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Good Weekend

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SATURDAY
THE AGE



RETURN SERVE

Rod Laver gets back into the swing of life ... and love

BY *Konrad Marshall*

LOVE ALL

The only player in history to win the Grand Slam twice, Rod Laver is adored by tennis fans and lauded by many as the greatest ever. After some tough years, he's back at centre court – and making up for lost time.

BY *Konrad Marshall*

ROD LAVER is watching me. Staring right at me, in fact. Studying my stance and gauging my grip. Checking out my waggle. Waiting for me to hit the first golf ball of the morning. And I am petrified.

I have only myself to blame, of course. I negotiated the creation of this moment. How about we actually *do* something for our interview, I asked his manager, instead of chatting in an office?

And I should be giddy that my plan has come to pass. The warm breeze on the American west coast is perfumed with sage and buckwheat. The sunshine is burnishing every coppery ridge and mesa in the coastal desert north of San Diego. And the sky, well, the sky is that wondrous geospecific hue of Pacific Ocean azure and misty heat haze that might as well be its own trademarked Pantone. Call it Southern California Blue.

Only my rusty swing, performed at a driving range in front of a designated National Living Treasure – a man with a statue, a stadium and an international tennis tournament named after him – could spoil this moment. “Well, we’re here,” says Laver, sighing contentedly, squinting into the sun at La Costa country club. “Now’s your chance to go whack.”

And so I cradle the TaylorMade driver I bought only yesterday, and you better believe I wallop that ball triumphantly long and hard and high and ... oh dear, wait a minute ... *wide*. Wait, wider still. Our heads swivel silently in sync, together tracking the uncooperative Titleist as it drifts to the right, a vicious skyward slice soaring over the boundary netting of the driving range and onto the aluminium roof of a faraway outbuilding, where it crashes. With my dignity.

Shit.

Laver looks at his feet, and I at mine. “I might have a hit,” he says, turning from my shame. He flashes a grin: “You’re gonna kill someone.”

Over the next hundred or so shanks and cuts and occasional flush strikes, the still wiry and ever-ruddy Laver proves a great golfer and greater company. Over three hours together, we enjoy a drive around his posh hilly neighbourhood in suburban Carlsbad, lunch at a sandwich shop in a strip mall, and kick back for a nice rest in the shade of his backyard. We cover the bones of the biography that built a tennis champion – probably the greatest of all time (more on that later) – but more importantly, we discuss what’s been happening in his life lately.

PHOTOGRAPH BY *Shaughn and John*



Rod Laver at home in California. Now 80, he has recovered from a brush with death: "I couldn't talk. I couldn't tell the time. I couldn't do anything," he says.



That last part is crucial because Laver, now 80, has become one of those mythic figures in the global sporting firmament. He's not quite so reclusive as the late Sir Donald Bradman (a man who, in many ways, the world never fully knew) but nor has he graced the retirement stage as eagerly as, say, Pelé, or Jack Nicklaus, or Michael Jordan, or the late Muhammad Ali – and make no mistake, Laver is comfortably in that immortal club.

It turns out, however, that his avoidance of the spotlight owes precious little to country-boy shyness or the magnanimous modesty of a champ, and instead to a long and painful run of grave personal misfortune. Twenty years ago, you see, Laver suffered a serious stroke – one that all but killed him. Upon emerging from rehabilitation, his wife Mary fell ill with an array of her own crippling, cruel ailments, meaning their two traumas virtually overlapped, Laver doting on her every need for almost a decade before she died in 2012. All of which means he stayed mostly within mournful shadow for around 15 years until, slowly, he began inching back into the light of public life.

You might have seen him at an event or two recently – the standing ovations are hard to miss. What you are witnessing is a genial old man wading into a reverent sea of adoration he did not fully know existed, one that will continue washing warmly over him through 2019, the golden anniversary of his defining achievement in tennis, the year he became the only person in history to complete two Grand Slams (winning all four major tournaments – the Australian Open, French Open, Wimbledon and US Open – in a calendar year).

Popping up in the front row at Melbourne Park these past few years, he's almost become the silent face of the tournament – the one who reminds Australia of its history in the game – but it's easy to forget such visits home were once infrequent. Rare even.

Remember the 2006 Australian Open? He presented the trophy to a weeping Roger Federer, who rested his snuffly nose and red eyes on Laver's shoulder, a moment that became instantly iconic. Few people understood that such trips were never more than a few days long. "He was like a cat on a hot tin roof," says one friend. "He just wanted to get home to Mary." Now though, he luxuriates in his tennis, following long matches, meeting umpires and officials, chatting with the top talent. He studies and loves the game.

Arthritis in his left wrist keeps him from playing his chosen sport these days, and so back on the driving range, between swings of his trusty eight iron, Laver flicks through his iPhone, showing me exactly what fun an octogenarian gent can have by diving back into life. Brekkie with Novak Djokovic. Hanging out in the Windy City with John McEnroe (who loves Laver) then a big hug with Roger Federer (who loves him even more). At the keyboard, in the hot seat, answering #asklaver questions on Twitter. Signing copies of *Rod Laver: A Memoir* (2013) at Macy's. Sipping a pint from a big glass stein with a frosted message: *Cheers and beers to 80 years!* Chatting with golfers Tom Watson and Adam Scott at Carnoustie, Scotland. Playing a round with golfers Gary Player and Fred Couples at nearby St Andrews.

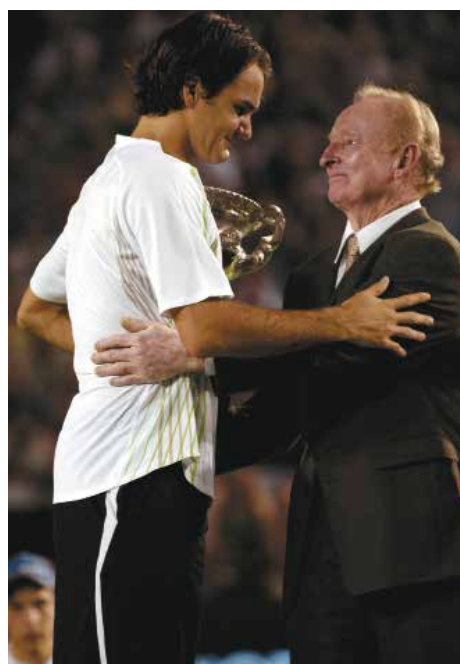
Visiting the Pantheon in Rome, then walking all four kilometres to the Colosseum. Eating deep-dish pizza with Nick Kyrgios. Shaking hands with Joe Hockey in Washington, DC, at the dedication of a new grass court for his ambassadorial residence. Meeting David Beckham. And Bear Grylls. And Bill Gates. A hot lap on a race track near London, in a bright yellow Porsche 911 GT3 RS, with Mark Webber behind the wheel, driving like the devil.

That was a slice of 2018 for Rod Laver. What did you do with your year?

The man is in the midst of not only touring the world but also cultivating a host of commercial partnerships (including ambassadorial roles with Rolex, ANZ and Dunlop) while nurturing the nascent Laver Cup tennis tournament (a new concept which, a little like the Ryder Cup in golf, pits an annually selected Team Europe against Team World).

He's constantly catching up with salad-day pals such as Fred Stolle and Tony Roche, Ken Rosewall and John Newcombe. Oh, and there's one other important development worth sharing: "The Rocket" has a girlfriend, with whom he's smitten, and who is in Melbourne for the first time now, joining him for the 2019 Australian Open.

And so, after all the pain and tumult of the past two decades, our own Rodney George Laver, AC, MBE, and arguably, GOAT (Greatest Of All Time), is making the most of this moment, making up for lost time, and having the time of his life.



Top: Rod Laver and Mary Benson pass through an arch of tennis racquets after their marriage in 1966; left: Laver presents the 2006 Australian Open trophy to an emotional Roger Federer.

L AVER TELLS the story of his brush with death over lunch at a sandwich and beer joint called Board & Brew. He comes here by himself occasionally, always ordering roast beef on a hoagie roll, with a bowl of jus for dipping. "I had a stroke," he says, taking a bite. "You probably know about that?"

I did, but not to the extent he now reveals. It happened in 1998, in a suite at the Westwood Marquis hotel, not far from Hollywood. He was just shy of 60, and doing an interview for ESPN.

"He came into that room very fit, walking on his toes, lively," says Alex Gibney, now a documentary maker in New York, but then a TV sports producer. "I remember noticing that big left arm lobster claw [Laver's playing arm was famously larger than his right], bulging out of a short-sleeved shirt. He was very much with it."

The ESPN interview began with a few soft lob questions, like where Laver was from. Rockhampton, he answered, a hot place: "That's where the crows fly backwards just to keep the dust out of their eyes." Soon, though, his right leg began to feel numb. His right hand and fingers grew cold. His right arm tingled with pins and needles. His answers grew garbled. "He started to lean in a very odd way, and sweat began to appear under his right arm," says Gibney. "He began to speak in non sequiturs. Odd words would pop into a sentence where they didn't belong."

Gibney quietly called the hotel's front desk to ask for a doctor. He also asked his cameraman – surreptitiously, so as not to alarm Laver – to go downstairs and call for an ambulance. Laver went into a dizzy spin. He swayed a moment, then fell while vomiting violently. Oxygen is what you need in such situations, and so Laver was lucky for the intervention of the crew, and the fact that the prestigious UCLA Medical Center was nearby. The doctors there asked him his name, which he slurred. He tugged at the coat of one and stammered: "I used to be a fairly good tennis player."

"They did a whole lot of CAT scans," Laver says now, sipping his water. "Twenty-eight, I think, because there was a bleed in the brain. It was leaking. Not good."

He went in and out of intensive care, his temperature spiking at 42°C. When awake, he says he was delusional, nonsensical, repeating words that didn't exist, pulling out his IV drips and swatting imaginary butterflies. He was paralysed on the right-hand side. One doctor said he was unlikely to walk again, or talk again. "I didn't want to believe any of that shit. But I couldn't talk. I couldn't tell the time," he says, shaking his head. "I couldn't do anything."

Laver's wife, Mary, stayed by his side in a chair, holding his hand, speaking for him. If the wrong meal was placed in front of him, the nurses would hear about it. If a doctor said he would update the family by the end of the day but hadn't, Mary would call at 4.55pm sharp. Over the weeks, he made small gains. With help he stood, then uttered a word or two. He wanted to leave but each morning the doctors asked him three questions (*What city is this? What hospital are you in? Who is the president?*) and each morning he failed their little test.

"I could get Los Angeles and UCLA, but the president ... I just screwed it up every time," he says. "It was Clinton, but I kept saying Carter."

After six weeks, he was ready to begin recovery at home. Internal doors were removed, ramps added and personal trainers hired. The legendary coach Harry Hopman – who gave

Laver the sardonic nickname “Rocket” due to his lack of speed – described Laver at 16 as “scrawny and slow but a harder worker than anyone else”, and the description seemed to fit him again at 60. His recovery began to mirror his tennis game, too, in that it was built on an unshakable self-belief that led him to attack, with audacity and without fear, especially when vulnerable. “Rocket was never more dangerous than when you backed him into a corner,” says friend and contemporary Fred Stolle. “He was always going to fight the stroke.”

After three months, Laver moved his right foot. Within six months, he took a few steps. A friend drove him to a tennis court outside Palm Springs, positioned a wobbly Laver at the net, then lobbed easy balls at him. At first Laver stood still, racquet raised. Later, he tilted his arm to meet each volley. Within 18 months, he hit faint, feathery strokes. “My muscle memory began to come back,” he says. “I was given a reprieve.”

It took a few years to get to where he is now – and he is still not fully recovered. His right foot is largely numb, so he has to judge steps carefully. When tired, words come slowly. He tells the occasional story that wanders, or fixates on names and places – as the stories told by old grandpas often tend to do. But you don’t interrupt a living legend to bring him back on track. You shut up and let The Rocket finish. Eventually, he’ll get to the love story.

THE TALE of Mary is told in Laver’s taupe Mercedes SUV, the one with the personalised, patriot’s number plate that reads “AUZZE”. The radio is set to a satellite station named SiriusXM Love, and the volume is way up. And so, as we cruise streets named Rancho Cortes and Carrillo Way and Paseo Frontera, past gardens of prickly pear and aloe vera and bougainvillea, we’re listening to *Sacrifice* by Elton John and *Save the Best for Last* by Vanessa Williams and *From a Distance* by Bette Midler.

It’s a beautiful place, his patch. Once it was all owned by Leo Carrillo, an actor and vaudevillian who created his own paradise on a 1000-hectare ranch here. I mention Carrillo because we’re faced with a delay largely of his making. There’s a peacock, you see, blocking the road. And then two more. They’re strutting like they own the joint, which they kind of do because Carrillo, Laver explains, donated his historic home to the city of Carlsbad on condition that his peacocks be allowed to stay. These are their descendants. Laver hates them. “Goddamn you guys, you poop everywhere!” he says, fixing one with a look. “Little poops, but a lot of them.”

Moving on, he says he met Mary in 1965; she was 10 years older than him. He was 28, the best player in the world, and living in the US. She was from suburban Illinois, divorced, with three children, a sunny disposition and warm olive skin. “I was all red hair and freckles,” he laughs. “She got me talking – I was pretty shy in those days.” They were married a year later, north of San Francisco (“When you know, you know”), and left the ceremony through two rows of tennis players holding their racquets aloft in a kind of matrimonial arch.

They set about building a life in which Laver was the soft touch and Mary the hammer. She was the ringleader, a person for whom place settings were an important matter. The family – her three kids and the son, Rick, they had together – used to call her “the conductor”, and in fact once bought her a conductor’s uniform, complete with cap.



Laver says she was financially astute, too – “a wheeler and dealer” – and she needed to be. In 1972 Laver famously became the first tennis player to amass career earnings of \$US1 million, but he was hardly wealthy. Take 1969, when he won a record 18 singles titles, including all four majors. For that stunning feat he pocketed \$US124,000. By contrast, Novak Djokovic won four titles in 2018, including Wimbledon and the US Open. His prize money? \$US16 million.

Mary invested in stocks and bonds, set up sponsorships and negotiated contracts. In retirement she nudged her star hubby into lucrative Legends tournaments, and encouraged him to run profitable tennis camps at Hilton Head Island in South Carolina and Boca Raton, Florida. Real estate was a passion. Over the years she bought and sold often, moving them all over California. From the old home in Cameo Shores to the ranch in Solvang, to the mansion in Palm Springs, to the house in Carlsbad where Laver now lives, and where she died.

Mary began slowing down in 2002, four years after Laver’s stroke. She stopped travelling. Didn’t want to go outside, or do much of anything. She was hit first with breast cancer, and required radiation therapy. A heart attack (and then surgery) came next. Her real foe, however, was the disease peripheral neuropathy, which attacks the nerves, causing weakness and discomfort at first, and later, excruciating pain. She became bedridden and reliant on codeine. When that stopped working, massive doses of oxycodone were required. “But the pain would just keep breaking through,” Laver says, pale blue eyes turning away for a moment. “It was so

Laver’s 1962 Grand Slam victory, clockwise from top left: the Australian Open; the US Open; Wimbledon (with Princess Marina, later known as the Duchess of Kent); and the French Open (with runner-up, fellow Australian Roy Emerson).

“I used to be a fairly good tennis player.”

severe, and she would just be crying.” Eventually, to find comfort, she needed methadone.

Laver watched over her, just as she had done for him. He rubbed the heat and pain out of the burning nerve endings in her feet, and brought her iced water in a cup with a straw. Eventually though, the caregiver needed his own caregiver. His stepdaughter, Ann Marie Bennett, intervened. “We said, ‘You can’t keep doing this by yourself,’” she says. Laver didn’t want help, Bennett adds, nor did Mary. “In the end they both needed to be told – ‘This is the way it has to be.’” Hospice workers were allowed in for an eight-hour shift. They took care of Mary during the day. “At night time, she was mine,” Laver says, smiling. “She was with me.”

An aortal aneurysm ultimately took her in late 2012. Laver, aged 74, devastated, quietly wondered what it meant for his life. He asked those close to him: *What am I supposed to do now?* Considering his future, he thought of something from his past.

As a boy in Queensland, he was sick with jaundice and forced to leave school for a few months. Sent to the dusty farm of a relative, he wandered the bush aimlessly until one day he found a kangaroo – a joey – whose mother had been shot. He remembers chasing it for half a day, stuffing it in his shirt and bringing it home. He nursed it, kept it warm and fed it bottles of milk. “When it was ready – when I was ready – I let it go,” he says. “It was time.”

IF YOU were born in the past 50 years, you likely never saw Rod Laver play. Which is to say that many of us barely (or never) witnessed this feted career, and so would have trouble ranking it against the greats. Historical comparisons in sport are notoriously fraught exercises, but perhaps more so in the Laver debate, because his career sits squarely atop a nexus point within tennis: the intersection of the amateur, professional and Open eras.

When Laver captured the 1961 Wimbledon crown (and when he completed his first Grand Slam a year later) he was an amateur – part of a group who played in the most prestigious tournaments in the world, but earned next to nothing. (That Wimbledon victory, for instance, netted him a £10 voucher and a firm handshake). Then there were the professionals – like Ken Rosewall and Lew Hoad – who won cash prizes on their own circuit but were essentially pariahs, prohibited from playing in the marquee tournaments. Laver, forced like all players to choose between making a reasonable living as a pro, and struggling to pay the bills as an amateur, turned pro in 1963. It was, he says, either that or selling insurance.

And so he embarked on a five-year stint touring the globe and traipsing mostly throughout the US, playing exhibition matches in music halls, basketball gyms, converted barns and ice rinks covered in canvas sheeting. By 1964, he was widely regarded as the best player in the world, a position he held for a handful of years. Finally, in 1968, the barrier between the amateur and professional ranks dissolved, and the Open era of tennis as we now know it began.

On that grand and reunified stage, half a century ago, Laver completed the 1969 Grand Slam, his second, the only player ever to do so. (None of the stars of the past quarter-century have even done it once.) He might seem a sweet old guy today, but there was a certain viciousness to his tennis. On court he was a cold, sallow face – a picture of hollow tension, competitive anxiety and what one *Sports Illustrated* profile



Above: Laver (in fourth row) watching the US Open men's singles final in 2016, among actors including Michael J. Fox and Kevin Spacey, as well as US Vogue head Anna Wintour.

from 1968 described as “disciplined, sure violence”. He retired in 1978, at 38, with an unchallenged legend and unquestionable legacy.

If there’s an argument against his pre-eminence it is his tally of majors’ singles titles, which sits at 11. That places Laver notably behind modern-day male stars including Federer (20), Rafael Nadal (17), Pete Sampras and Djokovic (14 each). Yet there are factors to mitigate that anomaly. Laver was, for instance, slavishly devoted to and dominant in Davis Cup tennis – a gruelling travel commitment that most of today’s best players avoid. He played serious doubles tennis, too – even winning six majors – which virtually none of the current champs waste time on. Not to mention the five years he spent in the professional ranks, during which he missed 21 opportunities (in his prime) to add to his majors’ trophy cabinet.

Christopher Clarey, the esteemed veteran tennis writer for the *New York Times*, says “the GOAT question” has come up often lately, and the best judges narrow the debate down to Laver and Federer. You need success, dominance and longevity, he says, and Laver ticks all those boxes. “If I had to make my pick on the greatest – having bridged those eras, being a stand-up guy, the two Grand Slams – I myself would go with Rod,” Clarey says. “But it would be close.”

The two players are perhaps more alike than different. Both are lauded for defying the gravity and entropy of elite competition. And for moments of transcendent kinetic beauty – a particular vision for where the ball might go, along with the control to place it there, with the velocity required. Each has displayed the power to manufacture shots when seemingly wrong-footed, in some scrambling, baffling, laughably preposterous act of proprioception.

Laver has called Federer the best. Federer calls Laver the best. They share a special bond, and deference is their default.

Walking through his home in Carlsbad, Laver pauses to look at a black-and-white photo hanging in a vestibule. The doctored image depicts both players as young men, both in whites, meeting over the net on the grass at Wimbledon, as if the idol had just played his successor. “They superimposed me into the photo. Looks pretty real, eh?” Laver says, beaming. “That would have been a good match.”

LAVER PUTS his feet up on the glass coffee table in his backyard, while bees swarm around a tall bottle brush tree, and a finch splashes in a three-tiered fountain. There’s an open fireplace for outdoor entertaining, and lawn games, and a four-burner barbecue where

he chars a mean tri-tip steak. He loves having family over, especially his granddaughter, Riley, 18, who just left for college at the University of Missouri, and who he will miss. There’s a veggie patch with a wooden sign that reads “Grandpa’s Garden”, but the plants are long dead – utterly neglected by their jet-setting custodian. “I’m usually pretty good in the garden,” he says. “I supply tomatoes to the whole bloody street, but I haven’t had time lately.”

Lately, he’s been busy. It’s a conscious and continuous choice he began making soon after Mary’s death. If a family member asked him to lunch, he said yes, always. If a friend suggested a round of golf, he agreed, immediately. “In a way, the grief allowed him to come out of his shell,” says friend Fred Stolle. “I love seeing him out there again. He’s reaping what he should have many years ago.”

The “Rocket Renaissance” is also due to his manager, Stephen Walter, who convinced Laver it was time to consider all those event invitations he spent decades declining. The tennis world knew the sad reason his RSVPs always returned as apologies, but in truth Laver was never an enthusiastic talking head. Clarey remembers he was hard to access even in the late 1980s. “He just didn’t put himself out there as ‘the main man of the past’. He didn’t seem to enjoy that status,” Clarey says. “But the game wants that from him now. I think he’s reinvigorated. It all seems fresh to him, and you can’t beat that at his age.”

Laver senses the warmth directed toward him in any stadium, or, rather, *every* stadium. He hears the ovations and is chuffed, every time. “Are they admiring the length of my career? Or because I was pretty consistent?” he asks. “Either way, I don’t want to get blasé about being recognised. It’s pretty amazing.”

The game is as interesting as ever to him. The fitness of the players and the power they bring to the sport. He doesn’t name names but laments certain “antics”. If anything is missing from tennis now, he says, it’s the camaraderie he and his peers enjoyed. Perhaps it was born of their days as “the barnstormers” on the pro tour, sleeping in roadside motels, eating at greasy spoons and carousing at the odd dive bar. He suspects the game today could use that kind of bonding.

He feels better at 80 than he did at 70. Most people tell him he looks fitter now, too. He’s boarded more flights in the past 20 months than the past 20 years. “We’ve gotta start cracking down on all this travel, because it does wear a man down,” says son Rick. “I mean, he’s not home right now – I’m not even sure where he is!”

But I know where he is. He’s sitting on his girlfriend’s couch in Florida. He has her dog,



“I’m not going anywhere yet – I’m coming around again.”

Above: Laver today. Arthritis in his left wrist prevents him from playing tennis now. Right: with his girlfriend Susan Johnson.

Brandi, on his lap. Susan Johnson, 67, tells me this over the phone from the coastal town of Jupiter. She’s the former wife of the late F. Ross Johnson, a legendary Wall Street figure made famous in the book and movie *Barbarians at the Gate*. He died two years ago – Susan was his carer as Alzheimer’s disease took hold. She has known Laver since the early 1980s.

“He’s an amazingly nice guy, modest, wonderful to be with,” she says. “He embraces everyone, gives back, makes a connection. He has this enduring value with everyone he meets, and he touched me in the same way. It’s a dream, actually.”

The pair have been together a year now, and Ann Marie Bennett says Johnson is a big part of his life. “If Rod’s going somewhere, he wants her with him. It’s good for him. I’m happy that he has someone in his life that he can call and talk to, or go see a movie with. They act almost like a little married couple,” she says. “‘Be careful with that step, Rod. Make sure you do your eye drops, Rod.’ You can see that she cares.”

Ask Laver what it feels like to find love again and he sounds like a teenager: “I think she feels the same way I do,” he says, sheepishly. “I’m just thrilled that she is with me and wants to be with me. She looks like she’s 40. She loves doing what I like doing. We’re enjoying each other.” Did he think this could happen to him again, at this age? “No, I didn’t. I really didn’t,” he says, pausing. “And I think Susan feels the same way, too, because her life was not entirely her own either.”

He drives me back to my car. SiriusXM Love is still playing, still loudly. This time there’s a song for every anecdote about their relationship, from their initial connection (*At last, my love has come along, my lonely days are over...*) to the occasional weeks in which they’re separated (*Every time you go away, you take a piece of me, with you...*), but those are few.

They play golf together. They go to the major tournaments together. She’s selling her place in the south-east to be closer to him in the south-west. One day they’re spotting orcas in the frigid blue off Vancouver – the next they’re barefoot in the Florida sand at Juno Beach, watching a rehabilitated turtle returned to the warm sea. They’re drinking in the same experiences. Meals with Jack and Barbara Nicklaus. Selfies with Bill Nighy at Henley Royal Regatta. Handshakes in the Royal Box at Wimbledon with Richard Branson and Maggie Smith. One moment sharing a table with Theresa May, the next, meeting William and Kate (Laver heroically shooing a big bumblebee away from Kate’s shoulder).

It all seems, I suggest – before recognising the faux pas – like one glorious, great, golden victory lap. “I hope not!” Laver says, dropping me off back at the driving range, back by the Spanish Revival clubhouse and thick Bermuda grass growing below the Southern California Blue. He smiles and waves. “I’m not going anywhere yet – I’m coming around again.” ■

