

matt jones

Interview – The Tennis Player, Boris Becker

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Becker bows out in style

Matt Jones reports from Wimbledon's Centre Court on the unexpected abdication of its former "Boy King" – three-time Wimbledon champion Boris Becker.

The next time Boris Becker comes to Wimbledon, it will be as a spectator – in his words, "As a fan who watches tennis".

After his quarter-final defeat by world number one Pete Sampras at the championships on Thursday, the 29-year-old German right hander – who held the gentlemen's singles trophy, the Challenge Cup, aloft in 1985, 1986 and 1989 – announced that he had played his last match in London SW19.

"That was it for me," he told a packed press conference afterwards, "the last time at Wimbledon." When asked why, he said, "I think it's a very good moment right now. I just don't feel I have it any more – what it takes to win a Grand Slam. I feel like I don't want to come back being number 60 in the world and praying to God I get a good draw to win a couple of rounds. That's not my style. I'm the type of guy who goes into a tournament and who likes to have a chance to win it, and I feel like that's not possible for me any more in Grand Slams."

Becker, the tournament's number eight seed but 18 in the world, made history on Centre Court in 1985 when, at 17 years and seven months, he became the youngest man to win the singles title; the first and only unseeded player – man or woman – to win a singles title; and the first German man to win a Wimbledon singles title.

He bowed twice to a standing ovation at just after 6.30pm after a rain-interrupted match won by fellow three-time champion Sampras in two hours and four minutes, 6-1, 6-7, 6-1, 6-4.

Becker, who has been dogged by a wrist injury which forced him to drop out of the Dubai Duty Free Open after reaching the quarter finals in February, said he was "relieved" after making the decision.

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“I feel like I’ve come to the end of the road, with my head held up high and I feel like I’m still playing good tennis,” he said. “It’s not like I’m going out there and I’m losing to people I shouldn’t lose to, and I always wanted to get out on top. I feel right now I’m on top, on top of the mountain – I can only go down.”

After Becker’s wife Barbara, watching from the staff box, and son Noah, Sampras was the third person to hear of his decision. He looked stunned as Becker told him as they shook hands at the net after the match. Becker said he told the 25-year-old American, “that it was my last match, and I was glad it would be against him because I respect him so much and because he’s such a great champion”.

Sampras, who called Becker “the Michael Jordan of Germany”, said the revelation left him with “a bit of a sombre feeling” as he walked off court, leaving Becker alone on the corner of the grass stage.

“Wimbledon and Boris went together,” said Sampras. “I mean, this is where he made his mark as a 17 year old, you know, it was like his living room out there. He’ll be missed by the fans and the tournament. I felt kind of honoured in a way that I was his last match. I’ve always felt Boris is a class act, on and off the court.”

Sampras, who recalled he was playing at a junior tournament in northern California when Becker first won Wimbledon, added: “He had it all. I mean, he had power, finesse, guts and a phenomenal career winning five or six majors. He’s one of the best players I have ever played against.”

Becker, playing in his 14th consecutive Wimbledon since he started his Grand Slam career here in 1984, hadn’t dropped a set this year before Thursday’s match, his 18th with Sampras in seven years.

Sampras, who had won the last two meetings between the two at Wimbledon, never looked in danger of surrendering a place in the semi-final to the German.

As former US President George Bush and opera star Placido Domingo watched from the Royal Box, the on-song Sampras fired off a barrage of three aces in the opening game. Becker was a shadow of his former “boom boom” self as he eventually crashed out in four sets.

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“I played against a very good player,” Becker said. “He didn’t have any weak moments whereas I struggled a bit with my serve. I was under constant pressure to hold my serve while he was winning his service games easy – and that pressure at the end was a bit too much to handle.”

Becker, who said he will still compete in one-week tournaments for the time being but may not enter the US Open, paid tribute to British tennis fans, for whom he has been a favourite. “I felt very much at home here and from the first years on I felt like I was one of them,” he said. “We can almost talk of a relationship we had because I’ve been here so many times and under difficult circumstances as well.

“I always felt like they knew how to treat me, and I was always happy to give them the best that I’ve got, and so that’s why it was my favourite tournament. That’s why I always love to come back here and do well. I’ll miss them as much as they miss me, hopefully.”

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