

# Game Winners: Pete Sampras' Too Early US Open Title

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"I never wanted to be the great guy or the colorful guy or the interesting guy. I wanted to be the guy who won titles." That's what Pete Sampras said, and that's what he did.

Known for his often unreturnable serves, Pistol Pete won 14 Grand Slams, which was the most ever by a man when he retired in 2002. Even more impressive? He still holds the ATP record of six year-end No. 1 rankings, further proof that he's one of the greatest [tennis players](#) to ever take the court.

With the [2016 US Open](#) beginning this week, we tracked Sampras down to chat about working with [American Express](#) to bring a virtual fan experience to the Open, his toughest opponent, and what it took for him to win his first Grand Slam title at the New York City venue... at just 19 years old!

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**I want to start by talking about your first big win, a Grand Slam title in 1990 against Andre Agassi. Were you two friends at that point?**

I didn't know Andre that well—we played some junior tennis together. I was in LA and he was at [Nick] Bollettieri's [Tennis Academy in Florida]. So I knew of him and [he made his mark a lot sooner than I did](#). He was No. 3 in the world. I was up and coming and had a pretty good summer.

And then when the US Open time came I just had two incredible weeks. I got in the zone and was serving great and playing really good tennis. And then to play him in the final and to play the way I did, it was exciting. It was also a little overwhelming. I wasn't quite developed as a man and comfortable in my own skin. My game wasn't quite developed either. I just had an incredible weekend and was excited but was also wondering what was next. [The win] just kind of came out of nowhere. I was seeded 14th and then two weeks later won the US Open.

**What was it like to beat Agassi in straight sets? What were you thinking as you entered that third set after winning the first two?**

I remember walking into the match and I wasn't all that nervous. I slept well the night before and I was relaxed and ready to go. I had nothing to lose, and that's a good feeling sometimes, because you can play more freely.

So I just wanted to keep it going. I wasn't even expected to get into the final and I could sense he was a little nervous in the match—he was the heavy favorite. So playing the third set was like playing the first couple. I just continued to serve well and put the pressure on him, and he missed a few. And you know, tennis can go quick sometimes. I just got into the zone and the next thing I knew I was holding up the trophy—it was a blur. I think Andre felt the pressure and the combination of everything, which is why it was a straight set victory.



**You're known for your incredibly quick and accurate serve. Was serving always such a strong point in your game?**

I didn't always have a big serve. When I was younger, I was a short kid and didn't have a lot of power and just arched it over. But as I got older, I started to come around and [my serve] became a little bit of a weapon. And from 19 on, I just got more power and got more confident, and it became my best shot—a shot I relied on heavily.

**You were only 19 at the time, the youngest male singles champion ever! Do you even remember what was going through your mind?**

Just playing the match itself, I had this feeling like I could hit an ace whenever I wanted. It all just clicked—it was the best match I'd played for those two weeks. I just remember winning and doing press, and my agent was like 'I got you booked on three talk shows the next day,' and I wasn't ready for it. I wish I'd won my first major a little older. You know, I'm not going to give it back, but I [had] just turned 19 and that's quite young. You win the Open, and it takes some time to even prepare yourself for the aftermath.

**How many times did you and Agassi play each other over your career? Did you look forward to it or were you kind of like, *Ugh this guy again?!?***

Early on we were excited playing one another. And as we got older, we appreciated our rivalry more and more. And then we played that epic match at the US Open in the quarterfinal when we just transcended the sport. We played a couple finals at the US Open, and we respected each other. We were very different but we still got along quite well. And you just look forward to playing the best. [No question, he was my toughest opponent](#). He definitely brought out the best in me.

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**You held the No. 1 ranking for an entire year in 1997. You were also the year-end top-ranked player for six years in a row. How hard is that to do?**

The hardest thing to do in sports is stay at number one. Getting there is hard but it's twice as hard to stay there, and I was able to do that for six straight years. People [are] gunning after you and trying to knock you off your spot, so no question, you feel the pressure. I just kept it strictly about the tennis and didn't want anything to get in the way. So my personality helped—even-keeled and not too up-and-down. I let my racquet do the talking.

**In 2001, you lost to Roger Federer [at Wimbledon]. That ended a long winning streak for you—31 matches. Knowing the player that Federer has become, does that make that loss any less hard?**

That loss? No. I didn't like losing against Roger or anyone. Wimbledon was a place I always came through. Looking back now, you saw Roger's talent in that match and he got all the shots and took it to a whole new level. I remember it was 5-setter and I lost 7-5 in the fifth and that was my disappointment. Did I think at that time when Roger was 19 [how great he'd be]? No, I didn't. I thought he would be a great player, but to take it where he has is incredible.

**Tennis is such an individual sport, and matches can go on for four or five hours. What is it like to be out there with all eyes on you?**

I always did my best with more pressure. Wimbledon was the biggest pressure I felt and I won seven finals there without a loss. I felt like the bigger the match, the better I played. It's trusting in yourself, it's trusting in your technique and having calm nerves. I'm not even worried about the cameras or the eyes, it's just who I'm playing and it seemed like I was better than everyone in my prime. You get used to the cameras and you get used to the people, but maybe I wanted it just a touch more, and I had the talent to do it. Combine all those things and you can have a pretty good career.



**You've played doubles as well with a few different players. Who has been your favorite doubles partner?**

I made my first break with Courier. We were 17, 18, [and it was just] nice to make a few extra bucks and play a few extra matches. But as we got better and became more dominant singles [players], that went away. And then [I played with] McEnroe quite a bit in the David's Cup. Both those guys were great players and good friends. Certainly with McEnroe, our personalities were actually pretty good for each other. He got me pumped; I calmed him down. He's for sure the greatest doubles player of all time, so I enjoyed that experience.

**Did you have any pre-match rituals? Anything you would do before you came out? Any mantras you'd say?**

No mantra. Just as I got older I was getting off to slower starts in my matches so my last few years, at the Open especially, I would go through the corridor there and put on some music just to make sure I had a good sweat going. I was a big Pearl Jam fan, so quite a bit of Pearl Jam. Sometimes I might put on a little hip-hop. Music is a good device to make you feel different emotions. I'd put on my headphones and sprint a little bit, and then stretch, and sprint a little more and get pumped up.

**Speaking of pre-match rituals, let's talk about the American Express Pro Walk. Why did you decide to team up with them on it?**

I did a deal with American Express a few years back when I played and I've been a card member since 1989 and they're a solid company. They came to me a few months back about doing an interactive fan experience for the US Open. The spot is basically trying to explain to the fans what it's like to step out on the court at the Open. [Back then] I was nervous, I was excited, I was trying to figure out what I was doing and who I was playing—just all the emotions that I felt walking down the tunnel.

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**What is the experience like? Would you say it trumps any other Grand Slam tournament?**

You know, every one is different. You walk down that tunnel [at the Open] and see all the pictures of the great players and past champions. It's not a long walk; it's a short walk. And you just feel the cameras and the sound guys are right in front of you and you're focused on what you're trying to do. You stop for a second and the camera puts you on the big screen, and the crowd goes nuts, and you just feel like 'OK, this is showtime.' That's why you play—for moments like walking out on that court. It's the biggest stadium in the world and the New York crowd is energetic and they bring it every match. It's just a cool experience and we want to make sure the fans can be a part of it.

**You've always been a fan favorite. In difficult matches can the support of fans help you push through to the end?**

Absolutely. You rely on the fans and the energy to play great tennis. If you're mentally down, they start getting louder and start screaming for you, and you can push a little harder. It's an adrenaline rush.

**Knowing what you know now, what would you tell your 19-year-old self as you got ready to walk out of the tunnel and onto center court that day in 1990?**

I would tell myself, 'you're going to feel the crowd, you're going to feel the emotions, and you're going to feel a little nervous. But you've been playing tennis your whole life, and it's the same size court as what you grew up playing on. I'd tell myself, 'just move your feet.' Sometimes when you get nervous, you don't move—you get stuck to the ground. And I would say 'have a good warm-up, keep it simple, and just win.'