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With Australian Title, Federer Returns From Vulnerable to Invincible

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MELBOURNE, Australia — How can you make breaking records look so easy? Ask Roger Federer. He did it Sunday night, winning his 16th Grand Slam title with a straight-sets victory over Andy Murray and re-establishing his grip on tennis supremacy.



With Federer adding to his record for men's Grand Slam singles titles, there is little doubt his place in the history books is secure. By winning his fourth Australian Open, Federer may have his best opportunity to join Don Budge (1938) and Rod Laver (1962, '69) in taking down the sport's holy grail: a Grand Slam, a sweep of the four major tournaments in the same year.

Three times, Federer has won three out of four but was unable to conquer the clay surfaces of the French Open. Two of those times, in 2006 and 2007, he made it to the final in Paris only to be dashed by his great rival and a wizard of Roland Garros, Rafael Nadal, a four-time French Open champion.

But Federer finally won his first French Open last year, when Nadal lost in the fourth round. Now Nadal is out for at least a month tending to a tear in his right knee that contributed to his retiring in the quarterfinals against Murray. There is no guarantee Nadal will return to top form for Roland Garros in May after a year battling tendinitis in his knees and other nagging injuries. He has not beaten a top-10 player since November.

"I mean, it's something if it happens, it does, it's great; but it's not something that's like my No. 1 goal," said Federer, who has made eight consecutive Grand Slam finals dating to the 2008 French Open, winning four of them. "It's the same as I haven't put a number on how many Grand Slams I want to try to win. Whatever happens, happens.

"You know, I really want to try to enjoy, you know, my end to my career, because I've reached already so many goals I thought were never possible. "

But Federer's 6-3, 6-4, 7-6 (11) dusting of Murray at Melbourne Park should make the upstarts on the tour insecure. They have said for months that Federer, 28, was distracted, aging and vulnerable



and that 8 to 10 of them were ready to knock him off his throne.

The 22-year-old Murray, who was seeded fifth, seemed in position to do it. He had beaten Federer in 6 of their 10 previous meetings. He was playing phenomenal tennis here, dominating Nadal before he retired and losing only one set before the final.

But Murray was reduced to tears after being outclassed by the top-ranked Federer. Murray again carried the hopes of British fans who have been waiting 74 years, since Fred Perry captured the 1936 United States Championships, for a countryman to win a Grand Slam event.

“I congratulate Roger on all of his accomplishments, and to keep doing it year after year is incredible, and tonight, he was a lot better than me,” Murray said, choking on his words at the trophy presentation. “I can cry like Roger; it’s just a shame I can’t play like him.”

Last year, Federer lost a five-set clash with Nadal here and was so crushed by the defeat that he cried at the trophy ceremony. There was no crying for him Sunday.

“I’m over the moon winning this thing,” he said. “I’ve played some of the best tennis of my life over the last two weeks.”

Federer has made 18 of the last 19 Grand Slam finals and 22 over all, another record. Some tour veterans have examined Federer’s game and found the talk that it is wanting ridiculous.

Lleyton Hewitt, a former No. 1, has played him 24 times and lost the last 15, including a straight-sets defeat here in the fourth round. He says he does not understand the doubts about Federer.

“He’s the limit at the moment,” Hewitt said. “He’s the No. 1 player in the world. Everyone says it wasn’t an absolutely great year for him, and he still won two Grand Slams and lost in two finals in five sets in the other two.”

This was Murray’s second Grand Slam final; he lost to Federer in straight sets at the 2008 United States Open. Struggling with his serve, Murray got off to a slow start Sunday, playing his best tennis in the third set.

But serving for the set at 5-3, he was broken. With another chance to force a fourth set in a marathon tie breaker, Murray blew five set points with mis-hit shots and poorly timed gambles.

As badly as he wanted to win his first major, Murray conceded he had a long way to go to narrow the gap with Federer.

“I think his level is a lot more consistent in the Slams,” Murray said. “Maybe, you know, in the other tournaments, he tries a few more things out. But, you know, the shots that he hits great all year round, they’re still great. He just makes fewer unforced errors, I think, than he does the rest of the year.”

Just as Federer is not putting a number on how many more major tournaments he could win, he also is not putting a timetable on retirement. He acknowledged that he had a special talent, remained highly motivated and had no plans on going anywhere.

“I always knew I had it in my hand,” said Federer, who won his first Grand Slam title since becoming a father of twin girls last summer. “The question is, do I have it in my mind and in my legs, you know. That’s something I had to work extremely hard at. Now I feel like obviously I’m being pushed a great deal by the new generation coming up. I always feel sort of tennis changes sort of every five years.

“When I came on tour, matches were played very differently. It was more of a bluff game, guys serving well, but there was always a weakness you could go to. Today, that doesn’t exist anymore. I think that’s also thanks to guys like Murray. They’ve made me a better player, because I think this has been one of my finest performances, you know, in a long time, or maybe forever.”

An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that Roger Federer has won 16 straight Grand Slam championships. He has won 16, but not in a row.