

It's Not Over Until It's Over: A Lesson in Inspiration and Determination from Tennis Great Rafael Nadal

Is your back against the wall? Are the odds stacked against you? Does common sense tell you it's time to throw in the towel?

Well, if you're convinced that you're doing right, especially as a follower of Jesus, then now is not the time to cave in or quit. In fact, the turnaround could be near. A lesson from the world of sports gives us some fresh inspiration.

Rafael Nadal is considered to be one of the best—if not the best—tennis players in history. Until this weekend, he was tied with 20 Grand Slam titles with his rivals and colleagues, Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic.

But seven weeks ago, Nadal was contemplating retirement while recovering from yet another surgery on his chronically ill foot. (He has battled this condition since 2005.)

Not only so, but because of his injury, he barely competed the last half of 2021, making his comeback road harder still. And, to add insult to injury (in this case, quite literally), he came down with COVID shortly before the new tennis season was about to start.

What were his chances of competing in the Australian Open, the first major event of the year? Very slim. What were his chances of winning the Open, thereby becoming the first man in tennis history to win 21 Grand Slams? Almost none.

Well, Nadal somehow made it all the way to the final, playing

against a very hot player from Russia named Daniil Medvedev, winner of the Grand Slam of last year. Not surprisingly, Medvedev was heavily favored.

Given the time differences between Australia and America, the match was played at 3:30 AM ET, when most of us here in the States are asleep. But when I woke up in the middle of the night while staying at a hotel this past weekend, I remembered the match was going on and looked at my phone.

Medvedev had just won the second set in the best of five competition and I assumed it was as good as done.

After all, Nadal was still getting back in shape and is now 35 years old. In contrast, Medvedev is just 25 and he was now decisively ahead.

Also against Nadal was the fact that he is a tremendous front runner, only losing twice in his illustrious career when winning the first two sets of a match. In contrast, when losing the first two sets, he has only come back to win a total of four times in his career. And the last time he did it was in 2007. That's a long time ago!

Then there was this statistic (of which I was unaware until Sunday): No player had come back from two sets to one to win an Australian Open final *since 1965*. Talk about having the odds stacked against you.

When I woke up in the morning a few hours later, I remembered the match, fully expecting to read the headlines that Medvedev had won, presumably in straight sets. Only there was no headline greeting me on my phone. Instead, there was a scoreboard. *The match was still going on*, now more than five hours long. (That's right. More than five hours of grueling, physical tennis between two elite athletes.)

Minutes later, Nadal had won, making history and defying the odds.

And immediately, I was reminded of the saying, "It's not over until it's over." How true!

There's another similar saying that does not sound PC these days, namely, "It ain't over until the fat lady sings."

As explained on Wikipedia, "It means that one should not presume to know the outcome of an event which is still in progress. More specifically, the phrase is used when a situation is (or appears to be) nearing its conclusion. It cautions against assuming that the current state of an event is irreversible and clearly determines how or when the event will end. The phrase is most commonly used in association with organized competitions, particularly sports."

As to its background, "The phrase is generally understood to be a reference to opera sopranos, who were traditionally amply contoured."

But whatever the saying, the meaning is the same. Just because things look bleak doesn't mean the outcome is fixed. Just because things seem impossible doesn't mean that a massive surprise is not at hand. Yes, "one should not presume to know the outcome of an event which is still in progress."

In the case of Nadal, this was not a matter of religious faith, nor did he paint his victory in spiritual terms. It's simply a great human interest story and a shining example of perseverance under pressure.

As his friend Roger Federer posted on Instagram, "Your incredible work ethic, dedication and fighting spirit are an inspiration to me and countless others around the world. I am proud to share this era with you and honoured to play a role in pushing you to achieve more, as you have done for me for the past 18 years. I am sure you have more achievements ahead but for now enjoy this one!"

Novak Djokovic echoed these words as well, writing,

“Congratulations to Rafael Nadal for 21st GS. Amazing achievement. Always impressive fighting spirit that prevailed another time.”

Fighting spirit indeed.

Of course, as believers, we have a Bible filled with promises and words of encouragement. That is number one source of confidence and faith. And we have a Savior who rose from the dead after being crucified, to the shock of His closest followers who had lost all hope. The fact that He lives means that we live too.

But there's some natural inspiration we can draw from Nadal's amazing victory as well—a true, feel-good story—so take courage and be encouraged. A big, surprising victory could be nearer than you know, even when things look grim. {eoa}

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