

JONATHAN AGNEW



The first Grand Slam tennis tournament of the year is reaching its climax in Melbourne, where soaring temperatures, rather than the quality of the tennis, have dominated the headlines. Frank Dancevic fainted through heat exhaustion during his

first round defeat, and even one of the ball boys passed out as the thermometer passed 44 degrees.

This is not unusual for Australia – the third Ashes Test in Perth this winter was played throughout a week of 40 degrees or more – but at least the cricketers can hide under a wide-brimmed sun hat and take a leisurely cooling drink on the boundary edge. A full-on singles tennis match is relentlessly intense, both physically and mentally.

So while the heat was making the news in Melbourne, Roger Federer's smooth passage into the quarter final of the Australian Open passed many people by. The silky and majestic manner in which he dismantled Wilfred Tsonga in straight sets in the fifth round suggests that the start of what is a crucial year has started with an encouraging return to form for the much-loved Swiss.

Sports watchers are always on the lookout for the first signs of the waning of a champion's powers. Age can be misleading because even the very best are permitted a period in which they are out of sorts and the absolute precision that stands them apart is missing. But the fact that

32-year-old Federer was seeded sixth in Melbourne illustrates why some onlookers have been talking about his decline following a year in which he failed to make a Grand Slam final for the first time since 2002 and slipped to number eight in the world.

He changed his racquet and his coach, but when a man, used only to losing to the big names of the game, comes a cropper against relative unknowns like

Sergiy Stakhovsky, Federico Delbonis and the veteran Leyton Hewitt, people are entitled to wonder if Federer's best days are over and all that remains is an occasional reminder of his brilliance.

Knowing when to go is the most difficult decision a sportsman faces. Sometimes it is brought about by injury but more common is that sudden awareness that you are simply not as good, agile or hungry as you once were. Tennis lovers will be hoping that 2013 was a momentary blip for the man many of us consider to be the best tennis player there has ever been.

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