

Is Novak Djokovic Likeable Enough?

Daniel A. Hill

“Coming from a small Eastern European country with a recent painful past affects one’s popularity rating.” — Marion Bartoli, former Wimbledon winner, on Novak Djokovic

Are you ready for a word you almost surely don’t know and yet it may define your life as a sports fan? About two-thirds of Americans are *infracaninophiles*, meaning we love, admire and root for the underdog. I tend to be that kind of sports fan myself, although I also often can’t resist rooting for the champions whose driving ambition and accomplishments inspire awe. Either way, coming as he does from an obscure part of Europe the all-time tennis great Novak Djokovic *should* be my cup of tea and yet... and yet... I’m ambivalent about the Djoker, a feeling I share with more than a few tennis fans.

By comparison, who’s always been easy to adore? Roger Federer, the eternal fan favorite. Throughout his career the guy was lauded as a genius on court, a ballet dancer who embodied finesse, grace, beauty, and magic. Federer’s smooth strokes, his seeming *lack of effort*, and his panther-like career dominance combined with his gentle doe-like eyes lift “F” into the stratosphere of being simply and utterly irresistible.

Nor does it hurt that Roger hails from Switzerland. Yes, I suppose that country has its detractors. In Orson Welles’ movie *The Third Man*, Harry Lime (what a name!) has his doubts, observing that “in Italy for 30 years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder, and bloodshed, but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Renaissance.” What has Switzerland produced? According to Mr. Lime, 500 years of “brotherly love,” leading to nothing more than “The cuckoo clock.” Fans of Roger, however, can take that insult in stride. After all, the movie was released 32 years before our beloved Genius was born in Basel, Switzerland to a Swiss-German dad and an Afrikaner mom.

If Roger is tennis royalty, the king, then Rafael Nadal is surely the sport’s crown prince. The Spaniard from Majorca also has fans everywhere. Sure, the on-court spectacle is different in Rafa’s case. For starters, he looks more like a boxer or an NFL linebacker. And then to watch him play is akin to witnessing a boa constrictor snake slowly but surely squeeze the life out of his latest victim across the net. Yes, Rafa is *all-effort*, all the time, and yet... and yet... we love him, too, despite the endless nervous tics and superstitions that cloud but can’t obscure the Spaniard’s superb mixture of humility and lethal prowess.

Despite these two great rivals, however, Djokovic has by now cemented his place as the male GOAT of Wimbledon’s pasture and every other court, en masse. Add up the number of Grand Slam trophies, weeks at No 1 in the ATP Rankings, Masters 1000 titles, and so forth and you’ve got... ambivalence. What exactly are we to make of the Djoker? In 1375, the short-lived Serbian empire of Dusan the Mighty popped into existence. Surely, the Djoker is greater and will have more staying power than Dusan the Mighty but what will it take for legions of tennis fans to unabashedly herald Djoker the Almighty’s reign?

Speaking (endlessly) of almighty Djokovic, **here is what we see of him on court** versus what history tells us is going on behind the curtain of the Serbian’s psyche. **First up are the Djoker’s two signature facial expressions. Take careful note, dear fans, of just how wide his eyes go. And don’t overlook how the Djoker responds to a challenge. Then his chin thrusts upwards, causing his mouth to form an upside smile** from the guy who’s too hungry for greatness to ever be truly happy for more than the time it takes to lift another trophy.

Welcome to my analysis not only as an avid tennis fan who has been playing the sport for half a century by now but also, more importantly, as an emotional intelligence (EQ) expert who’s been interviewed on Tennis Channel by Mary Carillo. Why? Well, my certified ability to decode players’ expressions enables me to say what the emotions on display likely signify.

The eyes going wide bring victory born of being hyper alert. Djokovic joins Andre Agassi in being the other greatest serve-returner in the history of men’s tennis because the Djoker is always ready. When your eyes go wide, you see more. More specifically, you can see the tennis ball hurtling toward you at upwards of 120 to 130 miles per hour. If you’re Djokovic, you can then meet the assault and turn it back. Eyes wide open signal the emotions of anger, surprise, and fear. The underlying dynamic then is one of seeking to gain control. On earth, where *it’s survival of the fittest* (or according to Charles Darwin’s own words, *survival of those who are the most adaptable* and legendarily flexible, like Djokovic), any physical movement signals a change in the status quo — meaning, either an opportunity or a threat. Well, the Djoker is sublime at turning threatening serves into rocket returns that leave opponents vanquished, point by point, breaking their serves and turning them into broken spears.

Might Djokovic the almighty returner be frightened at those moments deep within his ball-striking soul? Perhaps. No Serb is, after all, ever existentially free of fear. At the same time, however, the Djoker also owns a superb tie-breaker record — surprising no one by now due to his superb ability to go into error-free, lock-down mode.

In turn, how about the upside-down smile that punctuates the GOAT's hyper-vigilant stance? That expression signals a mix of anger, disgust, and sadness alike, meaning... it's time to circle back historically to Dusan the Mighty. For Djokovic, an upside-down smile qualifies as proud defiance. Think of that expression being in this case the polar opposite of waving a white flag on court, surrendering to fate or to *any mere mortal* daring to enter your kingdom.

Am I making myself clear enough? Are you beginning to get the picture? Do you truly see what we all see? **There is Djokovic winning yet another grueling match like he did in taking the ATP 1000 title in Cincinnati against Carlos Alcaraz, which the Djoker celebrates by ripping his shirt wide open to expose his chest... his beating heart... his remarkable and terrifying ferocity.**

We've seen this before, almost. In 1999, the American soccer player Brandi Chastain stripped down to her black sports bra by *whipping off* her shirt after she scored the winning penalty in the women's World Cup final against China. What came next? Chastain celebrated by twirling her shirt around in the air over her head before doing a kneel-drop onto the pitch and then raising her clinched fists as she burst into a huge, joyous grin. Chastain's reaction was (she admitted) "insane," a "primal" reaction, making her very nearly Djokovic's kindred spirit. What's the difference?

Never forget that despite playing doubles in the Olympics on behalf of Serbia, the Djoker is on a solo Crusade. What Chastain did was to bask in a shared American dream, whereas Dusan the Almighty tore his shirt nearly in half to expose the whole force of his determination to resist defeat in the same way that the Serbs never allowed the Ottoman Empire to entirely subjugate them during some 400 years of foreign, Muslim occupation.

No, no female tennis player would ever likely "celebrate" in the way Djokovic did after withstanding Alcaraz and the heat in Cincinnati... but Serena Williams came closest to date. Are you familiar with the famous ORANGES episode? You can find it described in Serena's first memoir, where she admits to a time when her dad's friend brings a big bag of oranges to the practice court. Serena is eight or nine years old. The oranges are sitting in the shopping cart Richard uses to store tennis balls for his two daughters. Venus doesn't touch the oranges. But Serena doesn't want to eat any; she prefers to hit a few over the fence before smashing the others into a fleshy pulp.

"I was a wild child," Serena confesses. "I unleashed on these defenseless oranges. I didn't think about it. I just went a little crazy." What's the take-away? For Serena the oranges episode confirmed that "You need a wild streak if you hope to be a serious competitor. You need a kind of irrational killer instinct." Is Serena any less ferocious than Novak? If so, then ever so slightly in keeping with the kinship that links her being a black female upstart from Compton, California and the Djoker heralding from rough-scrabble Serbia.

Back in Serbia, the Djoker remains (to quote the sportswriter Ben Rothenberg) a "messianic figure."

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Again, what does celebrating look like? In anticipation of having one or both of his daughters soon reach the Wimbledon finals, Richard told a white *Sports Illustrated* reporter in 1994 that he might invite members of Compton's Crips gang to watch the match. Wouldn't it be fun to have the Crips sitting in the Williams' box, not far from royalty. **When Djokovic wins his 24th Grand Slam trophy at the U.S. Open, that's the start of celebrating. The heart of celebrating is when Dusan the Almighty joins Serbia's national basketball team on the balcony of the Old Palace in Belgrade. His eyes are closed, head lowered; he's weeping. A small flood of tears accompanies eyebrows pinched together in confusion. What's going on, the GOAT must wonder. How can I be weeping in gratitude at the same time that thousands of my loyal, adoring fans are crowding the streets of my homeland's capital?**

What is so significant about the historic Old Palace (Stari Dvor)? It was the royal residence of the Obrenovic dynasty that intermittently ruled Serbia during the 19th century. Simple enough, you might say. Only there's more to the story of Stari Dvor than that.

Unlike what happened in most Balkan countries, the Obrenovic dynasty wasn't an imported (German) dynasty. An indigenous hold-out, the family allied with the Hapsburgs but ideally on their own terms... having just pushed the Turks back far enough to have gained some breathing room. There is though, really, no breathing room in the Balkans. There never has been and there never will be. The Balkans remain on the edge of Europe, not fully in it.

Western Europe — the distant land of Roger the Magnificent and Rafa the Indomitable — has cohesion. The borders have been largely set for centuries. There, one's language, religion, and very identity isn't a fight to the death. Remember the cuckoo clock and an Inquisition that ended long before General Francisco Franco momentarily brought it back.

In Djokovic's back yard, by comparison, you historically had Rome and Constantinople battling it out for Catholic hegemony. And then you got the Austrian Hapsburgs and the Turkish Ottomans squaring off, and off in the distance the Prussians and the Russians and never a moment's peace. All of Eastern

Europe is forever doomed to be a land *in between*. It's a good place to harbor grudges against distant leaders crowding your space. While leaders in the Balkans get to host minor, regional kingdoms, grand empires are reserved for outsiders.

Endless revolts and sieges. Everyone in Serbia and beyond longs for independence from everybody else. Belgrade gets bombed from the air by the Germans *and* the Allies in World War Two, and in 1999 Djokovic is 12 years old when his birthplace gets bombed by NATO.

The sight: a masked Djokovic boarding a flight from Melbourne to Dubai in January 2022 after getting himself deported for not complying with entry rules for vaccination. Why won't Dusan the Almighty take a vaccine shot if it gives him a shot at winning the Australian Open yet again? As the GOAT will say repeatedly with nearly religious devotion in explaining his firm opposition to mandatory vaccines, they're an infringement on "personal choice."

Back in Serbia, the Djoker remains (to quote the sportswriter Ben Rothenberg) a "messianic figure." Among the guy's off-court honors the greatest local tribute is receiving the Serbian government's highest civilian and military award, the Order of Karadjordje's Star. But don't overlook the Djoker also receiving the Serbian Orthodox Church's Order of St. Sava, which forever honors the royal son who became a monk on Mount Athos so that he could become a "genius" in interpreting the holy word.

By now we are knee-deep in a region historically full of *prophets* and *mystics* more obscure than a certain local tennis star.

Meet Djokovic, a card-carrying member of the Serbian orthodox church who has contributed to monasteries in Kosovo and conducted charitable work in his native land. Nor is that the complete picture of the GOAT's spiritual practices. At Wimbledon, the Djoker's been known to meditate at a Buddhist temple in between matches. Devoted to his vegan diet, the Djoker wants to be as "natural as possible" and endorses other possibilities, too. His 2013 autobiography cites a "researcher" who can supposedly transform the color of a glass of water, depending on whether the researcher directs anger, fear, or joy its way.

Speaking of what most of us might regard as *superstitions*, roughly a decade ago, I tracked down the tennis club owner in New Jersey at whose estate Djokovic was using the owner's hyperbaric chamber. What am I talking about?!? A pod in which you sit for up to 20 minutes a day, breathing 100% pure oxygen in hopes of improving your performance.

I got to use the owner's pod myself. Did I serve any better afterwards? No, the experience didn't transform me (as best I could tell) except to leave me feeling like I had just been a walk-on for a *Jetsons'* TV episode. I guess Djokovic felt differently. In 2019, the Djoker bought his own pod for \$75,000 and brought it to the U.S. Open, parking it on a trailer about 1,000 feet from Arthur Ashe Stadium.

Ever the pessimist about human nature and fate, in *The Sound and the Fury* William Faulkner writes that "no battle is ever won. They are not even fought." Well, such was the case for Djokovic at the U.S. Open in 2020. There, as you'll recall the favorite's title quest came to an abrupt halt in the fourth round after he smacked a tennis ball in anger that hit a female line judge in the throat, forcing his automatic ejection from the tournament. Given that Dusan the Almighty had unleashed balls into the crowd at previous events like at Roland Garros in 2016, this mishap was surely an *explosive* accident just waiting to happen.

Indeed, how are the Balkans always described? Whether in Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, Robert D. Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts* or Jacob Mikanowski's *Goodbye, Eastern Europe*, Djokovic's native territory is known as a *powder keg* waiting to go off. Easily the most notorious evidence remains June 28, 1914, when Franz Ferdinand arrived in nearby Sarajevo from Vienna on St. Vitus's Day, the anniversary of the Serbs losing the Battle of Kosovo to the Turks in 1389. On that inauspicious anniversary, a Bosnian Serb named Princip killed the Hapsburg potentate driving by him on parade, thereby igniting World War One.

Bloodshed upon bloodshed. In 1903, Alexander Obrenovich, King of Serbia, and his wife Draga are murdered in the palace whose balcony the Djoker would later grace, their naked bodies thrown from their bedroom into the garden below. Skipping past World War Two, we arrive at the point in 1987 when Yugoslavia is dissolving as Serbian nationalists put the body of Prince Lazar (the fallen hero of the Battle of Kosovo) on tour to Serbian Orthodox monasteries. That same year, the Serbian leader Sloban Milosevic gives a speech in Kosovo that by ending with the phrase "No one will ever beat a Serb again!" could have been a set-up for Mats Wilander joking about his victory over Ivan Lendl at the U.S. Open in 1988 by saying that "Nobody beats me seven times in a row!"

Seriously, though, things turn grim. Between 1991 and 1995, over 130,000 people perish in the former Yugoslavia as *ethnic cleaning* becomes a common term in Europe for the first time since 1945.

Throughout the strife, Djokovic's hands stay clean. He's still a boy. But that said, in September of 2021 the Djoker is photographed at a wedding party with Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik and the paramilitary officer Milan Jolovic, whose Drina Wolves committed wartime atrocities. Of late, the Serb-majority Republika Srpska wants to move from autonomy within Bosnia-Herzegovina to outright secession and has given the Djoker its highest honor. Nobody is at ease in a region where a hilltop overlooking Sarajevo was transformed from a lover's lane into a sniper's nest three decades ago.

Djokovic is everything to everyone. He's become both a globe-trotting international star and at the same time a provincial icon utterly devoted to his own people. He's the son of a Serbian father, born in Kosovo, and a Croatian mother. The Djoker married his wife Jelena in neighboring Montenegro. The guy speaks six languages, not including political correctness. When his dad, Srdjan, was caught on video at the Australian Open with Djoker partisans holding Russian flags after Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine, Dukan the Almighty told the press with great, apparent sincerity:

"My father, my whole family, and myself have been through several wars during the 90s. We are against the war. We never will support any violence for any war" for the simple reason that "We know how devastating that is for the family, for people in any country that is going through the war."

Wartime tensions don't die graceful deaths. Even today, Serbia is still not part of the EU or NATO. It's a pariah state, feared but also respected by the Croat driver who took my wife and me from Dubrovnik to Mostar during our visit to the former Yugoslavia a few years ago. From his stray comments, the driver's disdain for Muslims became obvious. Then he finally told me a joke: "In a war between Croatia and Serbia, who loses?" The answer was "Bosnia."

I used to find it pretty easy to categorize Djokovic and his rivals. In my chat with Mary Carillo on Tennis Channel in 2015, I had the male Big Four down pat. Federer = happiness, being the lad with the coy smile. Rafa = disgust, his upper lip curling in distaste at the idea that he could do anything other than triumph. Next up: Andy Murray = anger. On court, the guy can become a portrait of self-loathing so convincing that I call him the Scottish Inquisition given how he tortures himself.

Back then, Djokovic the future GOAT was still just "one of the guys." Novak Djokovic = surprise I told the ever-charming Mary, focusing primarily on the Djoker's wide-eyed look as he prepares to receive serve. In response, Mary cackled yet again as we covered the pantheon of tennis greats, male and female alike. Now though... I ponder anew two questions. First, who is Djokovic? And second, in addition to winning endless trophies is he likeable enough to also win the hearts of many more tennis fans finally ready to embrace him as the sport's male GOAT?

Serbian folk songs celebrate an epic past full of heroes, of which the Djoker is now one for the ages. He's pure Serbian: quarrelsome, courageous, and tenacious. None of the Great Powers from Constantinople or Vienna or Basel or Mallorca will ever be able to touch him again.

So many tournaments to watch and so little time.

I look at my TV set and another televised match, and lately I see: **the Djoker beating Taylor Fritz and in victory his arms are shaking, his fists are raised, his eyes are narrowed in what can only be described as borderline rage as he is apparently screaming (mouth wide open) the Serbian equivalent of "THAT'S RIIIIIGHT!!!!!" — or "Let's go!!!!!" — or "That's how it is!!!!!"**

An aberration? Hardly. **When the Italian heavy hitter Matteo Berrettini goes down in defeat, the Djoker offers an emphatic swinging fist pump that ends with his ever-so-tight fist crowning the air above his own head.** Is this a gut punch, a warning, to rivals who would dare contemplate beating him? I think so as I brood over the fact that Djokovic has become a world-class SCREAMER.

Maybe that newly enhanced tendency is part of what Rafa is alluding to when he very diplomatically fields questions in an interview about the relative popularity of Federer and the Djoker in comparison with himself. "[There] are tastes, inspiration, sensations that one or the other may transmit to you, that you may like one or the other more," Rafa says. Then in specific regards to Djokovic he adds that "with respect to titles, Djokovic is the best in history. I think Novak, in that sense, lives things more intensely than the way I have lived them."

Wow. Yes to "more intensely" — which is saying a lot when we are talking about Rafa, the King of Clay. And it's a line of critique that Stefanos Tsitsipas swings in behind even more clearly in his own interview about the Djoker's legacy:

"He [Djokovic] is no doubt the best, going by numbers. He breaks record after record. He also has the thirst, even though he has nothing to prove anymore. That's how he's wired. He's never happy; it's like he's always trying to prove something to someone. I don't know what or to whom. It's like he wants revenge. His eye shines."

Maybe here I can in my way help Tsitsipas out. The *revenge* in question is eternal. The pair of eagles on the Serbian flag could be Djokovic with both arms flung back, chest out after a victory. Or if he collapses onto the court in celebration, that same spread-eagled look takes shape at a lower elevation. Don't be fooled by Djokovic's forgiving smiles he as accepts his rival's inferiority and the fans' adoration graciously enough during the awards ceremony that follows yet another victory. That's only the version of Djokovic who's also sincerely enough a member of the "Champion for Peace" club, a group of elite athletes committed to serving peace in the world through sports.

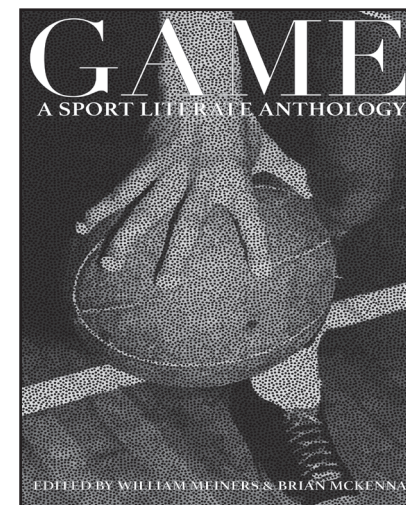
I would maintain that there's also another, deeper version of Djokovic. You get more than a hint of it from hearing how the GOAT spoke about his 2023 U.S. Open victory:

"If I wasn't from Serbia, I'd have been glorified on a sporting level many years ago, especially in the West," Djokovic asserted. "But that's part of my journey. I am grateful and proud to come from Serbia — because of that, all of these accomplishments are sweeter and even more fulfilling."

Yes, the *thirst* and the *revenge* are eternal and as monumental as Djokovic's shot tolerance on court. Serbian folk songs celebrate an epic past full of heroes, of which the Djoker is now one for the ages. He's pure Serbian: quarrelsome, courageous, and tenacious. None of the Great Powers from Constantinople or Vienna or Basel or Mallorca will ever be able to touch him again. He's Dukan the Almighty. He's Prince Lazar minus a final, catastrophic defeat. His kingdom of records will rule forever more. He's got it all: legitimacy and dignity intact, serving for the match at 40-*love* or some version thereof.

Daniel A. Hill is the author of 10 books including *Emotionomics*, which features a foreword by "The Simpsons" co-creator Sam Simon. He's also served as an analyst of U.S. presidential candidates and debates for the past 20 years for major media outlets, including *The New York Times*, CNN, Fox, MSNBC, and Reuters as well as the programs ABC's "Good Morning, America" and NBC's "The Today Show." For his work studying athletes for teams in professional and NCAA Division I sports, he received a front-page profile in *The New York Times*. Other media roles have ranged from frequently appearing as a guest on PBS's critically-acclaimed show "Mental Engineering" to hosting the podcast "Dan Hill's EQ Spotlight" on the New Books Network (NBN), the world's largest book review platform. His previous essays have been noted with honor in three editions of *The Best American Essays*.

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