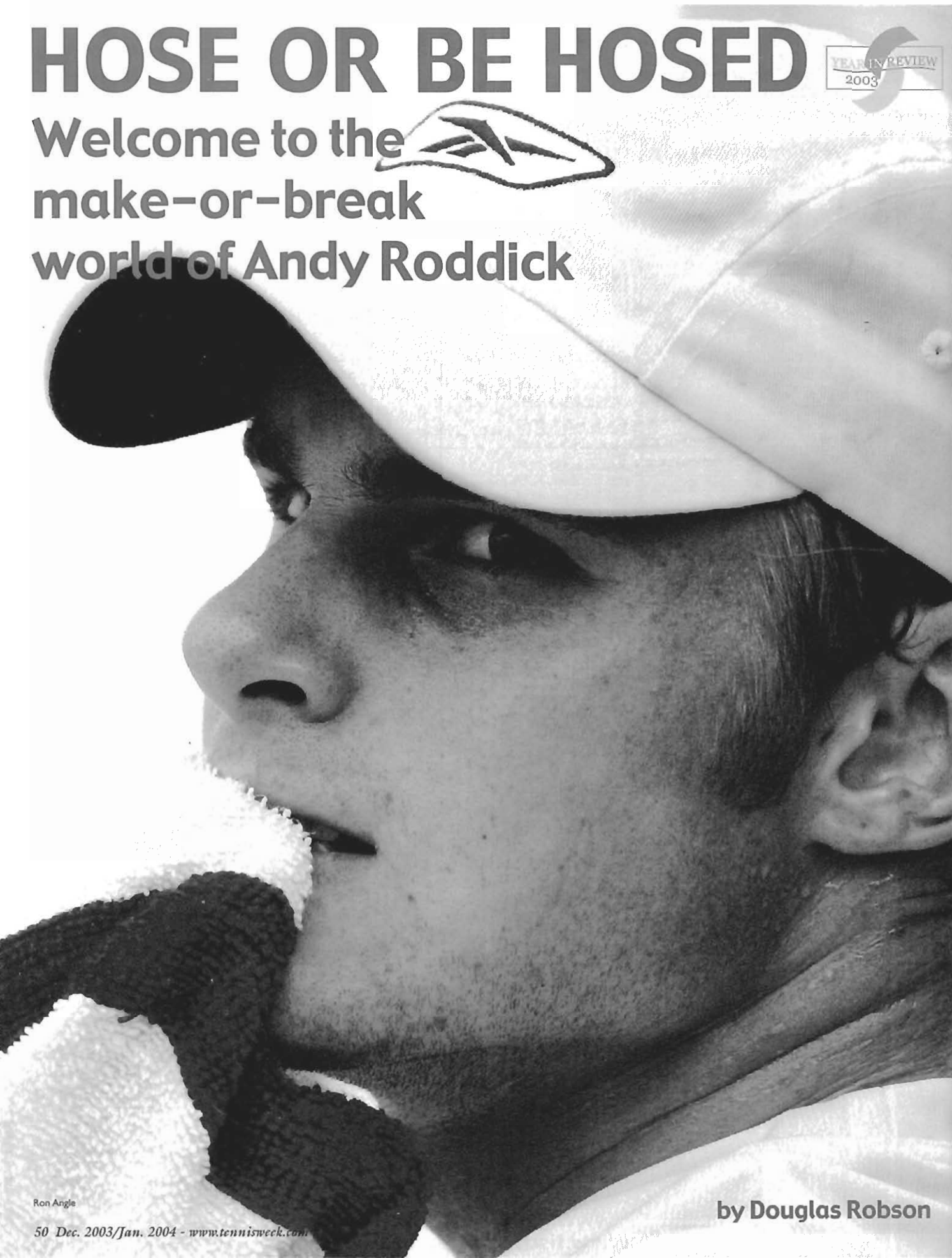


HOSE OR BE HOSED

YEAR IN REVIEW
2003

Welcome to the
make-or-break
world of Andy Roddick



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by Douglas Robson

It's a brilliant October afternoon in the tony hamlet of San Rafael, just north of San Francisco, and Andy Roddick, less than a month removed from his first major championship, is mouthing off about what he plans to do to me on the pingpong table awaiting us in Brad Gilbert's garage.

"I'll hose you," he declares.

Roddick and his bubble-gum squeeze, the 19-year-old singer-actress Mandy Moore, have been holing up at Gilbert's pad for several days as Roddick prepares for the fall indoor season in Europe. We have concluded our chat about life as the new Golden Boy of U.S. tennis, which takes place in a front room of Gilbert's 6,000-square-foot Arts and Crafts house. So the talk has turned to table tennis. Roddick, who has no idea if I'm any good (I'm no slouch), doesn't even consider the possibility of losing. He seethes with confidence.

And he's right. He hoses me. Well, not exactly. He kicks my butt the first couple of games. The third time, I find my range and forge a 17-13 lead. With his permanently tousled hair smothered beneath a John Deere baseball cap, Roddick then declares that he's stepping up his game. Under the pressure, I crack a bit, and indeed, he surges back for a 21-18 win. We shake hands, and he retires to the guest bungalow where Moore is awaiting his return.

Brushing aside an aging journalist in pingpong is a bit lower on the totem pole of high stakes than facing off against Juan Carlos Ferrero in the U.S. Open final. But Roddick's congenial confidence shows why the 21-year-old Nebraska-born kid has been able to parlay a suspect backhand and average court coverage – a bludgeoning forehand and howitzer serve notwithstanding – to become the third-youngest No. 1 in Open Era history.

In just a few months, the ubiquitous, skydiving, Saturday-Night-Live-hosting, 149 mph-serving poster boy for a charisma-starved tennis public has come a long, long way.

How far? Through May, he had one title in 2003. He was licking his wounds from a first-round exit at the French Open to journeyman Sargis Sargsian of Armenia. And he'd just dumped his longtime coach. Not exactly a recipe for global domination.

But his rise may be even more meteoric than most even realize. Four years ago, as a 17-year-old junior at Boca Prep

The very qualities that helped propel Roddick to the top at such a tender age are the same characteristics that could make it difficult for him to stay there.

Academy in Boca Raton, Fla., Roddick played No. 3 on his high school team, which included 20th-ranked Mardy Fish and former Stanford All-American David Martin, who finished 2003 at No. 734 in the ATP rankings. We're talking light years here.

As our friendly game of pingpong attests, confidence is one big reason Roddick has climbed to the top of the tennis mountain. Several other personality traits have been key to the Florida resident's ascent as well:

- Intensity. Look no further than his epic five-set win (including 21-19 in the fifth) over Younes El Aynaoui at the 2003 Australian Open.

- Youthful resilience. His insouciance in the face of adversity explains how, after a decent but certainly unspectacular first half of 2003, he tore up the circuit. He was last among the year-end Top 5 to win a title, yet wound up with six – more than everyone except Roger Federer. (Federer won seven titles.)

- Desire to please. A youngest child, Roddick not only expects to be the center of attention, but also craves affirmation from those around him.

- Love of the limelight. Roddick wants to be a star, but he also wants to blend in with his fellow man and has a particular distaste for haughtiness.

But here's the rub. The very qualities that helped propel Roddick to the top at such a tender age are the same characteristics that could make it difficult for him to stay there.

After reaching his first semifinal in a major in Melbourne, Roddick's results were inconsistent. His devastating defeat in Paris made him realize he needed to "hear a new voice"; so he parted ways with coach Tarik Benhabiles and hired the free-spirited but detail-oriented Gilbert, who hadn't coached since splitting up with Andre Agassi in January 2002.

"They are very different," says Roddick of the more tightly strung Benhabiles, who he goes out of his way – still – to praise. "But the one thing that is not different is the passion that they have."

Gilbert, the 40-year-old Bay Area native, and Texas-reared Roddick are an odd tandem. Gilbert, a father of three, dinked, angled and annoyed his way into the Top 10, while the 6-foot-2 Roddick is all about straight forward power: *Here's what I got. Beat me if you can.* But with a common language of sports as a foundation, the two quickly found their stride.

When I arrive at Gilbert's home, Roddick is practicing with up-and-coming Russian Dmitry Tursunov. Sporting one of his trademark Metallica hats (there are dozens lying stacked in his house), Gilbert wanders around the court picking up balls and barking encouragement and passing out fist-to-fist high-fives.

When he misses a forehand into the net after a long rally, Roddick screams "God, hit the damn thing!"

"That ball hit the leaf there," says a soothing Gilbert, pointing to a spot on the court. "It skidded off the leaf."

When Roddick smacks a kick second-serve ace, Gilbert purrs, "Oh, that's wicked."

The positive, calming, reinforcement clicks with his young charge.

"I just try to put the calm spin on everything," says Gilbert.

After winning the set in a tie-break, coach and student play a bizarre game of batting practice, with Gilbert pitching and Roddick using the handle of his racquet to launch balls up onto the lawn. Next it's a quick game of horse on the basketball hoop on the side of the court.

"Your book should have been called winning really ugly,

extremely ugly," jabs Roddick when Gilbert, whom he calls "BG," banks in an awkward shot. "By the way, I'm just putting letters on you."

If Gilbert receives much of the credit for helping Roddick transition from a should-be champ to a real one, he deserves it. Under his tutelage, Roddick has tamed his occasional on-court flare-ups, shored up his backhand and figured out when to keep the ball in play rather than blast for the big winner.

Roddick went 25-11 (a .694 winning percentage) before hiring Gilbert, and was 47-8 (.854) after. He won one tournament title without him, five with him.

"He's taught me how to win," Roddick has said.

But Gilbert hasn't quelled Roddick's temper at the expense of his intensity. Roddick will still let it all hang out on court, but he can also handle big-match pressure, as he did by dismantling Spaniard Ferrero with almost preternatural tranquility in the U.S. Open final.

"I think Andy just concentrates a lot better when he knows Brad's out there," says close friend and fellow pro Brian Vahaly. "He doesn't let the moment get the best of him. He really plays the percentage shots. It's similar to maybe what Brad did with Agassi. He has a great ability to take guys who already have an

amazing amount of talent and help them bring it out, contain it, maximize it.”

U.S. Davis Cup captain McEnroe sees it another way.

“He’s made him aware of how big his game really was,” he says.

In other words, Roddick’s game is no longer simply smash-mouth serves and crushing inside-out forehands. And Gilbert sees room for improvement.

“At 21, I’d like to say you can do anything better,” he says.

Whether the instant success the twosome have enjoyed can also improve is another question. Both admit to being similarly wired, with headstrong and excitable personalities. These are advantageous qualities in the single-minded world of big-time tennis. But good for a long-term partnership? Unclear.

Asked if their parallel personalities could lead to friction, Roddick says: “Not yet. I’m sure if we stay together for a while, like I think we will, I’m sure it will happen sometime. But not really because we don’t really take it to the point of...”

“I’ll easily get angry with myself. But it takes a lot for me to get angry at someone else. I think he’s kinda the same way.”

Likewise, it remains to be seen if Gilbert’s occasionally unorthodox methods mesh with Roddick over the long haul. There’s no question Gilbert is a master at dissecting opponents and figuring out the “X”s and “O”s of the game. He’s not afraid to motivate his students with wacky dares, such as agreeing to skydive despite a distaste of heights if Roddick won Tennis Masters Canada in Montreal.

“The key is communication,” Gilbert says. “It’s not my way or the highway. You have to hear him. He has to hear you. You try to go from there. Sometimes a coach can be, ‘My way or that’s it.’ I’m not like that.”

One of Gilbert’s big tasks will be to help Roddick maintain the supreme confidence level that made his rise possible, which brings us back to those traits that have served Roddick well thus far, but could trigger his undoing in the future.

CONFIDENCE

Roddick is the first to admit that his grip on the top spot is tenuous. “At Queens in the second round, I beat (Greg) Rusedski 6-4 in the third,” he says, explaining the sudden turnaround in his season. “You lose that match, you never know what happens. And you can say that about a lot of matches

along the way. I’m extremely lucky that it all turned out and the momentum came my way. I’m not saying I played great tennis every match. It doesn’t happen like that. You have to have a lot of luck thrown in there. Even at the Open, if I lose that fourth-set breaker to (Ivan) Ljubicic, who knows? I could be out second round. So a lot of things went my way.”

In short, confidence is a delicate mix of skill, luck and desire, and it can change on a dime. Roddick is supremely self-assured, but a crack in his belief could be the difference

between top-ranked and Top 20. Just ask Lleyton Hewitt.

INTENSITY

When I ask McEnroe, Vahaly and high school bud Fish to give me three words that describe Roddick best, all three use “intense.” Roddick is also hyper and often jokes about having Attention Deficit Disorder. These aren’t necessarily bad attributes. Every champion needs a relentless drive rooted in intensity to win. The fist-pumping, crowd-slapping Roddick unquestionably has used his natural energy to his advantage.

But too much intensity can be hazardous. With the exception perhaps of Jimmy Connors, players who have thrived on an inten-

sity bordering on frenzy, and needed it to play their best – Ilie Nastase, John McEnroe and Hewitt, come to mind – have not been able to go to the well for more than a couple of years at a time. It’s a tightwire act. And burnout is often the result.

YOUTHFUL RESILIENCE

Roddick wears his Mountain Dew persona on his sleeve – only his sport of choice happens to be the genteel game of tennis. He’s also still a kid.

After practice, Roddick, Gilbert and I all pile into Gilbert’s monstrous, black Cadillac Escalade and head into downtown San Rafael. Roddick, of course, is behind the wheel. He wears a cheesy t-shirt that says, “Don’t Sweat the Petty, Pet the Sweaty.” “Dude” punctuates his lingo, and when he’s excited, he says he’s “jimmy-ed up.” He and Gilbert razz each other about music, the disappointing Oakland Raiders (Gilbert’s team) and anything else at which to poke fun.

We end up lunching on foot-long subs at the chain sandwich shop Quiznos because, unlike Subway, “they toast the bread,” Roddick informs. Then we move on to Starbucks for lattes and finally back to Gilbert’s pad in the hills. All the way, Roddick blasts music (to Gilbert’s dismay) – Coldplay, John Mayer and Maroon 5, artists with a bent toward real instru-



2003 was a spectacular year for **Andy Roddick**, but by the time he reached the Tennis Masters Cup (above) he was spent. But he hopes to be recharged for an encore in 2004.

ments instead of computer-generated sounds. "I don't like gimmicks," he says.

But gimmicky is how the young star comes off to some fans and members of the media. His quick retorts and ready shtick can be overly cute and even abrasive at times. Roddick is aware of the perception and sounds a bit defensive talking about it.

"I definitely have an edge out there," he says. "I'll joke around sometimes, and if people take it the wrong way, they take it the wrong way. ... The thing that people need to understand is that I'm not doing anything meaning for it to come off in a bad way. If I give someone crap, then I'm giving someone crap. I can take it as well as give it. But that's fine."

Roddick's childlike exuberance has helped him deflect the burden of expectations, bounce back from tough defeats and maintain lighthearted detachment in the face of adversity. Still, at 21, he has a lot of maturing to do, which could help or hinder his ability to rule men's tennis. Help because resilience in the topsy-turvy world of elite professional sports can temper the inevitable ups and downs. Hurt because his priorities will surely change, possibly forcing him to choose between new interests

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and tennis supremacy.

Almost in answer to such criticisms and cynicism, Roddick already has demonstrated a grown-up sensibility. After a second-round defeat to Roddick at the U.S. Open, Croatian Ljubicic ripped him.

"I don't like him," Ljubicic said. "Nobody in the locker room likes his acting on the court. Every single player said to me, 'Good luck. Kick his ass.'"

Roddick, who heard about the comments in his own post-match press conference, called up Ljubicic at his hotel later that night and smoothed things over. The issue died.

"I thought he handled it great," says McEnroe. "He did what he felt was right and quelled whatever questions came up. He's a straight shooter."

LIMELIGHT PLEASER

Roddick loves attention and almost as much, he loves to please. How else can you explain his hectic schedule of TV appearances, charity events and Davis Cup play? He has been photographed shirtless for Rolling Stone, posed for a "Got Milk?" ad and has agreed to let a camera crew follow him around next year for a reality TV show.

Host "Saturday Night Live" a week before Tennis Masters Cup in Houston? Sure. Appear on Conan O'Brien's late night program? No problem. Host the USTA's Rock 'n' Rally at Rockefeller Center or jet off to Slovakia for Davis Cup the week after winning the Open? Absolutely.

During our afternoon together, he offers to burn me a CD, plays me in pingpong and banters with me like one of his best friends. I wanted to like him, but I felt that he wanted me to like him even more.

Says Roddick of all his activities: "If you can do something very simple and it will go a long way as far as the world of tennis goes, then I don't see why you wouldn't really want to do it. It's not like tennis is the NFL where it needs nothing like that. You need individuality, personality. It's kinda what you have to do."

There is a downside. His love of the limelight and say-yes attitude is great for the game. But by the end of 2003, the travel, TV and tennis had already begun to sap his boundless energy. A pooped Roddick did not shine at the Masters Cup in Houston, where he barely made the semifinals and got

thumped by an in-form Federer.

"I'm upset that I lost, but I'm relieved that the year's over," Roddick said after his 7-6, 6-2 defeat.

His desire to please all comers? Good for the ego. But the public, and in particular the media, is equally adept at building up as it is of tearing down. If the pleaser cannot please, it could damage his psyche.

The Japanese have a proverb about seeking too much attention. "The nail that sticks out is hammered down." The dichotomy of Roddick is that he wants to stick out, but not at the expense of family, friends and, ultimately, it seems, his own personal integrity. In that way, he wants to fit in as much as he craves to bask in his celebrity. Unlike Agassi, who travels in his own private Lear jet and whose wife, Steffi Graf, is the Greta Garbo of tennis, Roddick strives to be one of the guys.

For instance, he recently bought a house in Austin, Texas – not in trendy L.A. or South Beach – largely to be close to his two older brothers, John and Lawrence. Friends say Roddick is making a point not to display any of his trophies as he goes about decorating the house. When we are in Starbucks getting

coffee, he asks me to order a hot chocolate "for someone." Um, Andy, I'm not that stupid. "It's for your girlfriend, right?" I say. "Yep," he admits sheepishly.

But while he isn't above the masses that have made him rich and famous, he is no conformist. "I'm comfortable in my skin," he says, adding that "I'm not going to change who I am to try to impress people."

But which Roddick will prevail, the Boy Band hipster or the down-to-earth kid with the Midwest values? And will the public turn on him if they perceive him as phony?

The task of holding these pieces of Roddick together falls to Gilbert. The Svengali-like coach with the Midas touch seems up to the task. Gilbert says the key is focusing on "getting better," not on particular results.

"I never think about the past," he says.

But the bigger challenge might be what Team Roddick can't control: the onslaught from the most talented group of players in a decade. Ferrero, Hewitt, and Federer all will be gunning for Roddick's throne, as will talented Argentines Guillermo Coria and David Nalbandian. Other challengers include old man Agassi and the mercurial Marat Safin of Russia. They aren't going away, either. None except Agassi is older than 24.

"With the exception of Andre, the people who are taking over the game right now are all pretty young," Roddick has said. "It will be fun to see us try to steal the titles from each other."

It didn't seem much fun in Houston, however, where Federer swept the field and certainly appeared to be the best player in the world.

"I think Andy deserves his No. 1 spot," said the Swiss star after dismissing Roddick in the semis and then Agassi in the final. "I think he should walk away from here and feel the best."

But he also fired a warning shot: "I maybe feel the best of this week because I really have played unbelievable tennis. And I'll try to reach what he achieved this year, next year."

Next year is here. Let the hosing begin.

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Douglas Robson was the 12-and-under pingpong champion at the New England Tennis Camp in the mid-'70s. His previous story for Tennis Week was "Say Goodbye to Hollywood," a summary of the WTA Tour Championships, in the Nov. 25, 2003 issue.