



Serve to Win

By Novak Djokovic

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Novak Djokovic reveals the gluten-free diet and fitness plan that transformed his health and pushed him to the pinnacle.

In 2011, Novak Djokovic had what sportswriters called the greatest single season ever by a professional tennis player: He won ten titles, three Grand Slams, and forty-three consecutive matches. Remarkably, less than two years earlier, this champion could barely complete a tournament. How did a player once plagued by aches, breathing difficulties, and injuries on the court suddenly become the #1 ranked tennis player in the world? The answer is astonishing: He changed what he ate.

In *Serve to Win*, Djokovic recounts how he survived the bombing of Belgrade, Serbia, rising from a war-torn childhood to the top tier of his sport. While Djokovic loved and craved bread and pasta, and especially the pizza at his family's restaurant, his body simply couldn't process wheat. Eliminating gluten—the protein found in wheat—made him feel instantly better, lighter, clearer, and quicker. As he continued to research and refine his diet, his health issues disappeared, extra pounds dropped away, and his improved physical health and mental focus allowed him to achieve his two childhood dreams: to win Wimbledon, and to become the #1 ranked tennis player in the world.

Now Djokovic has created a blueprint for remaking *your* body and *your* life in just fourteen days. With weekly menus, mindful eating tips for optimal digestion, and delicious, easy-to-prepare recipes, you'll be well on your way to shedding extra weight and finding your way to a better you. Djokovic also offers tips for eliminating stress and simple exercises to get you revved up and moving, the very same ones he does before each match.

You don't need to be a superstar athlete to start living and feeling better. With *Serve to Win*, a trimmer, stronger, healthier you is just two weeks away.

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Editorial Review

Review

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About the Author

Novak Djokovic is a Serbian tennis player who is ranked World #1 by the Association of Tennis Professionals. He is widely considered to be one of the greatest tennis players of all time.

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Introduction

The Diet That Transformed Me

From the brink of failure to the champion of the world—in 18 months

Just as I was reaching for the top, I hit bottom.

I was nineteen years old, an unknown kid from a war-torn country, who had suddenly burst onto the professional scene. I was on a nine-match winning streak and poised to take a commanding lead in the final round of the 2006 Croatia Open. The stadium crowd was on my side, my team was cheering me on.

And yet I couldn't hear them. All I could hear was the roaring in my head. All I could feel was pain. Something was pinching my nose closed, bear-hugging my chest, pouring concrete into my legs.

I looked across the net at my opponent, Stanislas Wawrinka. I looked into the stands, where my mother sat. And then, suddenly, gravity sucked me backward onto the red clay court, and I was looking up at the open Croatian sky, my chest heaving. The Curse—the mysterious force that sapped my strength without warning—had closed in on me once more.

No matter how hard I inhaled, the air would not come.

My father, Srdjan, ran out onto the court, and with a doctor, lifted me up by my arms and sat me down in my courtside chair. I looked up at my mother, sobbing in the stands, and I knew. This tournament was over. And maybe my life's dream was over, too.

Most people don't decide what they want from life when they're six years old, but I had. Thirteen years earlier, sitting in the tiny living room over my parents' pizza parlor in a remote mountain town of Kopaonik in rural Serbia, I watched Pete Sampras win Wimbledon, and I knew: One day that would be me.

I'd never played tennis. No one I knew played tennis. In Serbia, tennis was as obscure a sport as, say, fencing. And the glamour of London was about as far as you could get from the desolate little resort town where my family lived. Yet at that very moment, I knew what I wanted more than anything: I wanted to lift the Wimbledon cup over my head, hear the crowd cheer, and know I had become the number one player in the world.

My parents had bought me a little rainbow-colored racquet and some Wiffle balls when I was four, and I

would entertain myself for hours, hitting the balls against the wall of the restaurant. But from the moment I saw Sampras that day, I knew. And for the next thirteen years, I gave every day of my life to reaching my goal. My family, who made countless sacrifices; my friends who supported me from the beginning; my trainers and coaches and fans—they all came together to get me as close to my life's dream as possible.

But there was something about me that was broken, unhealthy, unfit. Some called it allergies, some called it asthma, some just called it being out of shape. But no matter what we called it, no one knew how to fix it.

It wasn't the first time I'd collapsed in a big tournament. A year earlier, ranked just 153rd in the world, I shocked 8th-seed Guillermo Coria by taking the first set of our match in my very first French Open appearance. But by the third set, my legs turned to rock, and I couldn't breathe, and finally I resigned. "Obviously, he was tired after a while," Coria remarked afterward. "When you're fit, you ought to be able to play a long match in hot weather."

Three months later, in the opening round of my first US Open, playing against Gael Monfils, I literally collapsed on the court. I lay on my back like a beached whale in the humid 80-degree heat, laboring for breath, waiting for a trainer. After four embarrassing time-outs, I managed to win that match, but I was booed off the court, and my lack of fitness was the talk of the tournament. "Maybe he ought to change some things," Monfils suggested.

I tried. In professional tennis today, the slightest change in your skill level, your physical conditioning, and your mindset make all the difference. I practiced every morning and every afternoon, I lifted weights, I biked or ran for hours at a stretch every single day. It made no sense that I was unfit. I changed trainers, looking for a new workout regimen. I changed coaches, thinking that something in my technique would free me from this curse. I had nasal surgery, hoping that would allow me to breathe more freely. Each change helped, a little; season by season, I grew a little stronger and fitter. In 2007, I became only the second player to beat both Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal since their ascent to the top of the game.

Yet every time I took a big step toward my dream, I felt as though a rope were around my torso, pulling me back. Professional tennis is one continuous, eleven-month-long season, and the key to consistency is being able to recover quickly from one match to the next. I'd win one tournament, then collapse unexpectedly in the next; win one epic match, then retire in the middle of the following round.

Maybe my problem wasn't physical, but mental: I took up meditation, then yoga, trying to calm my mind. My training became obsessive: For fourteen hours a day, every single day, I did nothing but focus on improving my mental and physical game. And in the process, I became one of the top ten tennis players in the world.

But I had a dream, and it wasn't to be "one of" the best. There were two men in the world who were the best—Federer and Nadal—and to them, I was nothing but an occasional annoyance—one who might quit at any moment when the going got tough. These guys were the elite; I was stuck somewhere in the second tier.

I won my first Grand Slam, the Australian Open, in January of 2008—a breakthrough. But a year later, against Andy Roddick, I once again had to retire from the tournament. The defending champion, and I quit?! What was wrong with me? "Cramp, bird flu, anthrax, SARS, common cough and cold," Roddick said about me, making fun of the fact that I so often fell ill. Even Federer, who's so quiet and gentlemanly, dismissed me when talking to reporters: "I think he's a joke, you know, when it comes down to his injuries."

At the end of 2009, I even moved my training camp to Abu Dhabi, hoping that by practicing in the sizzling

heat of the Persian Gulf, I'd be better prepared for the Australian Open in Melbourne. Maybe by acclimating myself better, I'd finally beat this thing.

And at first, it looked as though I'd finally figured it all out. By January 27, 2010, I'd made it to the quarterfinals of the Australian Open, handling my opposition easily along the way. Across the net in my quarterfinal match was Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, the tenth-ranked tennis player in the world. I was ranked number three. Two years earlier to the day, I'd beaten him on this very court on my way to winning my first Grand Slam tournament at age twenty-one. And on this day, I needed to be just as good. No, better.

Tsonga is two hundred pounds of pure muscle, one of the biggest and strongest players in the game, and his serve comes in at 140 miles an hour. When he puts his body weight into a return, the ball comes in "heavy," with a combination of speed and topspin that feels like it could knock the racquet right out of your hand. And yet he moves with great quickness around the court. On this day, in his neon yellow T-shirt, he looked as big as the sun, and just as relentless. He had taken the first set, 7-6, after a punishing tiebreaker that drove the crowd to their feet over and over again.

But in by the second set, my obsessive preparation finally started to take over. I took the second set, 7-6, and then I began to control him, running him back and forth along the baseline. The singles court is twenty-seven feet from side to side, and I could cover that distance as well as anyone.

I took the third set easily, 6-1. I had him.

And then it happened, again. With Tsonga up 1-0 in the fourth set, the invisible force attacked. I couldn't breathe. When he took the next game, something rose up in my throat; I pleaded with the chair umpire for a toilet break. I didn't want my opponent to see what I was about to do.

I raced into the locker room, burst into a stall, and fell to my knees. Gripping the side of the toilet bowl, my stomach in spasms, I felt as though I were vomiting up all of my strength.

When I walked back onto the court, I was a different player.

Tsonga knew my body was breaking down, and holding serve, he could run me back and forth across the court like a toy. I felt the crowd shift to his side, and his serve seemed faster, heavier—or maybe I was slower, weaker. It was as though I were playing against a giant. More than once, his shots left my feet stuck to the blue Plexicushion surface; I simply couldn't move them. He took the fourth set, 6-3.

By the start of the fifth set, it was clear to everyone in the park how this match would turn out. Serving 0-40, with Tsonga up 3-1, I hit the lowest point of my career. It was break point, in more ways than one.

I had to deliver a perfect serve, knock him off balance, regain some control. If there was one chance for me to battle back, I needed to make this serve the best of the hundreds of thousands I'd hit in my lifetime.

Bounce, bounce. I tossed the ball in the air. I tried to expand my torso to get full extension, but my entire chest felt tight. It was as though I was swinging Thor's hammer instead of a tennis racquet.

My body was broken.

Fault.

My mind was broken. Bounce, bounce. Serve.

Double-fault.

Game, Tsonga.

The end came quickly and mercifully, like an execution. After shaking hands at midcourt, he danced around the park, urging on the crowd, full of power and energy. I was drained. Seventeen years of practicing every single day, and yet I did not feel physically or mentally strong enough to be on the same court with the game's best.

I had the skills, the talent, the drive. I had the resources to try every kind of mental and physical training known to man, and access to the finest doctors in the world. What was really holding me back was something I'd never have suspected. I was training and practicing right.

But I was eating all wrong.

The Diet That Changed My Life

My professional low was that double-fault on January 27, 2010.

And yet, by July 2011—just eighteen months later—I was a different man. Eleven pounds lighter, stronger than ever, and healthier than I'd been since early childhood, I achieved my two life goals: to win Wimbledon, and to be named the number one tennis player in the world. As I watched a last, desperate backhand from Rafael Nadal land long to give me the Wimbledon Cup, I saw myself as that six-year-old boy again, the one who came from nothing, innocently grasping at an impossible dream.

I fell to the ground. I threw my hands in the air. I crouched down, pulled some of the grass from the Wimbledon court, and ate it.

It tasted like sweat. My sweat. But I'd never tasted anything so sweet.

It wasn't a new training program that took me from being a very good player to the best player in the world in just eighteen months. It wasn't a new racquet, a new workout, a new coach, or even a new serve that helped me lose weight, find mental focus, and enjoy the best health of my life.

It was a new diet.

My life had changed because I had begun to eat the right foods for my body, in the way that my body demanded. In the first three months of my new diet, I dropped from 181 pounds to 172—my family and friends even began to worry that I was getting too skinny. But I felt fresher, more alert, and more energetic than I had in my life. I was faster, more flexible, and able to get to balls other players couldn't, yet I was still as strong as I'd ever been, and my mental focus was unshakable. I never felt tired or out of breath. My allergies abated; my asthma disappeared; my fears and doubts were replaced by confidence. I have not had a serious cold or flu in nearly three years.

Some sportswriters have called my 2011 season the greatest single year ever by a professional tennis player. I won ten titles, three Grand Slams, and forty-three consecutive matches. And the only thing I'd changed was what I was eating.

What amazed me the most was how simple these changes were to make, and how dramatic the results were. All I did was eliminate gluten—the protein found in wheat—for a few days, and my body instantly felt better. I was lighter, quicker, clearer in mind and spirit. After two weeks, I knew that my life had changed. I made a few more tweaks, cutting down on sugar, cutting out dairy, and I could tell the moment I woke up each morning that I was different than I had been, maybe since childhood. I sprang out of bed, ready to tear into the day ahead. And I realized that I had to share what I'd learned with others.

You do not have to be a professional athlete to make the simple nutritional adjustments outlined in this book, and you certainly don't have to be a tennis pro for them to improve your body, your health, and your outlook on life.

In fact, what I'm going to share with you isn't a diet in the strict sense of the word, because that implies that you're only going to eat exactly what I tell you to eat. That wouldn't make sense. Most diet programs assume the same plan works for everyone and that you "must" eat certain foods, whether you're a 27-year-old tennis player, a 35-year-old mother of two, or a 50-year-old executive vice president. That's silly. "Must" just isn't a good word. Your body is an entirely different machine from mine. Look at your fingertips: Your prints are unlike anyone else's in the world. This is proof that your body is different from anyone else's in the world. I don't want you to eat the best diet for my body. I'm going to show you how to find the best diet for your own unique self.

Simple Changes, Big Results

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Susan Romero:

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