Roland Garros

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Paris, France

Stefano Vukov

Press Conference

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. It's been quite the tournament from Elena, and obviously she's had a pretty difficult 12 months really since the lockdown, since the pandemic began. What's been the key to maintaining that positivity?

STEFANO VUKOV: Well, it's, as you said, it's been a tough 12 months. I think that -- I mean, corona and this break broke a little bit her rhythm, wasn't being able to work with her for quite a few months last year. When I started working again, she was away from tennis for a good four, five months before we started hitting a ball at all.

So, you know, I think just staying positive, trying to build up again the form through practices, through the events. It's been tough for everybody lately to prepare at all.

We've had a couple of health issues also for after Australia, after hard lockdown we got a bit unlucky there, staying in the rooms for two weeks.

Well, what can you do, you know? You just try to stay positive, practice day in and day out, and results from earlier come obviously.

Q. She spoke of taking, I think it was a week coming into Roland Garros to go back and just practice. How crucial do you think that was to her run here now in Paris?

STEFANO VUKOV: Very crucial, I think mostly from the mental part.

We've been on the road for so long since the beginning of the year. And I remember after Miami and in Charleston she was not feeling the greatest so we had to pull out from there. We had a long trip in Argentina for the Fed Cup, she played Fed Cup for her country for the first time. Because of that, we weren't able to compete in Stuttgart. You know, seven flights to get back to Europe.

Somehow made it to Madrid, but after Madrid I saw, you know, maybe it's best to take a week off and practice and reset and prepare for the clay, at least what was left of it, yes.

Q. The aftermath now of defeating Serena, how is she handling that?

STEFANO VUKOV: We haven't talked about it so much, to be honest (smiling). I think the job is not done yet generally, so we'll see later on, but we are trying to focus on the next match. Yeah.

Q. The next match is against her doubles partner. How do you see that one?

STEFANO VUKOV: A good friend of ours, very good player, very nice girl, Nastia Pavlyuchenkova.

I mean, you know, I guess it's a bit tough for the girls because they are friends, but obviously once on the court they go to work, and then after that obviously can be friends again, definitely.

Q. Are you surprised with Rybakina's success so far? Were you expecting these results coming in this early or not surprised at all, it could happen any time?

STEFANO VUKOV: I think that, you know, I started with Elena from ITF 25,000 events couple of few years back. We have been working close to three years together. It's been a process, but it's been fast. She's been having some great results.

So on Grand Slams, we didn't go that far, and this is the first time we break through to the second week. I think it was due time, because she's already been showing great results, especially the beginning of last year, competing in finals of Dubai, St. Petersburg, won two WTA events, couple more finals here and there. I think it was a question of time to break through one of the Grand Slams into the second week.

Q. What did you focus on her? When you first started working together, what was your main goal with her? What do you think she lacked and you had to focus on first?

STEFANO VUKOV: First we needed to, you know, find a bit a game style, because she was very talented. She feels the ball very well. She has many options.

Also with her movement, her height, we had to definitely improve the serve. The serve had some major technical

changes. Couple years ago she was having trouble with placement of the serve, acing players. Last year she was leading in aces I think by the time coronavirus kicked in, and also this tournament I think she is leader in aces.

Base her game on her serve, definitely her power, tried to spin the ball a little bit better, because when we started working, flat was the only option. It's getting better, yes.

Q. What are you more proud of her this Roland Garros? What are you kind of surprised about her or nothing surprising you?

STEFANO VUKOV: No, of course mentally. Mentally every match, you know, from day one she held it together, especially in the last match against Serena. We had a set plan. She followed it nearly to 80%, and so that was great.

Yeah, you still gotta wake up in the morning, get to Chatrier, play against one of the greatest players of the sport regardless of tennis or not. It's still mentally very tough, and I think she held it together really, really well. She handled it really well.

Q. Being in the second week of a Grand Slam, what are the things you need to focus on for her being in this new situation? What are the things you tried to, I don't know, keep her a little bit with her feet on the ground? What do you focus on?

STEFANO VUKOV: I mean, we just go match by match really. We don't try to realize that it's a quarterfinal or a first round or a second round. We prepare the same way every match. She's very young, and all of this is experience, first and foremost. She's hungry to improve. I think there is a lot of work to be done still. She's still not 100% mature in a lot of aspects of the game.

But we just keep working, keep working the same every match, every tournament, regardless the result.

Q. Do you think that still being in doubles has helped her in singles?

STEFANO VUKOV: Yes. I think I have learned with her throughout the years that especially in Grand Slams there is obviously a day of break, sometimes two. So for a player like her it's always best if she can, you know, play a couple of practice sets in singles or maybe, you know, if she can still practice serves and returns in doubles, stay in the rhythm. It has helped a lot definitely to keep her in the rhythm, yes.

Q. The three weeks that you guys took off after Madrid to prepare for the tournament, how huge was that, and what exactly did you work on? Seems like she's taken such confidence or just, yeah, seems like she's come in much more refined than she was before?

STEFANO VUKOV: Yeah, I think as I said before, it was very important and mostly because we didn't have any, let's say, blocks of practice since the beginning of the year. We prepared seven weeks in Dubai. We had a great preparation. I remember that she had a decent tournament, quarterfinals in Abu Dhabi, lost a close match to Sabalenka, then Sabalenka won the event. After the hard lockdown in Australia, kind of mentally and physically we had a few issues and it took a while to come back.

We just couldn't find some time, you know, to completely stop and practice and get in the fitness coach and work with our nutritionist, and with our physio. It was definitely important.

Q. Do you feel as though, given how red hot you guys were going into the shutdown last year, does this result feel like relief? Does it feel like pride? How do you kind of interpret it to get this big result at a slam at this point when maybe last year we would have thought this would have come, you know, quite earlier.

STEFANO VUKOV: Yeah, I agree with you. Obviously -- I mean, from my side, you know, I think that, as I said before, it's just like improving and gaining experience to develop as a player.

For her, you know, I think it was very tough this past couple of months, and I think it's what you get. You know, sometimes you have good days; sometimes you have bad days. These things can happen.

Relief, I wouldn't say "relief," it's just sport. It's not the first, not gonna be the last time. You gotta deal with it, and just move on.

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