

# Shot Making – Tennis.com

FRIDAY, JUNE 03, 2011 /BY **STEVE TIGNOR**



PARIS—“We’ll see what Roger gives us,” Manuela Davies says. The 42-year-old German-turned-Floridian trains her big, light-gray Canon on Roger Federer as he gets set to serve. Federer has reached the second-most-important moment of a match for a professional tennis photographer like Davies: set point. He’s trying to close one out against Gael Monfils in their quarterfinal on Court Philippe Chatrier.

Davies and I are above the court, in the press section that’s primarily reserved for reporters. Photographers are allowed there, “as long as they don’t disturb the journalists,” Davies says. It’s not an ideal set-up. The writers sit in front of the photographers, which means they also stand up in front of them, often at crucial moments like set points. Which means they’ve been known to ruin a potentially classic shot or two. “You take your chances up here,” Davies says. It’s worth the risk to her and other photographers because this angle allows them to take shots with no background distractions. “You don’t see any ball kids,” Davies says, “or logos or umpires in the background. You just see the clay.”

The stadium goes silent as Federer tosses the ball to serve. The other photographers in the

area, who have been clicking casually and a little haphazardly for the last 10 minutes, train their lenses on Federer. They all want the reaction shot, they all want Federer roaring in full fist-pump. Davies, for one, isn't optimistic.

"When they're playing a French player here," she says, "they usually don't celebrate too much."

She's right. Federer watches a Monfils ground stroke float wide and slides toward it. He cups the ball on his strings, then turns and shakes his fist three times while looking up to his box. You realize how much luck goes into any photograph. It appeared at first that Federer would react while facing away from Davies' camera, toward the other side of the court. But he waited until after he had turned, right in the direction of Davies and the other photographers near her. Still, while Davies got the shot, Federer's reaction was too subdued. "That one's dumpable," she says as she previews the shot. It won't make the cut.

(Aside: This reminds me of *Sports Illustrated* photographer Neil Leifer's story about getting his most famous shot, that of Muhammad Ali growling over a prone Sonny Liston in 1965. In between Ali's legs, you can see the face of *SI*'s other photographer staring across at Leifer. He doesn't have a shot; he was, by blind luck, on the wrong side of the ring.)

Davies is at the French Open on *Tennis* magazine's photographer's credential, as she has been for the last few years. With that, she gets access to the grounds for the two weeks, and, just as important, a reserved space in the photographer's pit at courtside for the finals. Davies and her husband, Jeff, who is also a photographer, began shooting tennis at a small tournament in Orlando in 2000. She had loved photography since she was 10, but hadn't pursued it as a career when she was young. "My parents didn't think it was a real job," she says.



Davies met *Tennis*' photo editor, David Rosenberg, on a side court at Key Biscayne a few years later, and sold him her first pro shot. "It was Alex Corretja pouring water over his head," she says. "Which was nice, because he was one of my favorite players."

Federer is also a favorite, she says, as we make our way up to another photographer's position at Chatrier, at the very top of the stadium, on the roof above the TV booths. But he's not necessarily a great subject. "He's very elegant," Davies says of Federer, "but he doesn't show too much emotion. He's not great for reactions. His photos tend to be similar." It's emotion rather than elegance, the unusual rather than the typical, that sells.

"Rafa is good for facial expressions," Davies says, "and Monfils is one of the best." Monfils is also popular with photographers because of his penchant for hitting shots at full stretch. "He fills out the frame."

But the all-time best player for emotion on a tennis court isn't in Paris this year. "Serena Williams is No. 1 for reactions," Davies says, with awe in her voice.

It's a little dizzying at the top of the stadium. The flags snap in the wind, and only scattered claps and cheers from the audience make their way up this far.

“I’m a little afraid of heights,” Davies says, “so this took some getting used to.” She hoists her other camera, the “big gun,” a 400 mm Canon that’s about half Davies’ size and powerful enough to capture the players from this distance. Davies’ husband thinks it’s too big for her to be lugging all over the grounds, but she says she has to use what the other pros use to compete.

The trick from this vantage point, it turns out, is to watch the players’ shadows. They have to fit inside the frame, along with the player. A shot with a shadow cut off is useless. It’s not easy. Their shadows appear huge from here, like separate people following alongside them. Getting the right shot requires patience; you can go days without anything. Davies still marvels at a shot of a diving Juan Martin del Potro she took from here two years ago.

You also have to be on your toes; you never know when something shootable or memorable is going to happen. Davies is frustrated when Monfils suddenly “does some crazy stuff” around the net in between points. She didn’t catch it.

“I’ve gotten in the habit, after every point ends, to look back down at the other player,” Davies says. “You never know what they’re going to be doing, celebrating or falling on the court.”

It isn’t just the players she has to keep an eye on. Celebrities in the stands sell too. “I missed a good one yesterday,” Davies says. “Pippa Middleton was here. But then I had a picture of Rafa playing where you could see her up in the corner in the stands.” Davies sent the shot to an agency but wasn’t optimistic.

As in every other industry, it seems, photographers’ days have gotten longer even as the business has changed and shrunk. Davies works 16-hour days at the majors. Nine of them are typically spent shooting, and seven spent editing, cropping, and downloading the best shots to her website and sending them to various agencies. Her day often ends at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning.

“You hear the stories of the old days,” she says, “when everyone worked with film. They

just took their shots and dropped them off to be developed, and then went carousing together. That's pretty much over now. There's more work for us with digital." Davies got into the business just as film was on the way out. She never worked with it. Technology has made one part of the photographer's jobs easier, though. "The cameras have gotten much quieter," Davies says. McEnroe-esque rants at rampant shutterbugs have become less frequent, though Davies has gotten a few dirty looks.

"In Monte Carlo one year, Coria slid toward me while I was clicking. He missed the shot and gave me an irritated look."

But it isn't just the technology that has been transformed. "The business is different than it was even two years ago," Davies says. More magazines have yearly contracts with Getty Images now, which allows them to use more photographs. There's less opportunity for independent photographers, so Davies has shifted to doing work for equipment companies, player websites, and memorabilia firms. It often means she has to shift what she's looking for in a shot as well.



"The player sites don't like the shots of their players straining," she says. "They want them to look calm and relaxed and pretty while they're playing."

Davies works all four majors, though she's not doing the French/Wimbledon double this year. It would be too much time apart from her husband in Florida. It was a tough decision for her, because she loves Wimbledon. "It has the best light," she says, "And

you can get really close there. The players are all in white, and there are no ads in the background. The only problem is that you might not see the sun there for three days.” On this day, from high above Chatrier, with the Eiffel Tower in the distance, the sun begins its slow—very slow, in Paris—descent, and a shadow creeps across the clay. It makes for striking images—when the players move into the shadow, it can look like a natural studio shot (see the Federer pic above). Other photographers begin to gather. Davies, despite the dumpable Federer reaction shot, manages to capture a spontaneous moment. Monfils double faults, raises his racquet, and slams it to the court. Davies has the moment, in pixels, forever, shadows safely inside the frame. Not bad for 16 hours of work.

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*Photographs by Manuela Davies/Doublexposure; Ray Giubilo*

Tennis.com – <http://www.tennis.com/pro-game/2011/06/shot-making/40302/#.UXW0Tytg90o>