Guga Kuerten, the ever-





smiling Brazilian of French Open fame, and Magnus Norman, a stoic Swede who is now Wawrinka's brain trust, fell from world #1 rankings as the open stance, drive-off-the-back-leg forehand came of age, putting undue loads on the right hip, which is mostly solved today by more sophisticated training methods.

Nonetheless, the pervasiveness of the current wrist outbreak is attention-getting and of great concern on both tours.

The first big hint of trouble came in 2010, right after Juan Martin del Potro broke through the Federer-Nadal-Djokovic triumvirate to win the 2009 US Open title. He then missed an entire year recovering from right wrist surgery. Now, after clawing his way back to the top echelon of the game, he is facing surgery again, this time the left one, the driving force on his two-handed backhand.

The women have not been immune. The big-serving, young British lefty Laura Robson recently went under the knife on her dominant wrist and will miss her hometown slam in London. Conversely, like del Potro, current world #14 and former #1 Caroline Wozniacki and #17 Sloane Stephens, America's top prospect, have either withdrawn from events or played hurt with two-handed backhand, top-hand wrist problems.



Enter Dr. Richard Berger, an orthopedic surgeon at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., who has emerged as the pros' wrist surgeon of choice, having previously operated on del Potro and now Robson.

Berger's take on the physical stress of the game being played today is revealing: "Tennis is one of those sports that, honestly, the wrist is one of the structures at most risk because the force of contact with the ball is transmitted directly through the wrist, and very often, with an element of torque as the player attempts to place higher and higher degrees of spin on the ball."

He goes on, "There's such a tremendous transfer of total body energy. This energy springs from the legs, up through the spine, down the arm to the forearm and across the wrist to the racket. At some point, either through genetics or the playing style, the structural integrity of any of those structures is exceeded. For any

given individual, the force is greater than the structures are capable of withstanding"

Berger's real kicker comes with this realization: "I think that with the technology available for training, the regimens that these players go through in their daily routines for fitness, you're getting close to superhuman capacity. Again, the ligaments aren't really able to keep up with that because they don't change."

Okay, so you are not a finely tuned professional player, but, nonetheless, it's all still relative. Most club players stress their bodies not through high intensity, off-court daily training programs, or through match play, mano-a-mano, 25-shot singles rallies. Their physical stress is a by-product of poor technique, mainly preparing the racket repeatedly late for ground strokes.

Couple that with their penchant for playing with oversized, head-heavy, thick-beamed war clubs – a non-solution for inefficient mechanics – which are unwieldy, lack maneuverability, and have grips that are often dangerously too small, and you have a game that puts wrists, elbows, shoulders and backs all at risk, not to mention the resulting out-of-control shot making.

As a senior player still going strong, I'm playing with a lightweight, 9.2-ounce mid-plus 98, a fairly stiff, medium-beamed frame that's evenly balanced. Just hit the "easy" button. It's easy to control and readily maneuverable, especially when jammed or at full stretch. No pain and plenty of gain. No chronic injuries, and that's factoring in the gazillion balls I've struck over the past 55 years.

Beginning very early on I was lucky in that I was taught an essential core fundamental of striving to never be late preparing for shots, and it has paid big dividends over decades.

Here's a few recommendations, especially for the 2.0, 2.5, 3.0, 3.5 crowd, and even some 4.0s: Consider at least trying a few demos that are more user friendly, ones that will stress your body and appendages far less. Start monitoring the timing of your forehand and backhand take backs – ideally fully loaded by the approaching ball's bounce. And realistically assess your playing style. Trying to emulate the degree of topspin that today's pros put on the ball — Nadal leads the league with up to 50 revolutions per second on his lasso forehand — with their extreme grips and roll over, makes sling shot wrist action unrealistic.

Comfortable grip positions that generate moderate topspin off both wings, or a bit of underspin on one-handed backhands, can still get the job done very nicely in Clubland, and be far kinder, gentler along with a lowered difficulty factor for anyone, especially those who can actually remember Tony Roche.

Think about it. 



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