



BACK ON TOP: Rafael Nadal of Spain returns a ball to Novak Djokovic of Serbia during the men's singles final of the China Open at the China National Tennis Centre in Beijing, China, yesterday. He moved back to the top of the rankings despite losing the match
Picture: FENG LI/GETTY IMAGES

Nadal ventures into new areas

WHEN the ATP releases its latest tennis rankings today, the name atop the list will be Rafael Nadal.

A year ago, Nadal was two months into a forced lay-off for recurring knee problems, with no guarantee that he'd ever play again, let alone win. One year on, Nadal has lost only four matches in 2013, won two Grand Slam titles, and reclaimed the number one ranking.

Aside from the impressive medical support that must have enabled this, most interesting are the tactical and technical innovations behind the comeback. Nadal the fighter, a defensive player reared on dusty red clay, who grinds out matches with physicality and endurance, has evolved into an adaptable and innovative player willing to venture into uncomfortable territory to change a historically winning, but potentially career-limiting formula.

Noticeable differences in Nadal Version 3.0 (he'd already shown the ability to transform himself into a fast court player), backed up by Hawkeye statistics, includes a willingness to play more aggressively, nearer the baseline, and to change the pattern of play, particularly using the down-the-line forehand earlier in points. The result has been to avoid lengthy rallies, which were his great strength, but also a significant source of tennis' most notorious knees.

The ability and desire to innovate is anathema to many coaches and sportsmen and women. The preferred cliché is: "Don't fix it if it ain't broke," and so the tendency in sport is to stick with tried and trusted recipes. The danger is that the environment and opposition are constantly evolving, and those who succeed today can be analysed and weaknesses sought, with the result that success, paradoxically, often accelerates future failure.

Barcelona's style of football provided nightmares to many opponents, but eventually, a counter-strategy emerged and Barca's style became predictable, and was ruthlessly exposed by Bayern Munich. They now find themselves seeking variety and innovation under a new coach. History is littered with similar examples of teams and athletes who went from invincibility to mortality within a season, because the source of their advantage became their Achilles heel.

Good coaching (supported by science) is the art of looking beyond the scoreboard to learn from both success and failure, and to

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predict the future in order to stay one step ahead of the pursuing pack.

Two critical factors are necessary to enable successful innovation.

First, it's important to recognise that while the opposite of innovation is stagnation, there exists a sweet spot between the extremes — it is possible to overdo innovation and destabilise a team.

Second, innovation is always accompanied by failure. This is as true in sport as it is in business — the iPhone was not perfected at the first attempt, and neither do Nadal or Tiger Woods execute game-changing shots without first failing literally thousands of times. Innovation is iterative, back-and-forth, requiring patience and openness to accept some failure and criticism in the pursuit of success.

There is a lesson in this for Springbok rugby. While we are to some extent licking our wounds after the defeat by New Zealand, we also have a sense of optimism born of the perception that the team is evolving, tactically and technically. A more expansive style of play has created scoring opportunities that go beyond sustained defensive pressure and the boot.

The downside is that mistakes will be made. Defensive competency, a historical strength, may be compromised — there is evidence from US sports that teams rarely have great attacking and defensive capabilities, and like a see-saw, leaning on one side pushes the other in the opposite direction.

However, if we are serious about innovation, and if we truly believe in the tactical approach and style of rugby we played, we must stay the course, be willing to fail and understand why we do.

Whether the powers that be do this, or revert to default, remains to be seen.