

MY CONVERSATIONS WITH TENNIS LEGEND RAFAEL NADAL

As many of you will recall from the special 40th anniversary edition, I was privileged to get to know movie star Angela Bassett, not to mention some other well-known people ... OK, I will mention them. I was privileged to minister and be friends with Rich Mullins when I was in seminary. I have also mentioned my ongoing friendship with Ken Hensley (Uriah Heep) numerous times, as well as another musician, Drew Shirley (Switchfoot). Two famous Padres pitchers shared their Christian testimonies with me (Dave Dravecky and Eric Show, who I also played guitar with). I've ministered alongside Rick Warren and Louie Giglio, both of whom have prayed at Presidential events. And yes, I even had a good conversation with Jerry Seinfeld before he became, well, Jerry Seinfeld producing his Emmy Award-winning TV show Seinfeld. All these names are so heavy I keep dropping them!

But most of you do NOT know I had a few conversations with possibly the greatest tennis player of all time ... Rafael Nadal. Cue the squiggly flashback lines like they do in the movies ...

✦ Business Class, Barcelona Bound

18 years ago ... there I was flying to Spain in business class talking with tennis legend Rafael Nadal. We were the only 2 tennis players in business class that day. I know this because we were pretty much the only 2 people in business class, period, that day. Yes, I do realize the irony of calling us both tennis players. I was the #1 tennis player on my college team, but to put me in the same class tennis player as Rafa would be like saying Mario Andretti and I both owned race cars ... because I did have a Matchbox racing car before I was legally allowed to drive.

I know what you are thinking (or not): "Larry, how in the world were you in business class talking to possibly the greatest tennis player of all time?" My father worked for Delta for 25 years. This gave us incredible flying privileges, which we largely took for granted. We flew standby, which meant we could either be upgraded to business class or left behind entirely. On this particular flight to Barcelona, business class was practically empty, except for Rafa and his entourage of about 10 tennis rackets.

I was very familiar with Rafa at the time, even though he had not yet reached #1 in the world and had only won 3 Grand Slam titles by then (if you follow tennis, you know what surface they were on). He would go on to be the only men's tennis player in history with a double golden slam (2 titles at each of the Grand Slam tournaments as well as 2 Olympic Gold Medals).

The Big Three and Broken Rackets/Bodies



How do I know Rafa was the greatest men's tennis player (GOAT)? Novak Djokovic got upset and broke his racket 62 times. John McEnroe? No surprise he broke his even more often (78). The elegant and composed Roger Federer only broke 11. Rafa? Zero. Zilch. Nada. He was the ultimate gentleman under pressure! I, too, never broke a racket in anger. We have that in common. Although, I did break one by accident. My aluminum upgrade from a Stan Smith wood racket bent so much over time that one day, mid-overhead, the head just snapped off like a Celery stalk.

But seriously folks, in comparing the Big Three, by age 35 Rafa had missed 13 Grand Slams due to injuries and a congenital foot condition at birth. Additionally, he had to withdraw mid-tournament twice and was also injured just before a final against a player to whom he had never lost a set. Federer? Missed ZERO in his first 17 years. Djokovic? Just ONE. So imagine what Rafa's record would look like if his body had cooperated. Even so, he ended up with 22 Grand Slam titles (2 more than Roger, 2 fewer than Novak) and a winning record against both in Slam matches and finals.

"Love means nothing to a tennis player." Tennis enthusiast, attorney, and Emmy-winning

journalist Ari Melber

Spanglish at 30,000 Feet (Ariba! 🇵🇷)

Back on the plane, Rafa and I chatted in Spanglish. His English was slightly better than my Spanish, which is like saying *Arnold Schwarzenegger* is slightly taller than a *Chihuahua*. We talked about tennis and his home island of Mallorca. He was gracious, humble, and genuinely kind.

After Rafa had his miraculous comeback (being down 2 sets to none) to win the 2022 Australian Open, I wrote an article celebrating his victory and the completion of his double golden slam. One of my wife's sisters lives in Spain and is married to a Spaniard who also plays tennis. When he read my article, he insisted I send it to Rafa, and even gave me some inside help on how to do so successfully.

✝ A Greater Mission

But my greater reason for reaching out? I hoped Rafa might consider faith in Jesus. I'd read a quote from him that struck a chord: *"It's hard to say, 'I don't believe in God.' I would love to know if God exists."* That's like saying "sic 'em" to a dog!

I shared about *Blaise Pascal*, the brilliant mathematician who finally concluded we all have a God-shaped vacuum only God can fill. Then I told him about *Antony Flew*, one of the most prominent atheist thinkers of the last century. When he became convinced there was a God, he wrote a fascinating book called *There is NO God ...* but the NO is crossed out in the title and it now says: *There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*.

On a personal note, I shared with him about the peace and purpose in my life which has only come from a personal relationship with my Creator through Jesus.

(This entire explanation and apologetic took a full 2 pages but I have considerably condensed it here. If you want the full version, or the article I wrote for Rafa, just holler ... preferably loud enough so I can hear you.)



Rafa's Reflections

Rafa has shared some profound thoughts over the years. He stated, *"I don't care much if I am the ... best of the history."* He's warned against chasing happiness through bigger houses or faster cars. During the pandemic, he reminded us: *"Tennis is only a game. In life, there are much more important things than tennis."* He is right!

As of now, I don't know where Rafa is in terms of faith in God. So if God does bring him to mind, join me in saying a prayer for him! Who knows? Maybe one day we'll have another conversation ... this time not in business class, but in Heaven.