

International Tennis Hall of Fame

Saturday, July 22, 2023

Esther Vergeer

Rick Draney

Patrick McEnroe

Dan Faber

Kim Clijsters

Press Conference

PATRICK McENROE: I'm Patrick McEnroe, welcome. I'm the new president of the International Tennis Hall of Fame. Welcome to everyone here for the Enshrinement Weekend.

Honored to be joined onstage by Dan Faber, our new CEO at the Tennis Hall of Fame. Kim Clijsters, a Hall of Famer herself, our honorary president of the Hall. Our 2023 inductees into the International Tennis Hall of Fame, Esther Vergeer and Rick Draney.

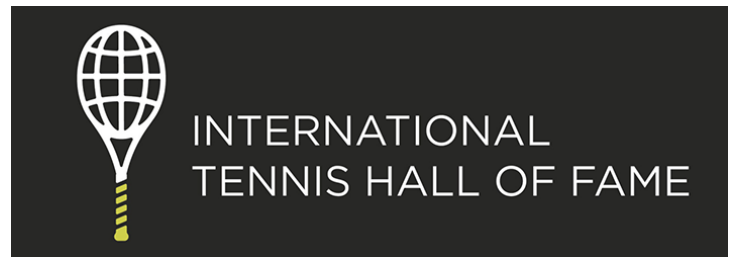
Esther is from The Netherlands. She's won 44 Grand Slams, 21 in singles, eight Paralympic medals, seven of them gold. She was No. 1 in the world for 668 consecutive weeks from October 2000 to January 2013. Last time I checked, that's 13 years. Amazing. She retired with 470 straight victories, and a career winning percentage of 96%.

Rick Draney is a pioneer of the quad division of wheelchair tennis. He's an American who captured five British Open titles and seven US Open titles at the Super Series level, the highest level of wheelchair competition before the Grand Slams started having wheelchair tennis in 2002.

This is even more amazing to me. Outside of tennis, Rick took up wheelchair rugby and won a Paralympic gold medal in 2000. He's a multi-sport athlete. At 6 p.m. tonight, we're looking forward to hearing both of them in the Enshrinement Ceremony.

Quickly, just a couple of comments, then we'll open it up for questions.

Dan, my partner in crime, it's been a whirlwind for us. We're loving being here at the Hall of Fame. You talked to



the board, everyone that listens about the three things that you look at, especially here at the Hall of Fame. Let everybody know.

DAN FABER: Those three things, it's attached to the Mission of the Hall of Fame.

It starts with preserving and promoting the history of the game. Sitting up here with Esther and Rick, knowing that they are going to be a part of history, they created this history, now going to be enshrined in history, is just unbelievable for us here at the Hall of Fame. That's a powerful part of what we do.

The middle one is celebrate. We get an opportunity to celebrate the sport's champions. Again, we have two amazing champions, but we have three, too, one up here with us as well. Very exciting for us to be able to do that here in Newport, but also bring this story and celebration outside of Newport globally. It's very important to us.

The last one, which I think is near and dear to all of our hearts is the word 'inspire'. How are we going to inspire people of all ages, using the history of the game, how we celebrate it, then inspire others to play the game or find the greatness in who they are?

Very excited about what's going to happen here this evening, to be a part of this with two incredible individuals on and off the court. Thank you.

PATRICK McENROE: Kim, you're a Hall of Famer on the court. Those of us that know you know you're a Hall of Famer off the court as well, amazing person, representing tennis as you do. You started actually before Dan and I did as the honorary president. We're so lucky to have you. You've mentioned a few times already how it's so cool for you to come back, now be able to sort of see some new Hall of Famers come in.

Talk about what it means to you.

KIM CLIJSTERS: It's very special to come back to a place that has had a big impact on my life, that weekend, the way I look at my own career. But it's really a little less stressful this year than it was back in 2017. I'm very excited to

ASAP sports . . . when all is said, we're done.®

watch Esther and Rick get inducted tonight.

I just want to also say thank you to the Dutch media that is in the Zoom call. I think part of inspiring people in different parts of the world, we need the media to help out as well. Thank you to the Dutch media to be involved and to take some good news out of here.

PATRICK McENROE: Thank you, Kim.

Esther, you have just one of the most amazing records ever in tennis. You talked about preparing for your speech earlier today. Actually it struck me, you were introduced, talking about what an amazing career you've had in tennis, we're celebrating that. To me it's also about celebrating your whole life in tennis, being an athlete.

Can you talk a little bit about not just the winning and all the titles, but also how much tennis has been a part of who you are for so long.

ESTHER VERGEER: Yeah, that dawns down on me when you're here, I'm here with my family, you just talk about what tennis has done for all of us, but also a little bit about how my life has changed when I was eight, what all has happened, how tennis has changed my life. It gave me confidence and made me the person who I am today.

Working in sports, still loving the sport, tennis, but also other sports, and seeing the importance of all people being able to play sports, I think that's what just makes me realize why I'm here.

Of course, next to that, like Kim said it already, once you're in the museum, you see you're going to be part of the history of tennis. I still can't believe it. That makes it so big. That makes it that it's almost I can't realize what the impact would be.

Those days are quite busy here, so probably when I'm going back home, sitting on a plane, I'm probably going to realize how huge this is, not only for me but for tennis as a whole, tennis as an impactful instrument for life, I would say.

PATRICK McENROE: It's amazing to have you here and your family. I know your parents are super proud. Also have them here taking care of your daughter.

ESTHER VERGEER: Exactly. That's the good part.

PATRICK McENROE: Rick, must be amazing for you because you did so much for wheelchair tennis for so long before really it became popular, maybe the wrong word, but became part of the Grand Slams. It's so cool to see all

the other wheelchair players and people here, first of all, that are supporting you, which is obviously a testament to you. It must be pretty awesome to kind of feel like what you did for so long, to kind of see how wheelchair tennis has become really just part of tennis, in the biggest tournaments in the world. How has this whole thing been? How does that part of it feel?

RICK DRANEY: Tennis for me was the catalyst that got me thinking about the future, not just from day to day but down the road, the possibilities that might exist.

To be able to have the opportunity to pursue that, to explore that, to thankfully in my case improve, have an opportunity to compete and compete well, but also recognizing how much others had done for me to help me get where I've been able to get throughout my career, is something that I've always appreciated and admired, and something that I've always felt was going to be part of what I hoped would be something that I could do.

So to advocate for and campaign for the quad division as it was still in its earlier developmental stages, trying to open those doors and provide those opportunities, to gain traction, to continue to grow and improve not only in the States but around the world, has been incredibly rewarding for me to think that maybe I've been some small part of that journey.

Again, I fully recognize that it was a collective journey of a lot of people, and great to be where we are now today.

PATRICK McENROE: You're a big, huge part of it.

We have a Hall of Famer that will ask the first question because that's the way it's going to be. Mr. Steve Flink.

Q. I'd like to ask both of you, how much of a difference do you think it's made to the growing popularity, growing importance of wheelchair tennis to have the wheelchair tennis players inducted at the International Tennis Hall of Fame?

ESTHER VERGEER: Well, I think it's been very important. I think it's important to talk about integration of wheelchair tennis within the whole tennis community. I think we do, or the ITF and the Grand Slams, have done a great job by integrating the tournaments together.

The Tennis Hall of Fame did it in a way that it's, like, for sure a common sense that wheelchair tennis is just part of tennis history. I think tennis is the sport that stands out, that does that in a brilliant way. It's very important for as a message to the world that there's no difference. We all love the sport of tennis, so we should be part of the whole

story that tennis is.

Walking through the museum, having of course inductees like Brad Parks, Monique Kalkman, we're adding a little bit to that story. We know that story is going to continue, which makes me even more proud.

RICK DRANEY: Initially or originally it was American players that were being inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame. That expanded and grew to international players as well. You have professional men, professional women, contributors, wheelchair category.

To think that we are all part of this beautiful sport, this beautiful game, the thing that we enjoy, the thing that we love, and that collectively we're elevating the consciousness of the significance and impact of tennis in whatever way, shape or form that might be, is something that makes it combined a greater and bolder statement than it would be if it was one specific category or perspective, like it may have been in the early year.

The progression and the inclusion is something that is a part of the entire story of the legacy of tennis for everybody.

Q. Esther, your numbers are unmatched, incredible. When it was over, your career was over, was there ever a moment that you looked and said, Did I really do all that?

ESTHER VERGEER: Yeah, there were some moments. Now, again, when people repeat those numbers, I'm like, Whoa. It all happened so fast. Sometimes when you're playing, you're not realizing what the numbers are. I wasn't playing for those numbers. One of the questions I got today was, Why didn't you retire at 500 matches unbeaten or stuff like that? I wasn't worrying about the numbers.

To look back on my career, to see what I did, it's quite impressive, so to say, especially because you see that being unbeaten and having the focus on winning every time, yeah, is quite remarkable so to say, yeah.

RICK DRANEY: Everybody else knew what her record was. They were keeping track. They said, I am a victim of Esther, as well. Everybody in tennis was fully aware of what she was doing and accomplishing.

Q. Esther, your achievements were historic, are historic still. How is it now to be integrated in the part of tennis history? What does it feel like?

ESTHER VERGEER: I think this is the biggest, it says everywhere we're where you read about the Hall of Fame,

it's the biggest honor you can have as an athlete. As a person, it's an amazing compliment for the results I had in tennis, then just be part of history.

That is probably the most amazing part, realizing that I'm going to be here in the museum, realizing that people will read about me, about the development that I had gone through as an athlete, see the development of wheelchair tennis. I can be a little part of whatever is going to be there for the upcoming years.

It's huge. Yeah, I mean, in The Netherlands, the International Tennis Hall of Fame is maybe not as well-known as it is here. You should be here next time because then you realize how big it is, how huge it is, and what a wonderful tool it is to celebrate a sport, to get together and honor the sport that you have loved, honor the people that have worked hard to grow the sport.

Yeah, it's amazing to be part of that.

Q. When you arrived two, three days ago in Newport, the grass courts, what was the feeling then? Was it some kind of magic?

ESTHER VERGEER: It is magic, yeah. This whole environment, the surroundings, it's beautiful. Every picture that has been taken is amazing.

Then you see the history of the tennis tournament, you see the history of the building. Walking through the museum, you feel the history of tennis.

They tell me this is going to be my second home or my home away from home. I would like to come back every year because it's been wonderful. The people are nice. They all welcome me. Yeah, I love Newport. It's a new love for me, yeah.

Q. Rick, wheelchair tennis has only been part of the Grand Slams for one full generation at this point, 20 years. What was it like to be at the forefront of that, and how proud you must be to see the growth in the sport over that period of time, the fact that you were one of the initial drivers of that?

RICK DRANEY: I was fortunate that I was able to do and got to do what I did when I did it. To think about the future and the vision, to see some of the things that were beginning to happen, to again have a role in trying to advocate for that, has been meaningful and significant to me.

While I never competed in one of the Grand Slams, just like the progress and evolution in sports throughout history,



there are better, bigger, grander things taking place now than there may have been back in the day for anybody.

To reflect and say I'm envious I didn't get the chance is not the right vision and not the vision that I take. It's to think that I'm still part of that process. It is happening in some part because of my efforts, and I take immense pride in that and satisfaction to know that we are where we are now.

Just as Brad, when he started all of this, his wife Wendy and that team, look at what is taking place in wheelchair tennis as a whole today. To be a part of that journey and work on that progress is something that you just cannot express how grateful you are to have been a part of that. Immensely proud to have done what I was able to do, and hope that it helped along the way.

Q. Rick, I hesitate to use the word 'void' because it sounds negative, but what was missing from Brad founding wheelchair tennis, then recognizing that there's a little bit more that can be done in terms of embracing the quad division into the sport?

RICK DRANEY: The interesting thing, couple of interesting things to me, is there actually was a quad division from the very beginning. Brad and Wendy, those early on, they understood that they wanted to provide competitive opportunities for players of all levels, all abilities, all skills. So not only was it the men's and women's top-level divisions, open divisions at the time, but there were letter divisions for players. There was a quad division.

The numbers were far fewer in the quad division. There weren't as many of them playing. Part of that challenge was I think because, with limitations in the upper extremities, in my particular case not having enough hand function to actually be able to hold onto a racquet, I had one additional thing that I needed to figure out in addition to everything else that wheelchair tennis presents as far as the challenges in mastering this sport.

It was not readily accessible I think to a lot of people available because there were some things that just hadn't been figured out yet.

To be able to maybe use my creativity and my determination in wanting to, what can I do, how can I do it, that can make me play this game better, make me move better, is it something I then can share with other people, then maybe the numbers start to grow.

Again, it starts in the States, international growth begins to take place, opportunities internationally for a quad division to develop and grow internationally.

It's not that there were voids, it's just that there were some other things that needed to be done and work through to continue the momentum that had initially been there to get things caught up.

It was a numbers game, like a lot of things are. That's part of the challenge. The other unique challenges to someone with limitations in their upper extremity, helping coaches understand that the dynamics and the instructional methods really aren't that different once you figure out a way for them to be able to secure a racquet in their hand or hold a racquet and move, then you go from there.

Q. Where would we be with getting women in the quad division to a higher level?

RICK DRANEY: Again, there are a few of them. In the quad division, it is a mixed division as far as men and women can and do compete, and have over the years. Again, because of the numbers, there just weren't enough to have a separate men's division and women's division. It made the most sense to have a combined division so that the draw sizes could be a little bit bigger, there could be more opportunities at tournaments where the players were traveling to to compete.

Even now, you look at the men's rankings, the women's rankings, the quad rankings, the number of players is different between the three. That's just, again, the nature of the injuries, the abilities, the disabilities, however you want to look at it, that there generally are more paraplegics than quadriplegics coming through. Whether it's tennis, rugby, basketball, swimming, whatever it is, that's generally the case.

It was not a neglect, not an oversight, dismissal or anything like that. It was that we followed the same path, it just took a little bit longer because some of the other things that were unique to quad tennis players.

Q. Esther, in the last month, how has it been realizing it's been getting closer and closer?

ESTHER VERGEER: I couldn't really hear.

Q. The buildup from Rotterdam to now, how has it been?

ESTHER VERGEER: Of course, in The Netherlands we had some nice announcements made at the ABN AMRO Open, which was nice. At the same time, from then to now, like I just said to the Dutch media, in The Netherlands, it's not a huge thing.

It's been quite quiet, which is kind of nice. I've been working on my speech, so that's probably the best and biggest preparation I did for today. Of course, I've been following what was happening on the Tennis Hall of Fame social media posts and all that.

Yeah, I mean, it's nice to just go with my family, live up to the moment that is going to happen here, but not realizing how big it is. Every night now we're here, we tell each other that it's amazing that we can actually be here together and celebrate all the festivities that we have here.

RICK DRANEY: It had been a long time since I was that excited and that nervous to roll onto a tennis court is when we rolled out in Rotterdam to be announced and introduced in front of the crowd. That was a thrilling moment.

Everything has just built from that. I've tried to get my head wrapped around it. I've tried to come up with a way to get it into perspective. I still haven't been able to. I don't know that I ever will.

That's what I'm starting to recognize. That's part of what you need to enjoy in this whole process. It should be a thrill for the rest of your lifetime. It is. It is. I have never been to a fantasy camp, but if you took every fantasy camp around the world and put them all together, this would still blow them away.

Now this fantasy, this dream, is becoming a reality for me. I'm just enjoying it, relishing it. I look forward to spending the rest of my life trying to come to terms with just how meaningful and significant it is to me.

It is a wonderful process, and I'm incredibly grateful that I get to be one of those individuals recognized in the International Tennis Hall of Fame.

Q. Two hours ago I was watching the YouTube videos of you doing your tours of the museum. Esther, what is your making of this experience?

ESTHER VERGEER: To do the tour in the museum?

Q. Yes.

ESTHER VERGEER: The whole experience.

PATRICK McENROE: Of seeing the museum.

ESTHER VERGEER: Goose bumps. I didn't know what to expect. Once you get into the museum, you see all the items. It's not only about trophies, only about players, but it's the history about the development of tennis balls,

shoes, tennis ball cans.

I saw Rick's chair and my chair up at one of those rooms. It's just impressive to see what tennis is about. Then, of course, you see your own items. Showing my dad, my mom, my daughter the shirts that I played in. I mean, she's three and a half. She can't really get the feel of what I did. But to show her is quite an amazing feeling.

So goose bumps and emotions, yeah, thrilled.

Q. Rick, when I was watching the YouTube video of your tour, I saw Steve with you.

RICK DRANEY: Steve and Brent, two of the individuals I played with a lot, trained with a lot in the very early years, formative years. Again, it was a team effort by a lot of us to try to do what we were able to do back then.

But to have them here and others here, again, how do you summarize a career? How do you capture all of the moments and all of the memories, keep that in perspective? Again, the significance of what's taking place, it's just overwhelming, but it is so wonderful to reflect back on.

I'm old enough that I was able to do it all, young enough I can still remember it. I haven't forgotten things. That's part of the beauty, as well, that's been part of this whole experience, is to share it with friends and family and others that were a part of that journey with me that did what they did for me. It makes it that much more meaningful and significant to me to have them here as well.

PATRICK McENROE: I'd just like to say it's an honor to hear from you both, to hear how much it means to you. It's amazing. Get a little bit of rest before 6 p.m. That's going to be the big moment. We're all looking forward to it.

Thank you to all of you for being here. We'll see you out there on the court at 6. Can't wait.

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