

Did Pete Sampras Retire too Early?

By
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At the time of his retirement at the age of 32 in 2003, many regarded Sampras as the greatest male singles player of all time winning 14 grand slams and overtaking the previous record of 12 grand slams set by Roy Emerson in 1967. Yet as of 2019 three players have beaten this record and are currently still playing on the tour. Federer has 20 grand slams at the age of 38, Nadal has 18 grand slams at the age of 33 and Djokovic has 16 grand slams at the age of 32. Did Sampras retire too early?

Sampras won his first singles grand slam the US Open in 1990 at age 19 and won his final singles grand slam in 2002 being the US Open winner over Andre Agassi. Sampras did not compete in any tour events in the following 12 months, but he did not officially announce his retirement until August 2003, just prior to the US Open. He chose not to defend his title there, but his retirement announcement was timed so that he could say farewell at a special ceremony organized for him at the Open. Sampras announced his retirement at age 32. Sampras averaged $14/13=1.08$ slams over 13 years. Assuming Sampras could have played to the age of 38 then based on his averaged performance from winning his first grand slam in 1990 to his last grand slam in 2002 at age 31, Sampras could have potentially won $7*1.08 + 14 = 21-22$ slams. Of course, Sampras played best on grass winning 7 Wimbledon titles and would have been competing against Federer who also plays best on grass and currently holds the record of 8 Wimbledon titles. In fact, the only time Sampras played Federer was in the fourth round of the 2001 Wimbledon Championships where Federer defeated Sampras in 5 sets. Federer won his first grand slam at Wimbledon in 2003 and assuming Sampras could have played to the age of 38, Sampras would have been competing against Federer until 2009. Also, Djokovic won his first grand slam title at the Australian Open in 2008 and Nadal won his first Wimbledon title in 2008. Although the competition from Federer, Djokovic and Nadal may have prevented Sampras from possibly winning an estimated 21-22 slams (based on his averaged performance from the years 1990-2002 and assuming he would have kept playing to the age of 38), there is some evidence to suggest that he would have won more than 14 grand slams. Also, Andre Agassi played around the same time of Sampras, winning a total of 8 grand slams and retired at the age of 36. Agassi won his last grand slam in 2003 at the Australian Open at the age of 33, with a total of 8 grand slams. Hence, there is evidence to suggest that Sampras retired too early.