

# Sampras ready to get back on court

## Tennis star ending retirement, applauds Federer's game

BY HOWARD FENDRICH  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

### NEW YORK

All those comparisons between Roger Federer and Pete Sampras are right on the mark. Sampras himself says so.

"They're all very valid: Not only is he winning majors, but the way he's winning them, with pretty much ease," Sampras said. "He's pretty much the favorite in every major for the rest of his career."

"Clearly, he's head and shoulders above the rest. I don't see anyone pushing him over the next three or four years."

Sampras knows his record of 14 Grand Slam tournament titles could very well be threatened by Federer, who has seven so far. Time for the 34-year-old Sampras to come out of retirement and try to add to his total? Not quite.

Sampras is returning to the tennis court, though, signing up for the World Team Tennis Pro League more than three years after his final match.

"This is more about just getting myself a little busier and focused on something I used to be good at," he said ahead of today's announcement by the league. "It's time this year to do a little more. Last year, I was kind of floating along."

His most recent professional match was the 2002 U.S. Open final, when he beat longtime



FEDERER

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Pete Sampras

On coming out of retirement to play in the World Team Tennis Pro League

rival Andre Agassi. As much as he says he's looking forward to playing in the WTT, Sampras made one thing quite clear: Don't call it a comeback.

"I miss playing the game. I miss the majors. I miss competing. But to play at the level I used to play is a whole other animal. I've done that, and I know what it takes," he said. "Me playing a little tennis this year is something I can control; there isn't any pressure. I can relax and have a little fun. Coming back is not something that crossed my mind."

While it's tough for him to watch Wimbledon, where he won seven championships, Sampras keeps tabs on the game. And he's impressed by the top-ranked Federer.

"He moves great, does everything very well. He's gotten to a point that when he's not at his best, he's finding ways to win, and that separates him from the rest," Sampras said a moment before making sure to bolster his own credentials a tad.

"There are less great players today than

there was when I was playing," he continued. "I just see him carrying on with what he's been doing. He's got the whole package. He doesn't have any holes in his game."

Federer has won Wimbledon three years in a row, and he's won the past three majors: Wimbledon, the U.S. Open and the Australian Open. The Swiss star heads to the French Open in May with a chance to complete a Grand Slam, albeit not in a calendar year.

The French Open is the only major Federer hasn't won; Sampras never made it past the semifinals at Roland Garros.

"Clay will be the toughest surface for Roger," Sampras said. "If things go right, if the weather's right, I think he can win it."

Sampras has never played in the WTT, a 12-team league that in recent years has featured such stars as Agassi, Steffi Graf, John McEnroe, Martina Navratilova, Andy Roddick and Venus Williams. Sampras will be chosen by a team in the March 28 draft and expects to play about a half-dozen matches during the July 6-26 regular season.

WTT co-founder Billie Jean King unsuccessfully tried to persuade Sampras to participate in the league while he was on tour.

"He's definitely someone that we wanted," WTT commissioner Ilana Kloss said. "We're just thrilled that Pete's going to be back out there, and fans will get an opportunity to see him again."

Sampras also will be appearing in an exhibition match at Houston in April. He said he's thought about working as a TV commentator, but he's not interested in coaching.



AP PHOTO

Pete Sampras, shown during a U.S. Open match in New York on Sept. 7, 2002, will come out of retirement this year to play in the World Team Tennis Pro League. Sampras has won 14 Grand Slam tournament titles during his career.

# Autistic student-manager enjoying sudden popularity



AP PHOTO

Greece (N.Y.) Athena High School basketball team manager Jason McElwain, who is autistic, is hoisted by teammates after his 20-point performance in the final home game against Spencerport on Feb. 15. Several production companies have inquired about making a movie of McElwain's experience.

BY BEN DOBBIN  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

### GREECE, N.Y.

Alone in the gym after practice, Jason McElwain went through his elaborate pregame ritual.

The 17-year-old senior, student-manager of the Greece Athena High School basketball team, drained a 3-pointer, a double-pump layup and a free throw, kissed the back of his ring finger at center court and sped off to the dressing room to exhort and amuse his teammates.

"You've gotta give it everything you got!" McElwain sang in rap verse. "The winner goes home all happy/The loser goes home and says/'Mommy we lost the game, wah wah wah!'"

McElwain, who is autistic, was back in his role as an all-around

motivator on the eve of a sectional semifinal game Tuesday night, handing out water bottles, dispensing tips, helping run drills. Two weeks earlier, he suited up for a game and delivered a jaw-dropping performance.

His play drew national attention and a flood of calls from Hollywood. His parents have received inquiries from about 25 production companies ranging from The Walt Disney Co. and Warner Bros. to independent documentary filmmakers.

"I don't know what I'm walking into," McElwain said.

In his team's final home game of the season, McElwain entered with four minutes to go. It was his first and only appearance for the Athena varsity team in this Rochester suburb.

The 5-foot-6 manager hit six

3-point shots and a 2-pointer and was carried off the court on his teammates' shoulders.

His triumph was captured on a student video that made the rounds of the television networks. The school received calls and e-mails from parents of children who have autism, a little-understood developmental disorder.

"We have an obligation as a society to find a way to include people with different abilities," said the school's athletic director, Randolph Hutto, whose 12-year-old son, Joshua, is autistic. "This, hopefully, will help open doors for some people or open some eyes."

McElwain still lacks social skills but has learned to cope well in his teens, said his special-education teacher, Diane Maddock.

"He might talk a little loud, laugh a little too long or not be

able to read the body language or even the tone of voice of a person, but it's not a big difficulty," Maddock said. "If you call him on it, he will acknowledge it, say 'OK, you're right, I shouldn't have said that or laughed when I laughed.'"

Considered too small to make the junior varsity, McElwain signed on as manager, then took up the same role with the varsity to stay near the sport he loves.

Amazed at his dedication, coach Jim Johnson had him suit up for the home finale. There was no guarantee he would play, but he got in when the Trojans opened a large lead.

Because he played in just one regular-season game, McElwain was ineligible for sectional play. But he's not bothered.

"I just want to win as a team, not individually," he said.

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