

Roger Federer's Graduation Speech Becomes an Online Hit

At Dartmouth College, the retired tennis champion offered his thoughts on winning and losing.

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Roger Federer noted in his speech that he had won only 54 percent of the points he had played in his 25-year career. Ken Mcgagh/Reuters

By **Steven Kurutz**

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There are thousands of commencement addresses on college campuses each spring. Most are unremarkable and go unremarked upon. But occasionally one gets people talking and gains traction online. That was the case with the speech given by the retired tennis champion [Roger Federer](#) at Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H., on June 9.

Mr. Federer, who left school in his native Switzerland at 16 to play professionally, noted early in his remarks that he was not an obvious choice for a commencement speaker.

“Keep in mind, this is literally the second time I have ever set foot on a college campus,” he told the more than 2,000 graduates.

After some warm-up jokes about [beer pong](#) (which is said to have been invented at a Dartmouth fraternity party) and a few shout-outs to local institutions (“I got a chance to hit some balls with my kids at the Boss Tennis Center ... I also crushed some chocolate chip cookies from [Foco](#)”), Mr. Federer got down to business and offered the graduates some tennis lessons that doubled as life lessons.

The part of the speech that has caught on with audiences far beyond the Ivy League environs of the Dartmouth campus — prompting numerous [TikTok videos, many of them](#) set to inspirational string music — was his reframing of his years of dominance on the tennis court.

“In the 1,526 singles matches I played in my career, I won almost 80 percent of those matches,” Mr. Federer said. “Now, I have a question for all of you. What percentage of the *points* do you think I won in those matches?”

The answer was 54 percent.

“In other words,” he said, “even top-ranked tennis players win barely more than half of the points they play.”

He went on, “The truth is, whatever game you play in life, sometimes you’re going to lose. A point, a match, a season, a job.”



Mr. Federer received an honorary degree at Dartmouth earlier this month. Ken Mcgagh/Reuters

A video of Mr. Federer’s speech has garnered more than 1.5 million views on Dartmouth’s [YouTube](#) channel, putting it in the company of earlier commencement addresses that have left a lasting impression.

In 2011, Conan O’Brien, a Harvard graduate, stood behind the same tree-stump lectern at Dartmouth and [roasted the idea of elite higher education](#) to uproarious laughter. Mr. O’Brien’s speech continues to be watched as a comedy master class, with 4.8 million YouTube views.

A 2005 speech by the writer David Foster Wallace to the graduating class of Kenyon College, titled “[This Is Water](#),” circulated online as a transcript in the pre-social-media days and, in 2009, was published as a book.

Another noteworthy commencement speech, known as “[Wear Sunscreen](#),” was not delivered as an address but rather written as a 1997 column for The Chicago Tribune by the journalist Mary Schmich. (It was the speech Ms. Schmich would have given, if asked.) Her piece inspired a hit spoken-word song by Baz Luhrmann, “[Everybody’s Free \(to Wear Sunscreen\)](#),” and was also published as a slim book, “Wear Sunscreen: A Primer for Real Life.”

Mr. Federer’s decision to quit school seemed to work out for him. Over a 25-year career, he won 103 tour singles titles, including 20 Grand Slam titles, and was acknowledged as one of the greatest tennis players. Two years after his retirement, Dartmouth awarded him an honorary doctorate, citing his work as an athlete, entrepreneur and philanthropist.

Grabbing a racket toward the end of his speech, he left the Dartmouth graduates with one final lesson: “OK, so, for your forehand, you’ll want to use an eastern grip. Keep your knuckles apart a little bit. Obviously, you don’t want to squeeze the grip too hard.”

Then he added, with a smile, “No, this is not a metaphor! It’s just good technique.”

Steven Kurutz covers cultural trends, social media and the world of design for The Times.

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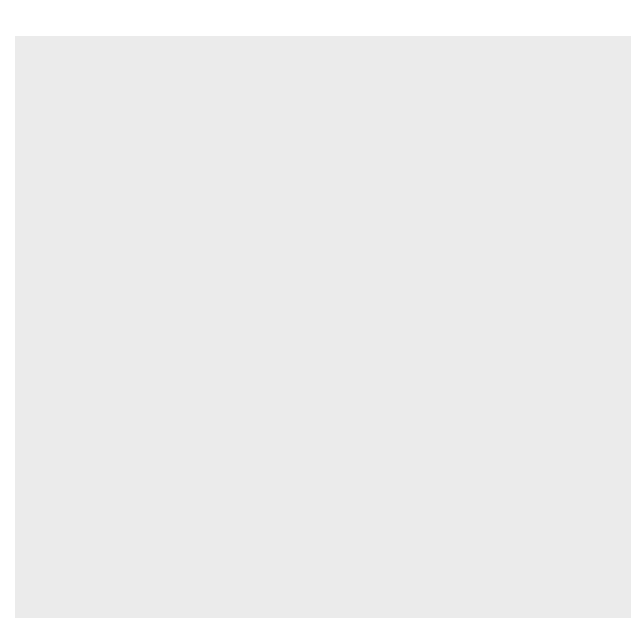
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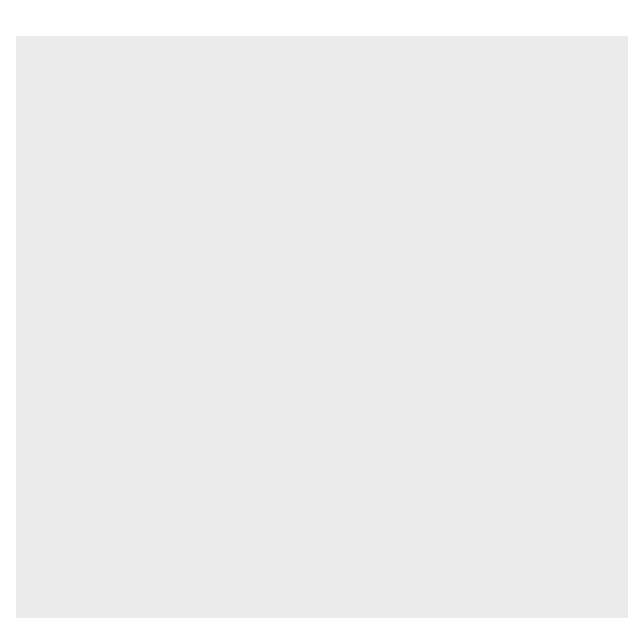
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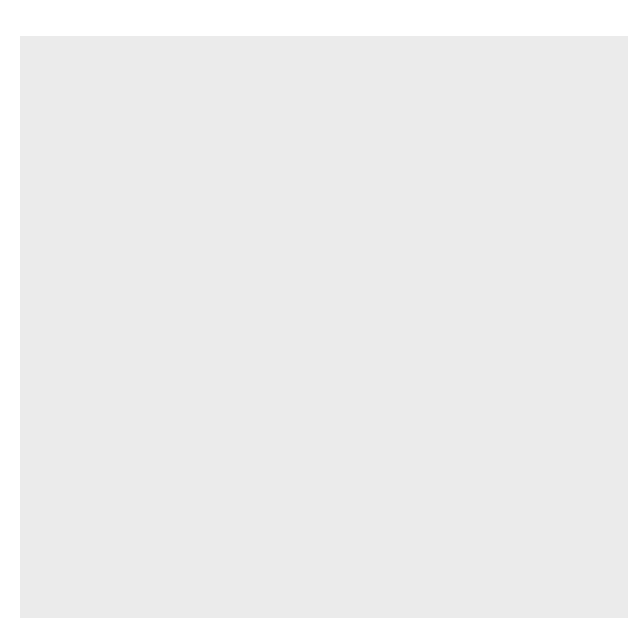
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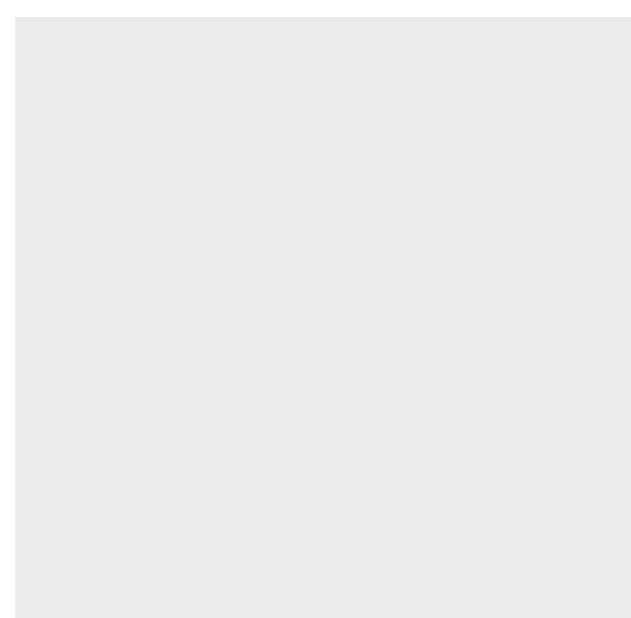
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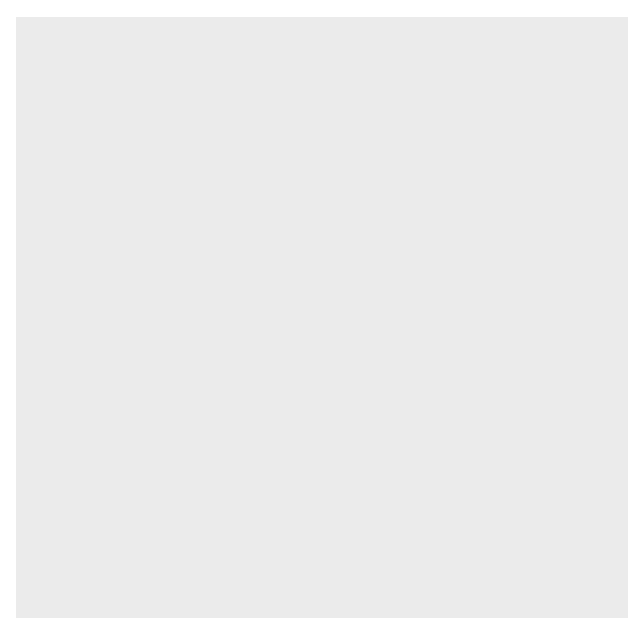
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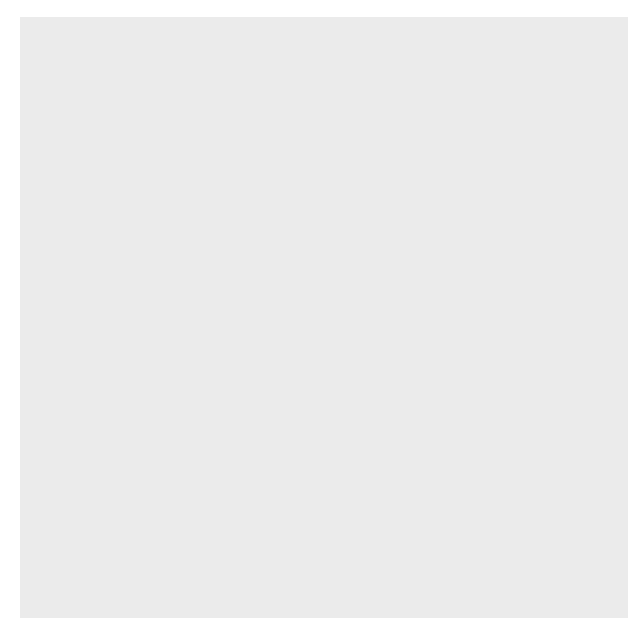
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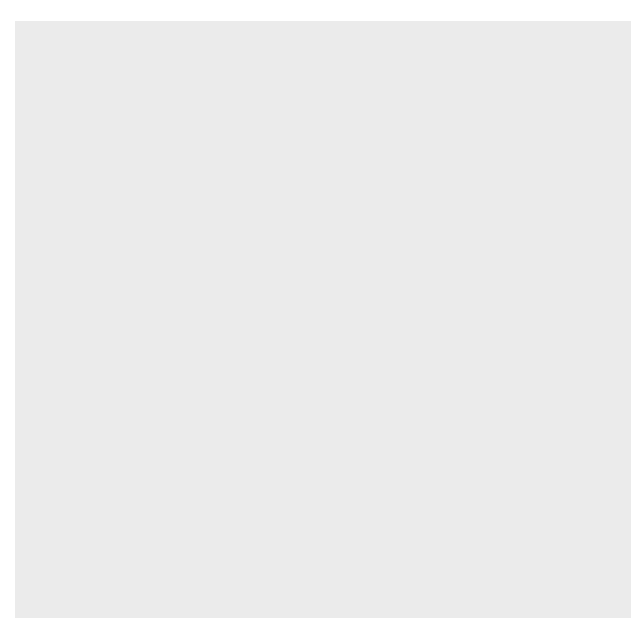


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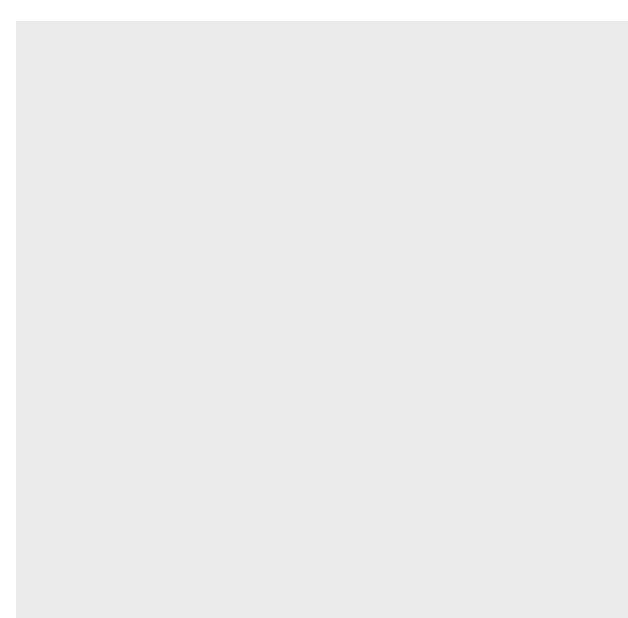
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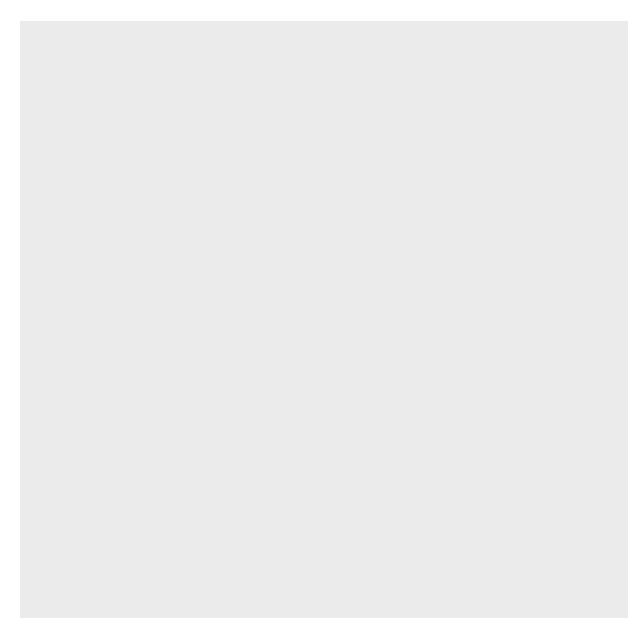
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