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Alexander Zverev wants to be a part of it. His big game temperament has inspired double-figure ATP tour titles, but does he have the killer instinct to win a Grand Slam? The spotlight will be on him at the 2019 US Open

Alexander Zverev is a very good tennis player. But he is not yet great. The 6'6" German blue-eyed giant did not enjoy a strong start to 2019. He may have the scalps of Roger Federer, Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal in his locker room, but Zverev is no bulletproof 22-year-old. He remains as vulnerable as anybody on tour.

By his own admission, Zverev struggles to leave his personal life behind when he crosses the white lines. And while emotion may be the maker of many great sports stars, its affects are only positive when channelled. Boundaries become even more blurred for Zverev, who is surrounded by family on and off court. To this point, his mother, father and brother (fellow professional Mischa), have supported and inspires Alexander Zverev, but only he can work on mental fortitude.

In the same way that Andy Murray's former fitness coach, Jez Green has slowly built Zverev's slight frame into a robust powerhouse, 'Sascha' as he is fondly nicknamed, needs to build resilience upstairs.

Within the space of a couple of months, his coach and father, Alexander Snr, fell ill and stopped traveling with the team. Now interim coach Ivan Lendl can't travel due to a pollen allergy. Zverev is understood to have split

with his girlfriend, Olga Sharypova, and he is in a legal dispute with former agent Patricio Apey. "In sports sometimes it's like this," says Zverev.

"Sometimes you go through the best time in your life, like at the last year's ATP Finals in London, sometimes that does not work.

"But when you leave those stages, you think you will be doing better and hopefully, that will be better for me. I have to win one or two close matches, then things will be better. It's important to find my game again."

Zverev's game did suffer as a result of the bumpy start to 2019, but he's a fighter. At the end of last year, he overcame an opening match straight-sets loss to Novak Djokovic at the ATP Finals in London to beat Marion Cilic, John Isner and Roger Federer, before exacting revenge on Djokovic in the final, all without dropping a set.

A straight-sets defeat to Milos Raonic in the Australian Open fourth round was followed by a loss in the final of the Mexican Open to Nick Kyrgios, before Zverev crashed out early in Indian Wells, Miami, Morocco, Monte Carlo, Barcelona, Munich, Madrid and Italy. Perhaps at the lowest ebb of his short career to date, and with the French Open looming, he won the Geneva Open and battled through three five-setters to reach a quarter-final date with Djokovic.

Zverev might be unbeaten in five-set matches at Roland Garros, and he joked in his press conference that he needs to understand winning in less than five sets is a possibility, but the truth is he should not be taken to five sets by such inferior opposition. He was weary going into the quarter final and Djokovic dispatched him in straight sets. Zverev has to find the killer instinct to go further. He tries not to have a favoured surface, but the hardcourt season and the US Open beckon, and with his height and athleticism, the pace at Flushing Meadows suits.

When Zverev was young, his mother was the primary coach while his father was focused on coaching his brother. "I think I have pretty good technique, which my mum did at a young age," he says.

"So credit to her for that. My backhand, in particular, is 100 per cent down to my mum."

While his mother had a more relaxed teaching style, his father "had a very Soviet way of doing

physical training sessions" that involved doing timed drills for fixed numbers of repetitions. Zverev's coaches thereafter pushed him to work on a riskier, more aggressive playing style built around hitting the ball with pace and finishing points quickly, contrary to how he played as a young teen when his style centred around being an "unbelievable fighter" from the baseline; in part because he was too slow to go to the net.

Initially, Zverev struggled to change his playing style. He "made a lot of errors" and lost to opponents who excelled at keeping points alive. However, his father stuck with this strategy, saying, "we must practice fast tennis, aggressive tennis. If you lose today, it's no big deal. You must think about the future."

Occasionally, Zverev relapses into his old approach to tennis, but he continues to fight and becomes sharper every year. One only has to look at the average age of his adversaries who, prior to Wimbledon 2019, have won the last 10 Grand Slams (Nadal, 33, Federer, 37, Djokovic, 32) to know that this 22-year-old will have his time. Zverev, however, is not used to waiting. In December 2018, he became the youngest player to win the ATP Finals since Djokovic in 2008. He was also the first German to win since 1995 when Boris Becker triumphed in ▶

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Frankfurt. A young, blonde-haired, blue-eyed German bursting onto the scenes in his teens naturally draws Becker comparisons.

"In a tough moment you can find the right key, but I think getting less pressure and attention may help him", said Becker.

"He has been the front runner for a while but it seems he hasn't rounded his game off enough. When the pressure ramps up at the big ones, he gets a little passive. He psyches himself out. The pressure so far has got to him."

Zverev had not even been conceived when Becker won his last Major, in Melbourne in 1996. The young German grew up worshipping Roger Federer and, with Mischa almost ten years his senior, Zverev met the great Swiss – and much of 21st century tennis royalty – as a kid. 'I got [Federer's] autograph and he said, "Well, maybe if you work hard, one day we might play against each other somewhere,"' Zverev recounts.

Left: Zverev wins a first
ATP 500 Series event, beating
Kevin Anderson in Washington
DC in 2017 **Below:** Zverev
rubbing shoulders with today's
greats at a charity badminton
tournament in New York

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A little over a decade later and Zverev claimed his second Masters title at the 2017 Canadian Open, defeating Federer. "This one against Roger is something so special for me because he was always a great idol growing up for me," said Zverev upon winning.

"The greatest player of all time, beating him in a final, not just any final but in the final of a Masters 1000, is amazing."

Mischa Zverev says of the boyhood Sascha that he would never want to leave the court unless he won the match; "he would not understand or accept that he was losing". ►





"When I was growing up I played a lot of different sports," Zverev Jnr said.

"There was a time when I was playing field hockey, tennis and soccer at the same time. I was actually quite good at all of those sports. My field hockey team were German champions and my football team were Hamburg champions. But quitting the other sports to focus on tennis was my decision."

After winning the boys' singles title at the 2014 Australian Open, Zverev shifted his focus to his professional career, only playing in pro events the rest of the year.

Above: Zverev in action during his 2018 US Open campaign

He struggled initially, failing to qualify for the main draw at his first five events of the season and he did not win a main draw match until he recorded a single victory at his tenth event of the year.

Zverev's breakthrough came during the 2016 grass court season at the Halle Open in Germany, where he upset Federer in the semi-finals, ending the Swiss' streak of ten consecutive appearances in the final while competing at the tournament. He was also the first teenager to defeat Federer since Andy Murray almost a decade earlier.

Zverev lost in the final to veteran compatriot Florian Mayer but broke into the top 30 where

he stayed for the remainder of the season.

In 2017, Zverev defeated Djokovic in the Rome Masters final to become the youngest Masters champion since Djokovic himself a decade earlier, and the first such champion born in the 1990s. With the title, he also entered the top 10 for the first time.

Zverev then defeated Roger Federer in the final to become the first player outside of the Big Four to win multiple Masters titles in the same season since Argentine David Nalbandian in 2007.

He capped off an excellent clay court season by reaching his first Grand Slam quarter-final at the 2018 French Open, but failed to

make it past the third round at Wimbledon and the US Open that followed.

He fired former world number one Juan Carlos Ferrero following the Australian Open. Ivan Lendl, another former world number one, now coaches Zverev, but he is struggling to travel.

"Now I kind of took over and do everything myself," says Zverev.

"It's a learning experience. But I think once you go through that, like I am now, you'll come out much stronger and much better."

Perhaps Alexander Zverev has now adopted the grit he needs to be a true champion. And the US Open in New York could be his first real shot at the bigtime. ■