

2024 Class - Commencement Address by Roger Federer at Dartmouth

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(0:00 - 0:55)

Thank you everybody, it's great to see you and hello class of 2024, this is so exciting. It's an incredible feeling to be here with you and I am so excited to join you today, really you have no idea how excited I am. Keep in mind this is literally only the second time I've ever set foot on a college campus, second time ever, but for some reason you're giving me a doctorate degree.

I just came here to give a speech but I get to go home as Dr. Roger, that's a pretty nice bonus. So Dr. Roger, this has to be my most unexpected victory ever, thank you. President Beilock, the board of trustees, faculty members, thank you for this honor.

(0:56 - 2:12)

President Beilock, I'm incredibly grateful and I'll try my best not to choke. I'm a little bit outside of my comfort zone today, this is not my usual scene and these are not my usual clothes. Do you dress like this every day at Dartmouth? The robe is hard to move in, keep in mind I've worn shorts almost every day for the last 35 years.

I'm not a person who gives a lot of speeches like this, maybe the worst, but an important speech was when I started on the Swiss national team. I was only 17 years old and I was so nervous I couldn't even say more than four words, happy to be here. Well here we are 25 years later and I still feel a little nervous, but I've got a lot more than four words to say to you, starting with I'm happy to be here, happy to be with you here on the green.

As you might have heard, grass is my favorite surface. The big green, it must be destiny. And there's another reason I'm here and I can sum it up in two words, beer pong.

(2:15 - 2:59)

Or pong as you call it and I guess you can all call it what you like, I'm told Dartmouth invented it. Now this sport, wait, is pong a sport? It is? Okay, or is it a way of life? Either way, Dartmouth is the Wimbledon of pong and it's even raining like in Wimbledon. So I'm glad to work on my shots with some of you.

These past few days I'm actually thinking about turning pro, but I know there's more to Dartmouth than pong. I've spent an amazing couple of days here and you've made Hanover feel like home. The mountains here are exactly like the Swiss Alps, just shorter.

(3:00 - 4:56)

But I'm loving it here. I got a chance to hit some balls with my kids at the Boss Tennis Center yesterday. I did a walk-em.

I got to climb the Baker Tower. I saw some incredible views and took my kids to see the Dr. Zoo's books at the library. And of course, also I crushed some chocolate chip cookies from Foco and I ate some EBA's chicken sandwich from Lou's.

I've done it all. But there's another big reason I'm here. Tony G, class of 93.

Are we rapping now? Tony Gotzig is my business partner, my longtime agent, and one of my closest friends and most important, the proud father of Isabella, class of 2024. From Tony and now Bea, I know how special this place truly is and how loyal you are to each other and how obsessive you are about this color green. I was with their family, including Mary Jo and Nico, the day Bea got into Dartmouth.

I remember how crazy happy she was. I saw a smile and a level of excitement on her face that I'd never seen before. But then I got here and actually everybody is smiling like this.

I can see how proud you are of this place and this moment. You've worked so hard to get here. I have huge respect for all of you, what you have achieved, and for the families and friends who have helped to achieve it, let's give them a big hand.

I'm even more impressed because I left school at the age of 16 to play tennis full-time, so I never went to college. But I did graduate recently. I graduated tennis.

I know the word is retire. Roger Federer retired from tennis. Retired, the word is awful.

(4:57 - 10:05)

You wouldn't say you retired from college, right? It sounds terrible. Like you, I finished one big thing and I'm moving on to the next. Like you, I'm figuring out what that is.

Graduates, I feel your pain. I know what it's like when people keep asking what your plan is for the rest of your life. They ask me, now that you are not a professional tennis player, what do you do? I don't know, and it's okay not to know.

So what do I do with my time? I'm a dad first, so I guess I drive my kids to school. I play chess online against strangers. I vacuum the house.

No, in truth, I'm loving the life of a tennis graduate. I graduated tennis in 2022 and you are graduating college in 2024, so I have a head start in answering the questions of what's next. Today, I want to share a few lessons I've relied on through this transition.

Let's call them tennis lessons. I hope they will be useful in the world beyond Dartmouth. So here's the first.

Effortless is a myth. I mean it. I say it as someone who has heard that word a lot.

Effortless. People would say my play was effortless. Most of the time, they meant it as a compliment, but it used to frustrate me when they would say he barely broke a sweat, or he's even trying.

The truth is I had to work very hard to make it look easy. I spent years whining, swearing, sorry, throwing my racket before I learned to keep my cool. The wake-up call came early in my career when an opponent at the Italian Open publicly questioned my mental discipline.

He said, Roger will be the favorite for the first two hours, then I'll be the favorite after that. I was puzzled at first, but eventually I realized what he was trying to say. Everybody can play well the first two hours.

You're fit, you're fast, you're clear, and after two hours, your legs get wobbly, your mind starts wondering, and your discipline starts to fade. It made me understand I have so much work ahead of me, and I'm ready to go on this journey. I get it.

My parents, my coaches, my fitness coach, everyone had been calling me out, and now even my rivals were doing it. Players, thank you. I'm eternally grateful for what you did, because you made me work harder.

So I started to train harder, a lot harder actually, but then I realized winning effortlessly is the ultimate achievement. I got that reputation because my warm-ups at the tournaments were so casual that people didn't think I'd been training hard. But I had been working hard before the tournament, when nobody was watching.

Maybe you've seen a version of this at Dartmouth. How many times did you feel like your classmates were racking up A after A without even trying, while you were pulling all-nighters? Loading up on caffeine maybe, or crying softly in a corner of Sanborn Library? Hopefully, like me, you learned that effortless is a myth. I didn't get where I got on pure talent alone.

I got there by trying to outwork my opponents. I believe in myself, but belief in yourself has to be earned. There was a moment in 2003 when my self-belief really kicked in.

I was at the ATP finals, where only the best eight players qualify, and I beat some of the top players I really, really admired by aiming right at their strength. Before, I would run away from their strength. If a guy had a strong forehand, I would try to hit his backhand.

But now, I would try to go after his forehand. I tried to beat the baseliners from the baseline. I tried to beat the attackers by attacking.

I tried to beat the net rushers from the net. I took a chance by doing that. So why did I

do it? To amplify my game and expand my options.

You need a whole arsenal of strength, so if one of them breaks down, you've got something left. When your game is clicking like that, winning is easy, relatively. Then there are days when you just feel broken.

Your back hurts, your knee hurts. I had that a lot. Maybe you're a little sick or scared, but you still find a way to win, and those are the victories we can be most proud of, because they prove that you can win not just when you're at your best, but especially when you aren't.

Yes, talent matters. I'm not going to stand here and tell you it doesn't, but talent has a broad definition. Most of the time, it's not about having a gift.

It's about having grit. In tennis, a great forehand with sick racket head speed can be called a talent, but in tennis, like in life, discipline is also a talent, and so is patience. Trusting yourself is a talent.

Embracing the process. Loving the process is a talent. Managing your life.

Managing yourself. These can be talents, too. Some people are born with them.

(10:06 - 10:36)

Everybody has to work at them. From this day forward, some people are going to assume that because you graduated from Dartmouth, it all is going to come easy for you, and you know what? Let them believe that as long as you don't. Okay, second lesson.

It's only a point. Let me explain. You can work harder than you thought possible and still lose.

I have many times. Tennis is brutal. There's no getting around the fact that every tournament ends the same way.

(10:37 - 10:53)

One player gets a trophy. Every other player gets back on a plane, stares out of the window, and thinks, how the hell did I miss that shot? Imagine if today only one of you got a degree. Congratulations, this year's graduate.

(10:53 - 11:22)

Let's give her a hand. The rest of you, the other 1,000 of you, better luck next time. So you know, I tried not to lose, but I did lose, sometimes big.

For me, one of the biggest was the finals at Wimbledon in 2008, me versus Nadal. Some

call it the greatest match of all time. Okay, all respect to Rafa, but I think it would have been way, way better if I had won.

(11:24 - 12:20)

Losing at Wimbledon was a big deal, because Wimbledon, winning Wimbledon is everything. Obviously, except winning that Dartmouth Master Pong title sophomore summer, it is. I mean, I've gotten to play in some amazing venues around the world, but when you have the chance to walk onto Centre Court at Wimbledon, the cathedral of tennis, and when you finish as the champion, you feel the magnitude of the moment, and there's nothing like it.

In 2008, I was going for a record six consecutive titles. I was playing for history. I'm not going to walk you through the match point by point.

If we did, we would be here for hours, almost five hours to be exact. There were rain delays. The sun went down.

Rafa won two sets. I won the next two sets in tie breaks, and we found ourselves at seven all in the fifth. I understand why people focus on the end.

(12:21 - 16:20)

The final minute is so dark, I could barely see the chalk on the grass, but looking back, I feel like I lost at the very first point of the match. I looked across the net, and I saw a guy who just a few weeks earlier crushed me in straight sets at the French Open, and I thought, this guy is maybe hungrier than I am, and he's finally got my number. It took me onto the third set before I remembered, hey, buddy, you're the five-time defending champion, and you're on grass, by the way.

You know how to do this, but I came too late, and Rafa won, and it was well-deserved. Some defeats hurt more than others. I knew I would never get another shot at six in a row.

I lost Wimbledon. I lost my number one ranking, and suddenly people said, he had a great run. Is this the changing of the guard? But I knew what I had to do, keep working and keep competing.

In tennis, perfection is impossible. In the 1,526 singles matches I played in my career, I won almost 80% of those matches. Now, I have a question for you.

What percentage of points do you think I won in those matches? Only 54%. In other words, even top-ranked tennis players win barely more than half of the points they play. When you lose every second point on average, you learn not to dwell on every shot.

You teach yourself to think, okay, I double-faulted, it's only a point. Okay, I came to the

net, then I got passed again, it's only a point. Even a great shot, an overhead backhand smash that ends up on ESPN's top ten playlist, that too is just a point.

So here's why I'm telling you this. When you're playing a point, it has to be the most important thing in the world, and it is. But when it's behind you, it's behind you.

This mindset is really crucial, because it frees you to fully commit to the next point, and the next point after that, with intensity, clarity, and focus. The truth is, whatever game you play in life, sometimes you're going to lose. A point, a match, a season, a job, it's a rollercoaster with many ups and downs.

And it's natural when you're down to doubt yourself, and to feel sorry for yourself. And by the way, your opponents have self-doubt too, don't ever forget that. But negative energy is wasted energy.

You want to become a master at overcoming hard moments. That is, to me, the sign of a champion. The best in the world are not the best because they win every point, it's because they know they'll lose again and again, and have learned how to deal with it.

You accept it, cry it out if you need to, and then force a smile. You move on, be relentless, adapt and grow, work harder, work smarter, remember, work smarter. Lesson three.

Are you guys still with me? For a guy who left school at 16, this is a lot of lessons as well for me too. So here's the third one. Life is bigger than the court.

A tennis court is a small space, 2,106 square feet to be exact. That's for singles matches, not much bigger than a dorm room. Okay, make that three or four dorm rooms in mass row.

I worked a lot, learned a lot, and ran a lot of miles in that small space, but the world is a whole lot bigger than that. Even when I was just starting out, I knew that tennis could show me the world, but tennis could never be the world. I knew that if I was lucky, maybe I could play competitively until my late 30s, maybe even 41.

(16:20 - 17:37)

But even when I was in the top five, it was important to me to have a life, a rewarding life, full of travel, culture, friendships, and especially family. I never abandoned my roots, I never forgot where I came from, but I also never lost my appetite to see the very big world. I left home at 14 to go to school in the French part of Switzerland for two years, and I was horribly homesick at first, but learned to love a life on the move.

But these are the reasons I never burned out, maybe. I was excited to travel the world, but not just as a tourist. I realized pretty early that I wanted to serve other people in

other countries.

Motivated by my South African mother, I started a foundation to empower children through education. Early childhood education is something we take for granted in a place like Switzerland, but in Sub-Saharan Africa, 75% of children do not have access to preschool. Think about that, 75%.

Like all children, they need a good start if they're going to fulfill their potential, and so far we've helped nearly three million children to get a quality education and help to train more than 55,000 teachers. It's been an honor. Thank you.

(17:40 - 17:59)

It's been an honor, and it's been humbling. An honor to help tackle this challenge, and humbling to see how complex it is. Humbling to try to read stories to children in one of the languages of Lesotho, humbling also to arrive in rural Zambia and have to explain what tennis actually is.

(17:59 - 19:50)

I vividly remember drawing a tennis court on the chalkboard for the kids to see, because I asked them what tennis was, and one kid said, it's the one with the table, right? With the paddles? Pong again. It's everywhere. I have to tell you, it's a wonderful feeling to visit these incredible rural places and to find classrooms full of children who are learning and reading and playing like children everywhere should be allowed to do.

It's also inspiring to see what they grow up to be. Some have become nurses, teachers, computer programmers. It's been an exciting journey, and I feel like we're only at the beginning with so much to learn.

I can't believe we've just celebrated 20 years of this work, especially because I started the foundation before I thought I was ready. I was 22 at the time. Like many of you are today, I was not ready for anything other than tennis, but sometimes you've got to take a chance and then figure it out.

Philanthropy can mean a lot of things. It can mean starting a non-profit or donating money, but it can also mean contributing your ideas, your time, your energy to a mission that is larger than yourself. All of you have so much to give, and I hope you will find your own unique ways to make a difference, because life really is much bigger than the court.

As a student at Dartmouth, you picked a major and went deep, but you also went wide. Engineers learned art history, athletes even sang a cappella, and computer scientists learned to speak German. Dartmouth's legendary football coach, Buddy Teevens, used to recruit players by telling their parents, your son will be a great football player when it's football time, and a great student when it's academic time, and a great person all the

time.

(19:51 - 20:32)

That is what a Dartmouth education is all about. Tennis has given me so many memories, but my off-court experiences are the ones I carry forward just as much. The places I've gotten to travel, the platform that lets me give back, and most of all, the people I've met along the way.

Tennis, like life, is a team sport. Yes, you stand alone on your side of the net, but your success depends on your team, your coaches, your teammates, even your rivals. All these influences help you to make who you are.

(20:32 - 20:53)

It's not an accident that my business partnership with Tony is called Team 8, a play on words, teammate. All the work we do together reflects that team spirit, the strong bond we have with each other and our colleagues, and the athletes we represent, and with partners and sponsors. These personal relationships matter the most.

(20:54 - 24:20)

I learned this way of thinking from the best, my parents, of course. They've always supported me, always encouraged me, and always understood what I most wanted and needed to be. A family is a team.

I feel so very lucky that my incredible wife, Mirka, who makes every joy in my life even brighter, and our four amazing children, Mila, Shaleen, Leo, and Lenny, are here with me today. And more important, that we are here for each other every day. Graduates, I know the same is true for you.

Your parents, your families, they made the sacrifices to get you here, and they have shared your triumphs and your struggles. They will always, always be in your corner. And not only them, as you head out into the world, don't forget, you get to bring all of this with you.

This culture, this energy, these people, this color green. It's everywhere. The friends who have pushed you and supported you to become the best versions of yourself.

The friends who will never stop cheering for you, just like today. And you will keep making friends in the Dartmouth community, possibly even today. So right now, turn to the people on your left and on your right.

And maybe this is the first time you've met. You might not share experiences or viewpoints, but you share this memory and a whole lot more. When I left tennis, I became a former tennis player.

But you are not a former anything. You are future record breakers, world travelers, future volunteers and philanthropists, future winners and future leaders. I'm here to tell you from the other side of graduation, that leaving a familiar world behind and finding new ones is incredibly, deeply, wonderfully exciting.

So there, Dartmouth, are your tennis lessons for today. Effortless is a myth, as we heard. It's only a point.

Life is bigger than the court. Wait, I mean, I got one more lesson. President Beilock, can I have my racket real quick? Thank you.

Okay, so for the forehand, for those who play tennis, you'll want to use an Eastern grip, okay? You keep your knuckles apart, just a little bit. Obviously, you don't want to squeeze the grip too hard. Switching from forehand to backhand should be easy.

Also remember, it all starts with the footwork. And to take back is important and the same as it follows through. No, this is not a metaphor.

It's just good technique. Dartmouth, it has been an incredible honor for me. Thank you for the honorary degree.

Thank you for making me part of your really big day. I'm glad I got to meet so many of you these past few days. And if you are ever in Switzerland, or anywhere else in the world, and you see me on the street, even 20 or 30 years from now, whether I have gray hair or no hair, I want you to stop me and say, I was there that day on the green.

I'm a member of your class, the class of 2024. I will never forget this day. Yeah.

(24:27 - 24:51)

I will never forget this day. And I know you won't either. You have worked so hard to get here and left nothing on the court or the pong table.

From one graduate to another, I can't wait to see what you all do next. Whatever game you choose, give it your best. Go for your shots.

Play free. Try everything. And most of all, be kind to one another and have fun out there.

(24:52 - 24:54)

Congratulations again, class of 2024.

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