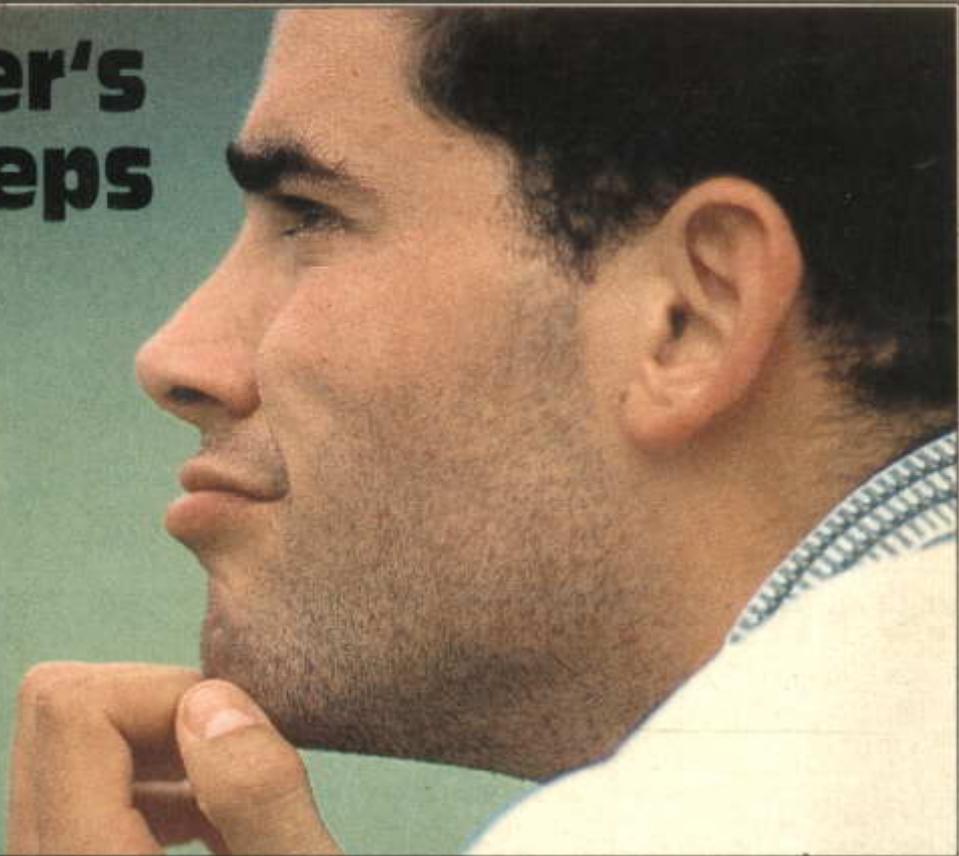


In Laver's footsteps



IN sport, there are champions, great champions, and then there are the legends. Five minutes past 4 p.m. on the centre court at Wimbledon on the third day of July, Pete Sampras crossed the line dividing the good and the great as he beat Goran Ivanisevic in the shortest Wimbledon final (an hour and 55 minutes) since John McEnroe outclassed Jimmy Connors in 1984.

When McEnroe beat Connors 10 years ago for the loss of just four games, the outrageously gifted left-hander crossed another line – the one dividing greatness and genius. But that was a different kind of genius. Now, it seems it's just a matter of time before Sampras leaves the realm of the great and moves in with the legends. To be sure, we are not talking here about a McEnroe, who became legendary merely because of his incomparable racquet skills. We are talking about uncomplicated champions who combined great skills with hard work and achieved their full potential – men such as Rod Laver.

For, from the time he was 12 years old, Sampras has had just one goal – to try and play like the great Australians of the 1960s did and to find a place alongside the Lavers and the Rosewalls. After watching him win four of the last five Grand Slam titles, few would discount Sampras's chances of finding himself a prominent place in the game's hall of fame. Still only 22, he already has five Grand Slam titles and the world seems to be at his feet.

At Wimbledon, almost all the former champions this writer spoke to rated Sampras as the greatest all round champion since Laver. Men like the colourful Romanian, Ion Tiriac and his friend and former team-mate, the irrepressible Ilie Nastase, said McEnroe was the most exciting player they had watched. But Tiriac was quick to point out that the New Yorker did not have two of Sampras's big assets – his power and his temperament. So, now, it doesn't seem to be a question of where Sampras goes from here. It merely seems one of how many

more Grand Slam titles he will win before he quits.

A man with a keen sense of history, Sampras is quite aware of his place in the sport's record books. He might be a very simple and modest man but he also knows that when he plays at his best nobody in the world can beat him and he knows where he wants to be ranked in the game's history when he leaves. In conversation, Sampras comes across as an intelligent, decent young man who is very comfortable with his own image and lifestyle.

Following are excerpts from interviews with the champion at Wimbledon:

Question: Was the final easier than you thought it would be? You had said that Ivanisevic was the most dangerous player for you.

Answer: I have always had a very difficult time playing big lefties. It has given me a lot of trouble. The thing I did in the final was to stand a little further back to give myself a little bit more time to get his serve back. That's really the big part of the match.

Q: Is there any difference between how you felt after winning last year and how you're feeling now after the successful defence?

A: I think it's about the same. The first one is big, something you will never forget. Maybe the second is a little bit sweeter.

Q: You are only 22. This is your second title at Wimbledon and you have already won five Grand Slam titles. How long do you think you can dominate the game?

A: As many years as I can. As long as I am healthy and I am enjoying game, it's great. Hopefully I can stay on top for as long as my body can handle it.

Q: You are on the verge of becoming a great champion. What do you think it takes to be a great champion?

A: You need some talent, you need hard work, you need

discipline and the determination to keep trying to get better. Sure, I am the No. 1 and I won last year. But if I wanted to win this year, I had to have that burning desire to keep on getting better. You know, you need all these ingredients to be a real champion.

Q: Pete, you have often used the word "class" here and elsewhere in times. What do you mean by class? Do you have a clear concept of your place in history?

A: What I mean by 'class' is to win in a nice way. I don't like to throw my racquet or yell at the umpires. I will do that now and again, but you won't see me doing that too often. I like the old Australians. They won with a bit of grace and that's something I'd like to emulate.

Q: You often talk about history, and about watching Laver when you young. How does it feel to be a part of history now. What does it mean to you?

A: It feels like I am getting closer, I am getting there. The Grand Slams wins that I've had are what can prove to people and to myself that may be I can go down in the history books. And that's one thing all the top players in history have tried to do. Winning the Grand Slams is the answer. That's the best I can give.

Q: You had a chance to spend some time with Laver in London. What do you think of his as a man, as a player?

A: As a player, obviously the results speak for themselves. As a person, he's really a nice guy. Talking to him you wouldn't think he is one of the greats of all time. As a kid he was someone I looked up to. I have got to know him pretty well over the last couple of years. He is a credit to the game, a class guy, someone I have always tried to emulate.

Q: Did he offer any useful advice?

A: He was comparing the game in his day's to the game today. We enjoyed talking about his days, about how he played. But he didn't give me any technical advice, about my strokes or anything. We didn't sit down and talk about my tennis, but hopefully one day we can.

Q: You have seen tapes of Laver at his peak when you were young. Do you think if he had today's equipment and if he was in his peak now he'd be one of the top champions?

A: Absolutely, I think he would. I think may be champions are born and not made. If he was playing today's game with the technology and everything, he'd be at the top of the game. No question about that.

Q: How do you think you would have fared against Laver in his prime?

A: If there is a dream match, that would be one. I really have no idea. It certainly would be a great experience to play Laver in his prime or McEnroe and Connors. I played those guys when they were past their prime. That's the kind of fantasy match I would like to have played. But, obviously, I was born a bit too late.

Q: You have talked about wanting to be remembered as the best and about how you are striving for that level. At Wimbledon, the great champions have won several in a row. Is this the Sampras era now?

A: I would like to win this tournament as many times as I can. This is the biggest tournament we have. It's the tournament I've always watched as a kid and wanted to win more than any other tournament in the world. That's why it's special; you know, it's the only big event on grass that we have. It's a bit like the Masters in golf. It's the grand daddy of them all.

Q: You won one match in your first three visits to Wimbledon. Now, in your last three visits, you have lost

just one match. What brought the turnaround?

A: When I first came here, everybody expected me to play well on grass but I had a few problems, technical and tactical. The one thing that's helped me was the return of serve. I learnt that you have to shorten your backswing. That's the biggest problem I had in the first couple of years.

Then I hired Tim Gullikson who is a pretty good grass court player himself and I've been able to make the breakthrough on grass. I got to the semis in 1992 and I have won two years, so it's getting better and better.

Q: After you beat Michael Chang in the quarter-finals, he said that two years ago you had a few weaknesses, but now there are absolutely none and that he thought you were at the peak of your career. Do you feel that way yourself?

A: I feel that if I play my best I am very tough to beat. I have filled a few holes in my game. I still make stupid errors but mostly I have cut them out. I am concentrating really well. I feel like I can stay back with the Agassis and the Couriers and serve and volley with the Beckers and the Edbergs. I feel I can play both games if I really have to.

Q: Chang also said that you have matured tremendously as a person and as a player. Can you describe how you've grown mentally and matured?

A: I turned pro at 16 and moved out of my parents' home at 17 and got a place for myself in Florida. It was really like going away to college. I didn't have my parents around me too much and I've been on my own for the last three or four years.

Maybe now I have more confidence in myself. But I am just 22 and doing something that is very abnormal. So you just have to understand the situation and grow up much quicker. And I think the fact that I moved out of my parents' home at 17 has been really good for me and my tennis.

Q: Away from the tennis court, are you a perfectionist? Does everything in your life have to be right? I mean, do things have to be tidy in your flat

and so on?

A: I am pretty organised. I like to be as organised as possible. I like to have everything taken care of and just play my tennis and concentrate on giving my best on court. I leave the other stuff to others and let them worry about that.

But it doesn't annoy me when people get things wrong. I am not that much of a perfectionist. I understand people are going to make mistakes. I am not obsessed with perfection off court. On court, yes.

Q: A lot of people think Wimbledon tennis, especially in the final stages, is boring now. Big serve and volley players, no rallies, no thrills. What do you think can be done about it?

A: The players are getting bigger, the court is quick and when people like Goran and myself play there are not going to be too many rallies. But I thought the tennis in the final was very high class. Maybe you didn't see a lot of long rallies, but it's tough to hit a serve that hard in a matter of three or four inches.

Well, you can put a clay court down to slow it down but that is not going to happen. I remember watching Newcombe play a big German fellow. They didn't have a lot of rallies. I think the fact that people saw Borg win here so many years made them imagine that there will be lot of rallies. But with big serve and volley players like Goran and myself, you are not going to see long rallies. That's the bottom line. ■

Nirmal Shekar

