

Launching Pat: No one pushed Rafter to the top but himself.



YOU'RE A LEGEND!

RAFTER THOUGHTS

National icon PAT RAFTER could be a key player in the future of Australian tennis

When Pat Rafter retired in 2001, we lost a player who regularly featured at the pointy end of grand slams, who helped his country challenge for Davis Cup glory, and whose sunny, humble personality in victory or defeat appealed right across all sports fans and beyond. Now, with Australian tennis drifting and short of big stars, it could be Rafter's time again...

What does a retired tennis player get up to?

I've played in a (seniors) tournament, and we've been commuting back and forth from [the Gold Coast to] Sydney. There's always something there to do. I'm doing a hell of a lot of work on a house at the moment. We're putting it on the market to sell, so the last four days we have not stopped. Flat out.

It must have been good playing Edberg in London recently.

Yeah, Stefan was one of my idols; when I was 15 he was No.1 in the world and winning slams all over the place. When I played him it was interesting because we played absolutely identical serve-volley.

Who's still got it out there?

Goran (Ivanisevic) would have won that tournament, because that surface

was absolutely perfect for him – a very quick indoor surface and his serve skids through very quickly. I got onto a few early, but after that I couldn't see it. He doesn't change the pace, just hits it as hard as he can in the corners.

In his autobiography, Andre Agassi said he hated tennis and was lonely on tour. Can you associate with that?

Hated tennis, well, no, but I'd sort of had enough of tennis by the end. I couldn't wait for that last year to end, because I was done. Agassi played from such a young age, then he went away and came back rejuvenated. He enjoyed that, but early on he had a lot of other pressures to deal with. The tour can be lonely, but it's part of the job.

How did you cope with all the boredom and downtime?

It's the hotels that tee you off. They are boring. All you watch is CNN. It doesn't matter how nice the hotel is, you want to get out. Restaurants get old, too. You just want to jump in there, say give me the food, and leave. Loneliness is there but it's not too bad.

Agassi had a very bad tennis parent pushing him, unlike you.

No, but my parents had eight other kids to worry about. Mum helped me quite a bit early on, but other than that they left me to my own devices. I just did what I had to do.

How did you get to the top without that?

It was a dream and a goal. By about 1995, my brother Geoff said, "You've got to give yourself the best opportunity and if you don't do that you're wasting your life." I had to give myself the greatest opportunity to reach my goal, and then I could hold my head high whether I achieved one in the world or 100.

You've got this nice-guy image...

I wish it wasn't that.

You're one of the few players to come out of Agassi's book looking good.

Well, Andre and I had some great battles and had a lot of respect for each other. And I always loved playing Andre because of the contrast in styles – I could come to the net and he could play from the baseline. When I played Pete Sampras I hated it because I knew it was going to be an ugly battle. But Andre and I didn't really have a lot to do with each other off the court, so we don't have ammunition on each other.

You must have had a huge competitive drive people didn't see.

I was able to train myself and push through certain barriers, without someone cracking the whip over me. If I went for a 45-minute bike ride I'd do an extra five. I convinced myself that I needed to be the best and so I needed to do that bit extra the whole time.

Why did it take you so long to break through as a pro?

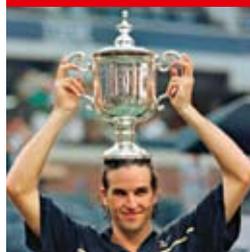
I was still developing my game. It was always evolving and I was getting bigger and stronger, and to be that type of serve-volleyer you need to be a good athlete. But I went through a few mental challenges as well, through '93, '94, '95, where I accepted the pressure put on me, becoming more of a man emotionally and physically.

Players go through big emotional highs and lows, don't they?



No passing zone: Rafter covered the net like a manta ray.

LEGENDARY STATUS



Born: December 28, 1972

Fame: One of Australia's greatest and most popular players of the modern era.

Record: Enjoyed a golden patch from 1997-2001, winning the US Open in 1997 and '98 and reaching two Wimbledon finals, including a 2001 epic against Goran Ivanisevic.

Notoriety: Became defined by the shoulder injury that cut his career short at 29. And had a surprisingly snippy relationship with that other "nice guy" Pete Sampras.

Before Davis Cup was the worst – the pressure of representing my country and pulling my weight. And I wanted to do more than that. I expressed that to the coaches – it's good to talk to the guys about it. That's also one thing

I tried to do before the US Open final in '97. I'd just come off six finals lost and I thought, "Am I going to lose again?" I'm thinking about losing the US Open final and shitting myself.

What is your proudest moment?

The first US Open, on a purely personal level. I'd love to have won a Davis Cup – I'm really interested to know how it would have felt.

Can we talk about the state of Aussie tennis?

Yeah, but this has been a contentious issue. My attitude is that these guys (at Tennis Australia) try their hardest and work incredibly hard. To me, they don't have the know-how, though.

Because they haven't played?

There's a bit of that,

but I'm mainly talking about player development, and I don't think they've got the skills to pull it off. They're not engaging the right players or finding the money for the right coaches. At the moment we're seeing a lot of Australian tennis coaches in France, because they get paid very well and are doing a good job. They're the best coaches in the world. And we're talking about Darren Cahill as well. [TA] is not prepared to pay the sort of dollars these guys want. I've been disappointed seeing a lack of action. They say there has been, but to me there hasn't been. I sit back and criticise them, but I'm not doing a lot about it. It's easy to be an armchair critic and that's what I do too much.

Are you moving towards doing something, though?

Maybe, maybe. It depends what options come up. I certainly wouldn't move to Canberra to be part of tennis.

I would love to work with them, but it would be on my terms. One thing I do want to do with TA is more stringent recruitment and player development, where you go out there and get the best athletes. The thing they should be pitching for is picking great athletes.

When will something happen?

I don't really know yet. One thing we've always proposed to TA is a panel of ex-players and others who can give guidelines on what player development should be like. But other than that, if things come up I will get involved, but I really don't have any idea that it's on the cards yet. – Ivan Smith