

Biting back

The star Spaniard tennis player Rafael Nadal on bouncing back after injury and why he doesn't intend to give up the sport he loves just yet, as **John Murray** reports

The end of the 2014 tennis season had an all too familiar feeling for Rafael Nadal.

While Novak Djokovic and Roger Federer were celebrating at the ATP World Tour Finals and Davis Cup respectively, their old rival was marooned on the treatment table.

Over his career, the Spaniard has suffered nearly as many injuries as he's won trophies. Take your pick from a broken ankle, injured back, shoulder, foot, left or right knee, and that was before the most recent additions to the list – a combination of a damaged wrist and appendicitis restricted him to seven matches from July onwards. Yet while he was once again forced to sit out a key part of the tennis calendar, you can bet Nadal lay on his hospital bed plotting his return to the summit of the tennis world.

"I have to recover what I've lost during the last six months. It's a nice challenge to overcome and I'm motivated, he says. "It's always a bit tough starting off after a few difficult months without any continuity. If you train well and you feel right physically, the process is much quicker.

"In a few days you pick up the speed of the ball again, the movement in the legs and, if I do good work at home and I play well at the start of the year, that could be enough to arrive in Australia well prepared."

That is his next target – Australia, or specifically Melbourne, for the 2015

Australian Open at the end of January. It is the first grand slam tournament of the year and, for Nadal, the chance to avenge his defeat to Stanislas Wawrinka in the 2014 final when injury – once again – scuppered his chances. However, while his recovery from his latest setback is progressing well, the Spaniard is well aware there will be some other formidable obstacles blocking his path in Melbourne – namely, the world's top two ranked players.

"I think Federer has finished the year very well, the same as Djokovic. They are going to start again strongly and I [will start] from almost zero, with more problems," he explains. "What I must do is play well, prepare, and when the moment comes, give myself opportunities. If one of those is in the final rounds, anything could happen."

Born on 3 June 1986 in Manacor on the island of Mallorca, Nadal – or 'Rafa' as he is universally known – has been part of the sporting world before he could even walk. Sport oozes through the veins of the Nadal family. Most notably,

his uncle, Miguel Angel Nadal starred for FC Barcelona and Spain, while Uncle Toni became a professional tennis player. And it was Toni who first spotted his nephew's aptitude with a racquet when he was just three years old. Soon afterwards, observing the young boy's unusual technique of hitting forehand shots with two hands, Toni suggested he should play left-handed as that would give him an advantage against future opponents. It was the first of many valuable pieces of advice from the man who remains his coach to this day.

"Toni was tough on me right from the start, tougher than on the other children. He demanded a lot of me, pressured me hard," admits Nadal. "I trusted him, and so I knew deep down that he was doing what he thought was best for me. Everything I have achieved in the game of tennis, all the ▶

Pictured: Spanish-born Rafael Nadal has been playing tennis since he was three years old

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opportunities I have had, are thanks to him. I'm especially grateful to him for having placed so much emphasis from the very beginning on making sure I kept my feet on the ground and never became complacent."

By the time he was 15, it wasn't just the people of Manacor who were talking about the next big thing in Spanish tennis. In his first ITF junior event, Nadal reached the semi-finals of the boys' tournament at Wimbledon. Back in London 12 months later, he became the youngest player to reach the men's third round since Boris Becker. At 18, he set another record as the youngest player to win a singles match in the Davis Cup final, stunning world No.2 Andy Roddick.

Things got even better in 2005 when he won 11 titles, with eight alone coming on clay, including the French Open on his debut appearance. No teenager has ever won so many tournaments in a season, and the world's media quickly anointed him the 'King of Clay' – a crown that he has worn with pride ever since. He has won the French Open an unprecedented nine times and boasts an overall

record in Paris of 67 wins and one loss (for the trivia lovers out there, that sole defeat was inflicted by Sweden's Robin Soderling).

Unsurprisingly, the Spaniard has a soft spot for the red surface. "It's my favourite part of the season. They are tournaments where I really feel I have great memories," he says. "I feel comfortable in every city, in every tournament."

The inaugural French Open success also marked the first time Nadal bit a grand slam trophy. In what has become a traditional post-match celebration, the Spaniard posed for photographers while sinking his teeth into the trophy. It must be a constant source of worry for his dentist – up to the end of 2014 he had won 64 singles titles.

While Nadal is famed for his prowess on clay, his most revered success came on the green grass of Wimbledon in 2008. Having lost the final to Federer in 2006 and 2007, he was determined to make it third time lucky. "The final of 2008 was the biggest match of my life," he recalls. "My defeat in 2007, which went to five sets, left me utterly destroyed. I wept after ➤

Main: Nadal has won the French Open an impressive nine times
Left: It was his Uncle Toni who first spotted his talent with a racquet





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Left: Nadal and his long-term girlfriend Xisca Perello
Below: Sinking his teeth into his trophies has become a trademark for the tennis player

that loss. Tears of disappointment and self-recrimination. One year later I was determined that whatever else gave way, this time my head would not."

What followed was arguably the finest match the tennis world has seen. For five sets and five hours, with three interruptions for rain breaks (in true Wimbledon tradition), the two threw everything at each other. At 9.15pm, in near darkness, Nadal finally emerged victorious after Federer dumped a forehand into the net. The new champion collapsed onto his back, almost in disbelief.

"It was impossible to describe how I felt in that moment," he says. "It's my favourite tournament. It is a dream to play in this tournament but to win – I could never have imagined."

Through all the success, Nadal has always kept his feet on the ground. "My ambition is to be a very, very normal guy. A very humble guy. To play tennis, which I love and want to be the best [at]," he says. "And when I'm done, I just want to be at home with my friends."

For the early years of his career, home was exactly where he

remained – living in an apartment with his entire family, including his grandparents on the ground floor. His girlfriend of eight years, Xisca Perello, is also from Mallorca. Despite all the riches that come his way, he is careful not to flout his wealth – when he was given a Mercedes for winning one tournament, it went straight into the garage. Instead, he drove another less flashy car around the island.

That humble nature has never gone away. Nadal behaves impeccably on and off the court, always happy to stop for a photo with fans and even

known to interrupt practice to play with spectators keen for a rally – sometimes to Uncle Toni's frustration. Clearly, his relationship with his fans holds huge importance. "It means a lot to me – all of the positive energy that I receive from the fans, from people close to me, to the team or the family," he reveals. "In the lower moments, it's very important to feel the love of the people."

With a fanatical fan base at home and overseas, Nadal is keen to give his own support to others. In 2007, the Rafa Nadal Foundation was launched to help socially discriminated children and teenagers through educational programmes and sport. Then in November, he announced a new project – the opening of a tennis academy in Manacor in 2016. As well as 18 tennis courts, the academy will have a school, various sports fields and apartments for athletes and teams. "The main thing is to educate them as

persons," he says. "This project that we have been working on for many years is finally a reality."

Nadal intends to work at the academy when his career ends. Not that retirement is on the horizon just yet. At 28, he remains one of the sport's finest players, and not only on clay; he has enjoyed success on all surfaces – be it hard-court, grass or indoor. And now, with 14 grand slam wins to his name, he trails Federer, the player whom many believe to be the greatest of them all, by just three. With five years in hand on his older rival, could the Spaniard – provided he stays injury-free – overtake the Swiss star and become the most successful grand slam champion ever? "It's not a source of motivation for me. I'll follow my own path," Nadal says. "Then when my career is over, we'll count. I don't really care that much about the records."

Nadal is too modest to divulge any more about his own hopes, so best to leave the answer to the record-holder himself. "Could Rafa eclipse my record?" asks Federer. "Yeah, absolutely." ■

