Roger Federer’s commencement speech wasn’t just a viral moment. It was masterful

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One day last June, during a steady rain on a chilly morning in New Hampshire, Roger Federer told a story about failure.

Over the course of two decades, he emerged as one of the greatest tennis players who ever lived. He played 1,526 singles matches in his career and won almost 80 percent. He hoisted 20 Grand Slam trophies, including Wimbledon a record eight times.

percentage of points do you think I won in those matches?"

He paused.

"Only 54 percent," he said.

It was one of those statistics that at first seemed incorrect. Federer was one of the most dominant athletic forces of this century. That guy lost nearly half of his points?

"When you lose every second point, on average, you learn not to dwell on every shot," he told the crowd. "You teach yourself to think, 'OK, I double-faulted. It's only a point.' When you're playing a point, it has to be the most important thing in the world, and it is. But when it's behind you, it's behind you. This mindset is really crucial, because it frees you to fully commit to the next point and the next point after that, with intensity, clarity and focus."

By the next day, the speech was everywhere, viewed by millions. Its message struck a chord with people from all walks of life, transcending the annual inspirational platitudes that define commencement season.

Originally the province of valedictorians and honors graduates, the graduation speech has long been a platform for politicians, thinkers and CEOs. But in the last two decades, another popular category has emerged: star athletes. Just this year, former Yankees shortstop Derek Jeter spoke at the University of Michigan, former NBA stars Grant Hill and Carmelo Anthony delivered addresses at their alma maters — Duke and Syracuse, respectively — and Olympic gymnast Simone Biles gave the speech at Washington University in St. Louis.

The American humorist Art Buchwald once mused that a commencement speech had an afterlife of 15 minutes. If you can even remember who spoke at your graduation, you probably don't remember much of what they said.

Or, as former Lakers great Kareem Abdul-Jabbar put it at Drew University in 2016: "Lilacs are in bloom, love is in the air, and colleges and universities invite success stories like me to stand behind fancy podiums to convince parents and graduates that your education was worth the outrageous price."

But Federer's commencement address was something different — sincere, gracious, indelible — the sporting equivalent to Steve Jobs' famed

to a colleague last month, he responded: "I have referenced that speech like 20 times."

Ahead of the first anniversary of Federer's speech, I set out to answer a simple question: Why did it connect?

Federer summed up his motivation for speaking at Dartmouth in two words: beer pong.

The actual reason was more personal; his agent Tony Godsick is a Dartmouth alum and Godsick's daughter was a member of the 2024 class. But Federer understood that nearly every commencement speech features a few local shoutouts, in this case a mention of the EBA's chicken sandwich from Lou's and the local pastime, Pong, a drinking game said to have been invented by Dartmouth students.

Federer's speech, which was 3,200 words and lasted 25 minutes, was structured to share three lessons — "tennis lessons," as Federer explained — all of which emanated from his long career and his own recent "graduation" from tennis.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

Roger Federer was one of a kind on the tennis court

Whether you think Roger Federer is the GOAT or not, there has never been anyone on a tennis court like him.

The first lesson: *Effortless is a myth.*

For as long as Federer dominated on court, commentators had remarked upon how easy he made it look. He glided around in balletic fashion, ripping one-handed backhands. He never seemed to sweat. But there was only one way, Federer explained, to make something look that easy.

"It's not about having a gift," he said. "It's about having grit."

delivery was tender and rehearsed.

"As many interviews as he's done, and as much as he's been in the public eye, you could tell he practiced," said Vinay Reddy, a former chief speech writer for President Joe Biden. "He put the time into not just going up there and reading something."

Reddy has written speeches for presidents and world leaders. He also played Division I tennis at Miami University of Ohio. As a kid, he would attend the ATP event in Cincinnati, camping out on the practice courts to watch Andre Agassi, Stefan Edberg and Ivan Lendl. Their talent was mesmerizing. But when Reddy listened to Federer speak about effortlessness, he thought about the deliberate practice — the drills, the reps, the hours — he witnessed on that practice court in Cincinnati.

"It's the things we tell ourselves growing up," Reddy said. "No matter what you do, just keep practicing, keep working, keep learning. There are just some things that are very enduring about discipline."

The structure of the speech was clear and clever, and the storytelling was compelling, Reddy said. Federer had something to say, and his earnest vulnerability allowed the message to break through. But there was another reason the address felt authentic: Federer opened up, sharing himself with the audience, at one point even jokingly referring to himself as "Dr. Roger" instead of "Dr. Federer."

"One of the strategies that Federer uses that good leaders use is to crack the door," said Steven D. Cohen, a professor of business communication at Johns Hopkins. "I always tell people, 'Don't feel like you have to swing the door wide open and feel like you have to share your deepest, darkest secrets. Your goal is to crack the door. To share a little piece of yourself.'"

Federer's second lesson: *It's only a point.*

It was here that he shared the story of his five-set loss to Rafael Nadal in the 2008 Wimbledon final, a match widely considered by many as one of the greatest of all time. Seeking his sixth consecutive Wimbledon title, Federer had lost the first two sets, clawed back into the match by winning tie-breaks in the third and fourth sets, only to lose 9-7 in an epic fifth, the match ending in the evening dusk.

"You can work harder than you thought possible and still lose," Federer said, before adding: "Perfection is impossible."

It was at this moment that Federer referenced his career record and his percentage of points won: 54 percent.

"Negative energy is wasted energy," Federer said. "You want to become a master at overcoming hard moments."

If you lose one point, there's no use in wallowing, because there might be another point — a break point, a set point — that means more. The match is long. There's always time to come back. In classical rhetoric terms, the anecdote was an example of logos, or using a compelling statistic to appeal to logic.

"Because it's counterintuitive, those stats become noteworthy and set up the rest of his argument," said James Holtje, a professional speech writer and adjunct professor at Columbia.

In tennis, a small, consistent edge over your opponent can translate into big

Open final — in one of the greatest matches since the 2008 Wimbledon final — Alcaraz, the champion, actually won one fewer point than Sinner.

It's an easy concept to apply to almost any field. In 2022, Ronald van Loon, a portfolio manager at BlackRock, authored a paper on the percentage of investment decisions that need to be correct to beat market benchmarks for returns. He researched markets, crunched the numbers and came up with a number: As low as 53 percent.

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

How did a tennis player ranked 864th in the world find a career in comedy? He learned how to lose

Before Michael Kosta was on the 'Daily Show', he was a competitive tennis player whose losing later informed his comedy career.

Michael Kosta, a rotating host of The Daily Show on Comedy Central and a former professional tennis player, viewed the clip through the lens of a standup comedian. Federer may have only won 54 percent of his points, Kosta said, but he always seemed to win the points that mattered most.

"He always brought his best at the right time," Kosta said. "And that's an important part of comedy, too. You can have a rough five minutes in your set. You can lose the audience. But as long as you get them back by the end, I think that's kind of most important."

One of the most important parts of any speech or presentation is connecting with the audience. Cohen, the professor at Johns Hopkins, said Federer utilized a strategy he teaches: What's in it for them — or WIIFT.

"What Federer does here that is so powerful is he captures the moment and he understands what's keeping these students up at night," Cohen said. "It's the fact they're transitioning from one part of their life to another, just like Federer is transitioning from being a tennis pro and he has to figure out what comes next."

In an interview with ESPN's Chris McKendry last summer at Wimbledon, Federer explained he had two goals. He wanted to have fun and keep the audience awake.

"That's also my take on life," he said. "It's like, 'We got to have fun along the way.' "

When Federer was 14, he left home in Basel to attend a school in the French part of Switzerland. He was homesick at first, but he came to appreciate the act of exploration, of traveling the world, experiencing new cultures and undertaking what he called "life on the move."

He also had a realization: "I knew that tennis could show me the world. But tennis could never be the world."

The graduates before him would be record-breakers and world travelers, leaders and philanthropists. In other words, they were going places, and if they ever saw him in the future, he said, they should say hi.

As Federer concluded his speech in the rain, he finished up his "tennis lessons" and pivoted to something fun — a real tennis lesson. He stood on stage and clutched a racket in his hand, suggested an Eastern grip and showcased the proper placement for your knuckles, which, he said, should allow for easy switching from forehand to backhand.

He extolled the paramount importance of footwork on the court, same with the takeback and the follow through. He flashed a grin.

"No, this is not a metaphor," he said. "It's just good technique."

Rustin Dodd is a senior writer for Peak. He last wrote about his experience a secret to workplace happiness. Follow Peak here.

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