

Novak Djokovic is larger than tennis

By Binoy Kampmark

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Despite being ranked as the world's best male tennis player, Novak Djokovic's personality has made him headline news for many other reasons, writes Dr [Binoy Kampmark](#).

THE VICTORY of [Novak Djokovic](#) in the latest [French Open](#) had the usual mixed reception in Australia. While Australians pretend to like radicals, larrikins and the occasional deviant, the contrary is true. Tight-buttoned, properly behaved and conformist to the point of invisibility, the boringly predictable are always preferred. You can rely on them.

Even in Melbourne, a town where his following is strong (he has won ten Australian Opens), the callback circuit on the local ABC radio station qualified, ignored and even denigrated the Serb's latest achievement. At best, 23 grand slams, making him the most accomplished player in the open era, had to be seen alongside other caveats. "He did not," one caller churlishly insisted, "do the grand

slam in one year, twice!"

Another, showing the sort of maturity demanded in some spectators, insisted that a French Open without [Rafael Nadal](#) was not a tournament worth seeing. Even the radio host joined in, regretting that "it had to be Novak" getting his nose in front.

Of the big three who have dominated tennis for almost two decades – [Roger Federer](#), Nadal and Djokovic – the Serbian has tended to be seen as one playing catch-up; his talent formidable, colossal, yet limping behind the anointed ones. But the views of him as a player have rarely remained technical or specific to his craft. There is always something else about him that irritates and enrages, necessitating his diminishing. He does not play the role of what might be termed "the nice person".

[Cathal Kelly](#), writing for [The Globe and Mail](#), wistfully recalls that other villain of tennis: the young [Andre Agassi](#).

He writes:

'Young Andre Agassi was insufferable. He was so easily detestable that Esquire magazine named its yearly razzie sports awards after him.'

But the insufferable became palatable — Agassi lost the wig and 'became a nice person. It was a real disappointment'. He also found himself a wife of unquestioned

goodness: another stellar tennis performer, [Steffi Graf](#).

Djokovic, however, presents something of a puzzle for Kelly. For one, he has barely changed in appearance: *'Same build, same hair, same everything.'* But instead of moving from the insufferable to the drearily palatable, he has done something quite different — *'He's mellowing into the bad guy.'* He might have tried, at the beginning, to impress, being *'a charming dweeb'*. There were those impressions of his colleagues. People laughed, barely.

Federer and Nadal, the good students of the tennis classroom, express no views of any consequence or interest, behave with impeccable dullness off the court, and will not be remembered for anything other than their tennis. *Bravo*, many will say. For them, it's the game and sponsorship deals. In a sense, they are ideal sportsmen — from the perspective of administrators, politicians and most spectators, they do what is expected of them. Each has a role and a brand. The world external to that, other than bank balances and prudent investments, is of no consequence.

Not for Djokovic. Be it the issue of [vaccinations](#) (he refuses to take them); his political views about [Kosovo](#) (how dare he have them); or the treatment of tennis players more broadly (how dare he speak for them), Novak has shown himself willing, to the point of being comically absurd, to stick his slender neck out. His passion remains scorching, his mental resilience awe-inspiring.

His treatment by the authorities prior to the [Australian Open](#) in 2022 was schizophrenic and scandalous: granted a visa to enter the country after supposedly satisfying COVID-19 entry requirements despite not being vaccinated; detained by the border authorities for not satisfying those same requirements; triumphant on a judicial review of his case; permitted to train for a week till the revocation

of the visa, a decision affirmed by the Federal Court.

The then Immigration Minister, [Alex Hawke](#), weighed up the issue of whether letting him remain might be good for the tournament or bad for Australia's COVID-19 program. Little consideration was given to the fact that the country's vaccination rate, at that point, was so high as to make any views Djokovic might have on vaccination irrelevant. The jabs had been accepted by an obedient populace; why not just let the man play tennis?

But the anti-vaxxers, loathed and reviled as "covidiot" and any other number of opprobrious tags, had come to terrify the political classes. To let this figure remain in Australia might sow the seeds of some unhelpful ideas. His deportation, deemed necessary, was celebrated with a lynch mob's smug satisfaction.

Along the way, Djokovic, in reliable fashion, dragged another issue into the spotlight: Australia's wretched, criminal treatment of [refugees](#). While he only did a brief stint of slumming at a hotel in Melbourne incarcerating such unfortunates, he managed to get a sneak peek of a barbaric policy, promising to expose it widely.

Refugee advocates such as [Paul Power](#) of the [Refugee Council of Australia](#), showing little gratitude for that fact, [scorned him](#). Instead of seeing the virtue of exposing the mistreatment of those seeking asylum in Australia, the handling of Djokovic had been a model of speedy, administrative justice, the very sort not afforded lowly plebs seeking sanctuary down under.

He wrote:

'Refugees seeking asylum in Australian airports don't even get access to lawyers before they are put on the next flight out of

Australia, let alone a chance to argue their case.'

Perhaps now Novak, Nole, the Joker, or simply Djokovic, might be appreciated for being the remarkably accomplished tennis player that he is. But this is unlikely to be so. He is simply too interesting to be appreciated merely for that.

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