

Tennis Channel

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Martina Navratilova

Media Conference

ERIC ABNER: Appreciate everybody joining today. Hope everybody is keeping safe, everybody is well. This is Eric Abner. I will give my contact info for anyone reading the transcript and needs to get a hold of me. My phone is 310.314.9445 is my direct line. You can email me at email me at EAbner@TennisChannel.com.

As we head into the 2020 US Open, obviously this is an unprecedented time for all of us. While the tours were on hiatus this summer, Tennis Channel spent the time showing as much tennis as possible, as many exhibitions and special events as we could put on the air to keep the sport front and center for our viewers.

When the tours returned, Palermo in Italy, then Lexington, Kentucky, now at the Western & Southern Open being held in New York. Like everyone, we're excited for the return of a tennis major with the US Open next week.

Our daily US Open show 'Tennis Channel Live at the US Open' will begin Monday at 10 a.m. eastern time. That's the usual start time for most of the tournament. Week two it changes a little bit.

Brett Haber is going to be our host alongside Martina and her fellow Hall of Famer Jim Courier. We'll also have author and journalist Jon Wertheim of '60 Minutes' fame. We'll have encore matches every evening, around midnight eastern time, a little bit later at the beginning of the tournament. This is Tennis Channel's 12th year of covering the US Open.

Our guest today has been with the network since 2007. She has offered commentary at every major tournament the Tennis Channel has ever covered. If I tried to list all the championships she won in her career, there would be no time to ask questions today.

I want to note that no man or woman has won as many professional tennis tournaments as Martina Navratilova. We're proud to say she's part of our Tennis Channel family.

We'll open it up for questions at this time.



Q. I'm working on a story about the Original 9. I know you were kind of in the first generation immediately after their big tournament they had that paved the way in 1970. What are your thoughts about the risk that those women took for their careers and what it's led to since?

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: We know what it's led to. It started basically women's professional tennis and paved the way for the sport to go to the heights that it's never seen before, has been building ever since.

The risk to the women? They didn't know what was going to happen. The risk was huge. Some of them would have other options or would be able to recover. For some people, it could be an existential kind of risk.

You should ask every woman what was the risk for them.

It was definitely something that is to be admired, respected. All these women were way ahead of their time. They took a huge, huge chance. Look how it paid off, for some maybe not as much as others. We have a 'thank you' to every single one of these women.

There probably would have been more depending on when it happened. There may have been some others that could have been the Original 12 instead of the Original 9. Those were the women there that actually took that big step. The rest is history. Big, big thank you to every single one of these women.

Q. Do you think what they did is properly appreciated?

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: Well, this is 50 years ago. How many people can remember that far back? We owe a big gratitude, big chunk of gratitude to them. We will try to commemorate it the best that we can. I'm sure they didn't get as much recognition and certainly not financial rewards for what they did within their lifetime.

We can just keep thanking them, hope that that's enough. That's for you guys. I talk about it. You guys can magnify that gratitude and thanks and the big move that they did 50 years ago.

For anybody to do that is risky. I think for women particularly, when things don't go well, they pay a bigger



price usually than men. At every level was just such a huge move.

Anyway, so, I'll keep thanking them for the rest of my life. You guys do your job, then maybe they will be rewarded enough for it.

Q. Your impressions of Coco Gauff both as a player, if you've gotten to know her as a person at all, what your thoughts are about her as a person as well away from the court?

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: I have barely said hello to her because I haven't had the opportunity to cross paths yet. What I know, what I see is quite outstanding both on and off the court. We know what she's done on the court. She's just getting started really. It's astonishing.

At her age, to have the awareness to see what's going on in the real world, then the guts to actually speak out about it on social issues, is just phenomenal at this age. She has an amazing platform, she knows that. I think she's used it so well already.

I think she's got a potential to really make an impact on and off the court, so I am so happy to see what she's done so far off the court. On the court I'm looking forward to her evolution as a tennis player. There is a lot there. It's going to be fun to watch.

Q. Can you give your thoughts on all of the players who have not come over for the US Open, the players who have? Do you think the Europeans who skipped the US Open did it because of safety concerns or is it a little bit more strategic because playing the US Open and then the French back-to-back is too demanding?

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: I think every single individual has different reasons. I think also with the travel, you don't know what it's going to take. Will you have to quarantine when you get here? Will you have to quarantine when you get back depending which country you're coming from, which state, et cetera? It's just really complicated. How many flights do you want to be on really?

I just flew for the first time the other day since Australia, January, beginning of February. I felt safer than getting gas in Florida because nobody there was wearing masks.

It's to each person. Do you have a better chance at the US Open or French Open or both? You say, Do I play both, because it's really back-to-back. That's no different from what French and Wimbledon used to be. There used to be one week, then it became two weeks, now three weeks. We're used doing a quick turnaround from French to

Wimbledon. US Open to French, two weeks in between, it's okay. There are so many different factors that come into it.

Maybe also the fact you haven't played that many matches. Would you want to play that many matches all of a sudden, particularly for guys, three-out-of-five? There's so many factors that would go into the decision. Each player would decide what's best for them, her or him, individually.

For me, for my game, I would definitely play the US Open and then see how I feel. I would enter maybe the French, then see how I feel. Do I still want to play there? I don't know. It all depends on each person.

Q. Do you think it would have been foolish for Rafa to have come here to the US Open? He's chasing history, looking at 13 Roland Garros titles.

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: Again, you play the odds, right? Do you have a better chance of winning the French without going to the US Open? Clearly playing the French is money in the bank pretty much, right? Is there a plus to going to the US Open?

With the limits that are put into play here compared to the French, it's much more difficult to navigate, much more restrictive. As much of a creature of habit as he is, as we know, I'm thinking about him always playing the game with three people, playing this board game before matches for hours on end. You can only bring two people with him, as far as I understand. Who would he play that game with? I don't know.

There is a lot that goes into those decisions. Again, being Rafa, being the age he is, how difficult it is to travel, his best chance to win the French Open is by not coming to New York. I would have been surprised had he played actually.

Q. In terms of Serena, how important for her sort of overall G.O.A.T. status is it for her to get the 24th major to tie Margaret Court or is she clearly the G.O.A.T. even if she doesn't get it?

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: There is a lot of different measuring sticks. It's hard for me to talk about it completely objectively because we were playing under a different measuring stick, so to speak, during my time with Chris and myself. Not even playing the French Open or the Australian Open because we were playing World TeamTennis. The Australian Open wasn't even important enough, and the money was so bad, we would make more money playing regular tournaments than going down to Australia. The majors became a huge measuring stick in

the '90s forward.

If you just go on majors, then you have Serena. If you go a different way, then it would be me or Steffi Graf, perhaps Margaret Court. It just depends how you want to measure that.

But I think Serena just wants that record regardless of any G.O.A.T. status. For her it's about that number. Now she's got a great chance with the US Open with a smaller field obviously. At the same time she likes to feed off the energy from the crowd. That won't be there. I think that's more of a handicap for the top players than the lower-ranked players, the crowd not being there. Bit of an equalizer.

She has a better chance now. For her, it's about that number, not about G.O.A.T. I think. You'd have to ask her that.

Q. If she doesn't get it this year, she'll turn 40 next year. Roger and Serena both turn 40 next year. How tough will it be to win one after they get to their 40th year?

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: Look, it was hard for me once I hit 30, and they're 10 years older (laughter). I played a lot more tennis at that point. Still, everything gets harder when you get older. Everything takes longer: preparation, recovery, recovery from injury, the nerves get in the way more as you get older, and you slow down a little bit. No matter how hard you work, the quickness is not the same.

I thought, Okay, I was just as fast. The reaction, even though I saw the ball, I almost had to tell myself to run for it. What came naturally in your 20s and early 30s now was a struggle. Then I played doubles, finished almost 50 years old. I know that age definitely gets in the way. It's just a matter of how well you manage it.

What you may lose speed-wise maybe you gain knowledge-wise, how to play points, how to manage your emotions and everything else. There's different payoffs or different tradeoffs rather. It doesn't get easier.

Yeah, time is not on these guys' side, whether it's Roger or Serena. It's not a friend.

Q. I am writing a piece about music and players. There's three players that just released rap singles, Yastremska, Denis Shapovalov, and (indiscernible). I'm curious to get your thoughts on the pros and cons of putting a lot of passion into another project like an artistic project while still being an elite tennis player. Do you see any positives in it? Do you think it's

foolish from your perspective?

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: I haven't heard those songs, so I can say I don't know what I'm talking about on that front.

But I think it's great that players find other venues, other passions, other than tennis. Particularly something like that doesn't necessarily take that much energy away from you. I mean, when Caroline Wozniacki was going to run the marathon, that takes away from some of the training for tennis, right? You may question that decision.

Singing career, releasing singles, getting away from the tennis grind that way, why not, if you have the platform, if you have the ability. It's a very subjective thing, music. More power to them that they can put some energy into that while not taking away anything from obviously training and becoming the best tennis player they can be. If you can manage it, great.

Q. Did you ever have those kinds of decisions to make in your career, passions like that that maybe you wanted to pursue but you didn't because you were so focused?

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: I think there's more opportunities to do stuff like that now. It's a little bit easier to kind of venture out of your field. At the same time I was too busy thinking about anything else. That being said, I was interested in the world, very vociferous [sic] reader and consumer of world affairs, news, et cetera, but didn't have the time to really sink my teeth into anything else other than tennis while I was still playing.

Q. You're normally at these majors that you're providing commentary for. What is your setup going to be for commentary from home? Where in the world are you going to be? How is your tech situation? What do you think you'll miss by not being there in person?

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: Of course, just miss being there on a personal level. My favorite part of the year is French Open and Wimbledon. They didn't happen at all. The French looks like it will happen. This year's US Open is a different situation. We're not allowed to get on the site.

Champions adjust, as Billie Jean King says. Tennis Channel has adjusted to the situation for me. I can sleep in because we were getting up at 5 in the morning to do our show from 8 to 11. Now the show is 10 to 11. I bought a computer, a MacBook Pro, so I have really nice options on that. I've been pretty much living on my iPad the last few years. I splurged, bought a new computer. I have to

set up my office so it looks really, really nice for the show.

Other than that it just makes life easier. My makeup won't be as good as it could be when Erin McParland is doing it. Make the most out of a tricky situation. At least I can sleep longer.

Q. If you were covering a tournament, how would you keep track of everything? Watch a lot of matches in person? Would you be in a room or truck somewhere watching multiple screens?

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: In the truck or in the locker room actually watching the action from there. I was always playing the seniors or whatever setup there was. I was able to get in the locker room and watch on those screens, which is great. And/or I would go into the Tennis Channel truck and watch there.

Now I guess I've got the TC Plus, maybe ESPN. I don't know how much they'll be showing. I will get access so I can keep track of the matches from my own couch. It's just going to be weird. It's weird for everybody. We're just adjusting to a new situation. Try to make the most of it without stressing too much.

Yeah, that will be the setup.

Q. Since you hold some of the most important records in the history of the game, how did you handle the pressure of chasing some of these records? I'm asking that in relation to what Serena and Novak are trying to do. Among the young players, both women and men, whose game excites you? Do you have any special feeling or observation about the Canadian lefties Leylah Fernandez and Denis Shapovalov?

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: It's two different histories, right? There is cumulative, like winning so many tournaments, so many matches, so many tournaments in a row, so many total, then there is the consecutive.

For me the biggest pressure I felt was when I was going for my seventh major in a row, which was the Australian Open. Then also breaking the consecutive match streak, which Chris had at 55. I got to 54 and I lost, then I had to start a new streak. I got to 74. That's when I lost to Helena Sukova because I was going for seven slams in a row.

It's just consecutive records, when you go for that you feel the pressure the most. You know you probably won't ever have the chance again. That's why the pressure builds.

Winning one more Wimbledon, you have a chance every year. Winning one more major, you have the chance four

times a year, or three times a year this year. Those kind of records are more not relaxing, but they're easier to deal with because you have many more opportunities for it.

It's when you get a big streak going, like when Serena had the chance to win the calendar year Grand Slam, you saw the pressure was something that she had a hard time dealing with. I mean, it got to her. Just like it got to me losing to Helena Sukova at the Australian Open. History doesn't come around that often for those kind of records.

The 24th for Serena, she's got more opportunities for it, but you still feel it. The longer it takes to get there, the more you feel that pressure. I didn't chase the total number of wins or tournaments or whatever. I did chase that ninth Wimbledon title. That's the one that meant the most to me because it was for the record, so...

Then the Canadian question? I haven't seen her play that much. I've seen a little bit on Tennis Channel. I haven't seen her live so I can't talk to what kind of ball she hits because I haven't seen in person. Really great athlete. Really great attitude. I like what I see.

Denis, my goodness, he looks a bit stronger. I saw him on TV the other day. First thing I noticed was his quads. I think he's been doing some squats with his legs because they look definitely bigger than a year ago, last time I saw him, which should help him get set up for his shots. His backhand seems to be more powerful. He's progressing nicely I think. He's got the talent to go all the way, as does the righty, Felix Auger-Aliassime. He's got all the goods, as well. Interesting to see which one comes out on top at the end of their career. Right now I have no idea.

Q. Playing the US Open with no crowd, crowd is always such a big part of the US Open, do you think there might be some players that it might benefit, some that it might take away from their abilities, their performance?

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: Well, like I said, it's a bit of an equalizer when there is no crowd because the big players, the top players, are used to playing in front of a big crowd on the big stadiums when it's really buzzing. Whereas the lesser-ranked players, maybe it's a once-a-year opportunity, once-a-year experience. It's more difficult for them. Now that's not there. It's still a big stadium, but it's empty.

Particularly Arthur Ashe Stadium, I don't know the noise level, it's always noisy anyway, but with the air filters running, et cetera, but also the crowd gets rowdy there where people have a hard time hearing the ball hitting the racquet.



It's just a new experience for everybody now. We'll see who handles it the best. The top players obviously handle pressure very well and they're used to being maybe uncomfortable in some situations because they've had to handle it all their lives.

Overall I'd say the situation is an equalizer. It's better for the lower-ranked players than the top players. For the top players, it's just tricky, particularly when they know they're going to have the crowd on their side, and now they won't be there.

Novak Djokovic may be happy he doesn't have to deal with the crowd. Then neither Federer nor Nadal are playing, so there's that. For Serena Williams, may be a bit of a handicap in that she thrives on the crowd getting on her side, as they have been so vocal the last few years. Now she won't have that. She's such a self-starter anyway, she motivates herself.

Again, all the champions, they're very self-motivated. But the crowd definitely helps, especially when things don't go their way.

Will it make a difference at the end who wins the tournament because there's a crowd or wasn't a crowd? I don't think so.

Q. This is a year where travel has been very difficult in international tennis. Could you think of any time in modern tennis history when it's been like that? Did you ever have any travel difficulties in your career, like before the Berlin Wall came down?

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: Yeah. For me, that's why I left my country, because of travel difficulties because I didn't know if I could get out of the country. There was that. It was just a different situation. That was a more unique obviously to the Soviet bloc countries, maybe China, places like that, that it was an issue for the players.

This is an issue for everybody. So this is a new situation completely.

Q. Do you remember any experiences where you had a difficult time traveling?

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: Yeah, I mean, just the difficulty of getting a visa to some countries. Even after I defected, I didn't have a passport. I had what is called a reentry permit. I had to get a visa to practically every country I went to. It just made it more difficult to navigate the logistics of that.

I remember being held up in Hong Kong one year for three hours at the airport because of where I came from, coming from a communist country. Hard time getting a visa to I think Japan. It was a little more difficult back then.

I would not go to Russia. I would not go to any communist country obviously because then I would be in trouble. It was just that political stuff that I had to navigate, plan ahead.

There were no tournaments in the Soviet Union back then. It didn't hamper me in any shape or form tennis-wise, it just made travel a little more difficult.

Q. What are you expecting in terms of quality for this Open? Players have been out for five months, maybe had some exhibitions but essentially haven't played best-of-five sets. Do you think we'll get some pretty high-quality tennis or it will be really random and chaotic?

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: I think tennis will be high quality, but it will be unpredictable, just like the Australian Open is unpredictable. There will be a handful of players that will feel match tough when the tournament starts. So everybody is pretty much in the same boat.

It's really unpredictable with players coming in after such a long layoff. It will just be interesting to see how everybody looks physically, then also mentally.

I think you'll have more upsets there than you would normally. At the same time not all the top players are playing, so it will be hard to measure apples to apples.

Overall I think the quality, I mean, look, they've had a long break, nobody is match tough, but they also had a great opportunity to get in amazing physical shape, right? There's no reason not to be unbelievably fit right now. You had time to experiment and maybe try different training techniques, maybe do some Yoga and pilates that you didn't have time to do before, really balance out your body, find the extra 10th of a second getting to the ball through better footwork or stronger legs, et cetera. Physically everybody should be amazingly fit. The matches, there is no substitute for that. Kind of a mixed bag.

I think overall you'll see great tennis. What I've been seeing, even in the exhibition-type formats, is great tennis. I think the tennis quality will be there. It will be a little more unpredictable, that's for sure.

Q. Do you think it's a pretty massive opportunity on the men's side for somebody to break through, or do you see Novak Djokovic having the really big edge

because he's got the maturity and experience?

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: Yeah, he would be the favorite anyway, as the No. 1 player in the world. Now with both Rafa and Roger not being there, he would be a big favorite I would think.

His preparation is so meticulous. He leaves no stone unturned. With the new situation, I'm sure he would have had his team put their heads together and really try to find the best way to prepare under the circumstances.

Yeah, again, like I said, the crowd, he would get into it with the crowd. Now there's nothing to concern him there so he can really just concentrate on playing, not get upset that the crowd's not on his side. I agree with him, he doesn't deserve the level of non-support that he gets. Anyway...

It will be I think a little bit easier for him to really stay focused in a way. Not that he has any issues, but really keep the energy on the court.

Q. In Cincinnati Pliskova, Kenin, Kvitova, all out in their first matches. Pliskova in particular, No. 1 without having won a major, what do you think is holding her back? Is this a golden opportunity or is she likely to get edgy by being the No. 1 seed at the Open?

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: I don't know. She is the most unpredictable of the top players. She hasn't come through in the majors and she knows it. The longer that goes on, the more the pressure goes.

In every interview she does, she's getting that question. It's really hard not to get down on yourself. Even if you have the belief, when you have to kind of refute that with every interview, it keeps getting into your head. It doesn't get any easier. The only way to stop those questions is to win, and you know that.

You just got to suck it up and keep the eye on the prize, really concentrate on that which you can control. Look at it again as an opportunity. Not everybody is playing. For me, she should look at it as a plus that not everybody's playing, but without the pressure of I'm No. 1. Who cares? The draw doesn't care. There really is no added pressure because she's never won it before.

In a way, yeah, she's No. 1, but she has never won a major. In some ways the pressure's off. She should not be the favorite. For sure she won't be the bookie's favorite. That will be Serena once again, rightly so.

When I played a major, I never cared whether I was No. 1,

No. 2. It just meant I was on top of the draw or the bottom of the draw. You still need to beat seven players to win. It didn't really matter. I'm sure her coaches will be keeping that under control and not letting the pressure get in the way.

That being said, because of how she plays, very hard and very flat strokes, she doesn't have much margin for error. When you get nervous, it makes it more difficult. I think that's why she's been a bit unpredictable or inconsistent, especially at the majors.

ERIC ABNER: I appreciate everyone's time.

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA: Thanks, everybody. That was fun.

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