

# Tennis Channel

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Culver City, California, USA

## Jim Courier

### Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: This is Eric Abner with the Tennis Channel. I will give everyone my contact information so it is in the transcript. My telephone number is 310-314-9445, email me at EAbner@TennisChannel.com.

I want to say two things about our French Open coverage. Obviously we've been covering the French Open since 2007. This is going to be (indiscernible) in history. We're excited to cover it again.

Of course, we are going to be doing the usual Tennis Channel coverage, which is start each day, first ball, 5 a.m. eastern time, we will run up to the end of day's play, usually around 3:00 in the afternoon eastern time. (Indiscernible) next day's play.

We have a great team there, among them are Hall of Famers, Martina Navratilova, Tracy Austin, Lindsay Davenport, of course our guest today, two-time French Open champion, Jim Courier. I want to thank Jim for taking the time to join us today.

We'll go ahead and open it up for questions.

**Q. A lot of intrigue with Roland Garros this year. Novak looks good in Rome. I want to ask you, your thoughts on the conditions that players will be facing because of the autumn dates and the additional changes and conditions that might be brought about by the roof? With regards to the men, Rafa, how he'll handle the conditions?**

JIM COURIER: First of all, from a comparison standpoint based on what the players face typically in the spring versus what they'll face in the fall, there will be about an hour and a half less daylight. Fortunately all the courts, including the field courts, now have lights. We'll be able to play until we need to to get matches done, if there's no bad weather or rain.

Forecast right now that I'm looking at right now on my phone looks like it's going to be fairly cool as far as top end temperatures. Normally in the spring event, we get a few really hot days. Doesn't look likely for us to have that.

Playing into the evening could be quite cool.

What does that mean? That means the ball won't be lively. A lot of the players that like to adjust their string tension lower to get more power will probably do that to get a bit more movement on the ball. Particularly as it revolves around Rafa, it means his forehand probably won't jump up as high as he would like it to. Won't be jumping out of the typical strike zone of the backhands. That's been such a dominant weapon for him in the past. We've seen him be vulnerable against a player like Diego Schwartzman in recent years under heavy, cooler conditions than hot, drier conditions. That will be something for him to look at.

As far as the roof goes, we don't know yet if it's going to have the same muting impact that it does to the wind in New York with Arthur Ashe Stadium. I suspect that it will. Until we see players play, we don't know for sure if it's taken a little bit out of play. That's certainly a factor. Novak would like not to see a lot of wind in there. He doesn't like wind typically. Last year it was incredibly breezy in the semifinals. He seemed to be the most disturbed by it of the four players.

Of course, the conditions are going to be tough as far as trying to be in a bubble and all that stuff. That's a different conversation. But it's going to be different. We're just lucky that we're going to actually get to watch it, frankly.

**Q. In light of what you mentioned, does it change in your mind how heavy of a favorite Rafa would be in Paris this year?**

JIM COURIER: I think because he hasn't had a normal run-up of matches, because he didn't get to play that many matches in Rome, he's not coming in with the normal comfort level I would imagine that he's used to having, where he comes in with at least one clay court title under his belt. He's a guy we know who loves the reps. He questions his immense talent basically more than anyone else does.

On paper he's surely the favorite. I would add Novak a very close second. Behind him probably tied with Dominic Thiem given his run in New York and his awesome claycourt play in the past four or five years.

**Q. Johnny Mack made the comment after Novak was**



**DQ'd at the Open that he's going to be the bad guy for the rest of his career. Do you agree with that? Where do you assess his image is going into the French Open? Is this going to haunt him forever? What is the perception going to be?**

JIM COURIER: I think intent matters. Novak clearly had no intention of harming anyone with the ball that unfortunately hit the lines woman in the throat. It was an accident. It's one that he's deeply sorry for.

I don't think it should be necessarily this great shadow that makes him all of a sudden go from a good guy to a bad guy. That's not the way that I see it, with all respect to John and his views. John would know more about being the bad guy than most of us. He carried that pretty well.

We have to take the full body of work. Novak has done a lot of good on the court as well as off the court. Because he's so high profile, mistakes are magnified. This is one that will certainly. Because he was defaulted in a major, that he was going to win most likely, that's why I think it will travel with him more so than, say, if it happened in Monte-Carlo where it would be, it's an accident, what a shame he hurt the person a little bit and thankfully she's okay.

I think the significance of the location and what it might do to the historical view on his record, he probably would have one more major had he not done that, that's why it's a bit of a shadow.

For me, it's not a reflection on his character. I've said it publicly, I will say it again, if Novak zombie out there, which we saw for a couple of years where he tried to mute his emotions, and that wasn't him, it's not in his DNA, he needs to be a fiery player, an emotional player for better or worse on the court. That's when he plays his best tennis. That's who he is. Obviously we hope and he hopes more than anyone he won't have an incident like this the rest of his career.

He can't go into a shell if he wants to be the same player he is. He has to be fiery. He was this week in Rome and it worked out for him.

**Q. What do you make of the American men going into Paris? Obviously a bunch of the big servers all had disappointing first-round exits at the US Open. Only Frances went far. What do you think their chances are in Paris?**

JIM COURIER: It's going to be interesting. Isner chose not to go over and play in Rome and Hamburg. He's not going to have a lot of reps. Doesn't necessarily mean he

won't go far. When John gets going, John is very tough to stop. He can play very well on clay. We've seen him do that in Davis Cup and in Houston.

Guys like Steve Johnson have won clay court tournaments as well.

We have guys that I'd say maybe not their favorite surface, but they're comfortable on the clay. A lot depends on the draw. We'll see how that goes. A good draw can go a long way towards success.

But it's too soon to tell for me anyway until we see where the draw shakes out, then we'll have a better idea.

**Q. How much of a concern is Rafa's loss in Rome as he heads to Paris?**

JIM COURIER: I don't think that it's a concern. I think given that it's best-of-five sets in Paris, he'll have more time to work through problems. He won't play a player like Diego that early in the draw either just because of the seedings. I think he'll have time to work himself into form.

But it's not easy for Rafa right now, having had six months off. He was one of the players who didn't play in any of the special events that took place during the break. He's really light on matches. He talks openly about how he needs those matches to feel comfortable and confident, to rest a little easier.

He'll be anxious for sure. But I don't think that's going to bother him much in the first week.

**Q. Dominic Thiem is bidding to make unique history, first man to win US Open and Roland Garros back-to-back. What will winning a maiden major do for him heading into Paris? Where would you rate him among the contenders?**

JIM COURIER: I've already ranked him as co-second with Novak behind Rafa as far as my personal favorites. That's my view of how I would rate them.

Again, the draw, it matters as to who is on Rafa's side. Obviously if Thiem is on Rafa's side versus on Novak's side, that changes a little bit, maybe. We'll see. Having to go through two of them is definitely tougher than just one.

But for Thiem, the double, it's obviously a first and hopefully the only time we're going to have this scenario where the US Open, French Open double, back-to-back. It will be very challenging just because of the lack of time to change surfaces, to get used to the new landscape. The players have done that from the French Open to

Wimbledon historically. You just get used to it.

This is a little bit of an outlier, but I think everyone seems to be in a reasonable frame of mind to give it a try. Dominic should be confident coming in after the US Open. He had a great performance overall. He didn't necessarily play his best tennis in the final, but played well enough to win. That's all that matters. He played some high level stuff coming into the final.

That should give him a big boost that he was able to manage his way through that really tense final, overcome all the hurdles that he did to lift that trophy. He's now forever a major champion, which is awesome, exciting.

At 27, it feels like he's a young 27 given how players are excelling so much now into their mid 30s. It seems like an open road for him. Going to be exciting to see how he handles now his new status. Always interesting to see how players deal with something new. This will be something new for him at Roland Garros. We'll look forward to it.

**Q. The US Open seemed to do a great job with the tournament, having no fans, the bubble. What are your thoughts on Roland Garros' decision of allowing a limited amount of fans into the event with COVID-19 cases spiking in France?**

JIM COURIER: It's clearly a government call, not necessarily a tournament call. I would imagine they'll be following those protocols very closely. It's not a great sign necessarily that we started the process, or they started the process, aiming for 50% capacity and now found their way down to 5,000 a day just on the main court, Philippe Chatrier. That indicates the direction things are heading in Paris. Unfortunate for sure.

I will say having watched Rome this week, covering some of it for Tennis Channel, once they started allowing a very limited number of people into the stadium to watch the last few rounds, that atmosphere that they created really made a difference. While tennis without fans is better than no tennis at all, tennis with limited fans is far better than tennis with no fans from an atmosphere standpoint.

For me, it is a viewing enjoyment standpoint. I'm sure the players would echo that, that they much prefer to have some feedback on what's going on out there.

We'll see. Safety is paramount. They have to get that right in the way that the USTA did. I'm sure they will. It will be all the better if we can have a limited amount of fans in the stadium creating that energy for everyone in the draw.

**Q. On the women's side, Ash Barty won't be returning**

**to defend her title. No Naomi Osaka either. Azarenka is finding her happiness on the court. There's so many names in the running. Who in your opinion has the best chance at winning this year?**

JIM COURIER: I thought Halep had the best chance because she's a very natural claycourt player. She's been practicing on the clay. That obviously paid a dividend for her in Rome earlier today. She's perfectly poised to do well there. Doesn't mean she will.

Women's tennis has been hard to dominate in recent years. We've had so many winners in the majors. I don't think we've ended that cycle. I still think we have room for more intrigue and excitement. You could have another story like a Sofia Kenin coming out of nowhere like she did in Australia. Someone like that could do it in Paris. You just don't know.

Serena is in France practicing at Patrick's academy. She looks likely to step into the ring and continue her quest. That's always exciting for us to follow. We just don't know. Hopefully Pliskova is going to be healthy. She was having a good run this week in Rome, too.

It's definitely different than the men's field, as it's been for many years now. It's much more open. Halep for me would be the favorite, but a lot can change. We'll see.

**Q. The environment, the red clay, the food, what is your favorite part about Roland Garros? What are you most looking forward to this time around?**

JIM COURIER: I think the thing I'm most looking forward to this time around, my favorite court in the entire world since I was a kid, was the Bullring, which was demolished. Now they have an open space for what they hoped would be a lot of fans circulating. That won't be the case this year. I'm interested to see those improvements.

The Simone Mathieu court last year was magnificent. I'm looking forward to checking out this new addition. I love the atmosphere there in general. It's very charming at Roland Garros. I'm sure they've done a great job with it.

**Q. The changes we saw in the New York bubble, whether it was Hawk-Eye Live or players fetching their own towels, what changes would you like to see the sport incorporate going forward?**

JIM COURIER: I think the towel change will stick. I don't suspect we're ever going back to ballkids fetching towels for the players. I think the players can be responsible for that. There's no reason why that shouldn't be an ongoing thing no matter where we are with the pandemic.



Hawk-Eye Live, I think it proved its merits as well. There's a line item factor for the tournaments that are looking to deploy that. They have to measure whether it's more economical for them to use the technology or the lines-people. They'll figure that piece out eventually. Pricing I'm sure will eventually make it at least a wash. From there we'll see.

I look to the players. That's my original mindset in the game. I look to them for guidance. It seems to me in the ones that I spoke to, listening to interviews, that the players became comfortable pretty quickly with Hawk-Eye Live. It seemed to work. Didn't seem to be too many snafus with it.

I'm moving in that direction of now that we can get the line calls right, we probably should, just make sure the players determine the winners and the losers, not well-intended officials that make mistakes because they're human. Just like players miss overheads on top of the net, sometimes official make bad calls. That's just nature. If you can eliminate some of that, get more towards a pure result of whoever deserves to win wins, I'm probably pushing in that direction.

**Q. What is the upside of the two young Italians, Lorenzo Musetti and Sinner?**

JIM COURIER: I love both of those players. Sinner I've seen a fair bit of. I got to see a lot of Musetti. I followed a couple of his matches this week.

They both are impressive in different ways. Sinner is very polished, very buttoned up, mature for a 19-year-old, has a well-rounded, powerful game. His coach Riccardo Piatti has great experience, is guiding him wonderfully.

Musetti is a very flashy, artistic player, with his slashing one-handed backhand. He was able to match it against Stan Wawrinka in his win in the first round in Rome. He's beautiful to watch. It's along the lines of Richard Gasquet with his backhand as far as pure aesthetics.

He seemed to handle the moments pretty well, too, for a young guy. He comes in a different path where he's working with the only coach he's ever had since he was eight or nine years old. It's a different path, but also really interesting.

They're going to be fun to watch. You put them in with Shapovalov and Felix Auger-Aliassime, you have the makings of some really interesting young players coming through.

**Q. I think it was last spring that Coco Gauff lost in the second round of qualifying. A lot of stuff has gone on with her in the last year. She still hasn't played a main draw match in Paris. Is that something you're looking forward to watching? What do you expect for her on the clay without giving her any undue expectations?**

JIM COURIER: She's a junior champion there. She likes the clay. Being from Florida, she spent plenty of time in development on the green clay events like I did when I was a kid in Florida. The surface is not a barrier to entry for her by any means. It's an opportunity. She's already one of the best movers in tennis. She's still very much a work in progress.

I think the expectations are not overly high for her. If she wins a few rounds there, she'll certainly generate a lot of attention, possibly expectation because she's been able to beat big players in majors before. But if she goes out early again, that wouldn't necessarily surprise me either because she's still a work in progress, has areas in her game that she's working on to get better. She's going to do that.

It's going to be great to see her play there, see exactly what she can do. We know she's someone who is not afraid of the dirt.

**Q. A comment you made about Halep being a natural claycourter, would you say that's one of the things you're looking at as soon as you saw the small window between the US Open and Roland Garros, is it going to favor players who are comfortable on the surface already more than it ever has?**

JIM COURIER: I think if you have any trepidation about the movement on clay, if that's something that's not natural to you, then it's very difficult to make the transition in such a short period of time. If it's a surface that you played a lot on as you were younger and you don't have to think too much or worry about do I need these shoes or those shoes, you get on the surface and naturally start playing.

Gunther Bresnik, Dominic Thiem's coach, not with him now, but I believe Chris Clarey interviewed him a few days after the Open, he asked Gunther how long it would take Dominic to get back on the clay and get comfortable. He said 30 seconds, if I'm quoting him correctly.

That's the way I felt personally because I grew up at Bollettieri's where you could be an hour on indoor carpet, the next hour you're on a hard court, the third hour you're on a green clay court. You didn't change your shoes or strings, you just played. Tennis becomes tennis if you have that mindset.



I think for Simona, and Dominic for that matter, it's that kind of easy transition as far as getting back and feeling good about the movement.

Confident is a different thing. Whether you're confident on the surface is different than moving on it. If you've been winning, I think you are. Simona and Dominic have been winning.

**Q. It's very unusual for the clay season to kick off after the US Open. What do you think some of the positives are playing at Roland Garros in October?**

JIM COURIER: Well, look, I think the fact we're playing at all right now is fabulous because I know how hard the organizations across the globe have been working to make these tournaments happen. It not easy by any stretch. I'm sure we're all aware of that after the complications in New York. It's a challenge.

I mean, we have a short claycourt season. It's wonderful that they've been able to adjust and find spaces for the players to play, adding tournaments, give a chance to get another major in. We're going to get three out of the four majors in which is pretty remarkable given the state of the world.

This time of the year? It's going to be interesting because players are fresh and they're ready to go. The mindset is weird, too, because players aren't mentally used to being on this surface this time of the year. Can you be positive and look at it as an opportunity or are you just sort of grinding your way through what's left of this year? Depends on your view.

It's a great opportunity for whoever is ready to take it, there's no doubt about. I haven't read any articles yet, maybe some from you all soon, if this tournament deserves an asterisk in the same way people were asking that about the US Open.

As long as it's seven matches to win and the players aren't striking, then for me the answer is no. It's a very different Roland Garros but it's not one that the champions will be looked on with any inferiority from my standpoint.

It's going to be great. It's going to be different with the roof. That was always going to be different. We're going to have night matches. A lot of firsts by coincidence at the same time we're having this bizarre 2020.

**Q. The player I'm interested in, Tsitsipas. Do you think there's something holding him back right now overall at the slams or kind of a run of bad luck, weird experiences that will all help him in the end?**

JIM COURIER: Yeah, I mean, look, I'm sure there's a little bit of scar tissue from what happened in the New York when he had the big lead, wasn't able to close it. But he's super talented. He's won big matches. He's still very nascent. I'm looking forward to seeing him there.

His match last year with Wawrinka was absolutely smashing at Roland Garros out on Suzanne Lenglen. That was another close match that he lost. He's lost some tight ones in the majors. That may weigh on him in a major when he gets back to a fifth set, scroll through his memories, conjure up some bad stuff there.

I would encourage him to think about how much upside he has, keep going with his passion. He's a great personality for our sport. He's going to do well. He's going to win majors.

**Q. Is there anything when you watch him the last year or so that you think he could be better at?**

JIM COURIER: I still think that his serve, the ball toss for his serve is a little bit erratic. He doesn't get his momentum going after he serves. He falls off to the left a little bit. That exposes him a little bit to inconsistency with his serve. You can drive the ball down the line from the ad court and hit some returns against him and get away with stuff you shouldn't be able to get away with.

There's subtleties for him to work on. That's not subtle, a little more overt for me. Narrow the ball toss, the width of it, so it's not all over the place. Get a little bit more forward in the court on your first serve, have that solid kick serve for the second, but your weight is centered in the court so you're not out of position.

**Q. Do you think with this sudden surge of the 21-year-olds, Thiem, Shapovalov, all these other guys, Medvedev coming up, that there's a lost generation in tennis, meaning guys like Anderson, Isner, Raonic, Dimitrov, Nishikori, maybe they never win a major at this point? Is there a lost generation?**

JIM COURIER: I think it's too early to tell on that. I think if we wait a few more years we'll have a clearer picture on that.

The one person that I would point to as a counter to that potential argument that is Stan Wawrinka, who has won three majors from the age of 29 I believe was when he won his first major. That I think points to an opportunity still for some of the players you're mentioning, it's not too late for them to break through.

They've played in the toughest generation that's ever been in men's tennis in the Open Era. It's been hard work for them. They weren't able to take advantage of this opportunity at the US Open that presented itself just a few weeks ago. It was the younger guys that did.

We'll see. There's still room for those guys if they stay positive and optimistic. Potentially, like Stan, also learn some new tricks. Stan's forehand went from a little bit of a shaky shot to a massive weapon. All of a sudden he became one of the big guys, so it is possible.

**Q. You as a former French Open champion, what does the Four Musketeers mean to you? They're legendary. You had to be cognizant of them when you were in Paris. What did they mean to the game?**

JIM COURIER: I think when you look at the pillars of how the game has been built globally, I look to the Four Musketeers as the ones who built the Roland Garros event. That's why the stadium was built, for those guys so they could compete.

That was a big turning point I think for that tournament. It adds to the rich history that it has, you get to play in that venue that was built for them. Even though now they've changed a lot of the stadium itself, the playing ground has changed, but the actual terrain, it's still there.

It's not like the new Yankee Stadium where you have to go across the street, walk outside to walk to the old grounds where Mickey and Babe hit their home runs. You're still playing on the same courts when you play there today that those players played in.

For me, there's magic to that that you don't get at the US Open at the new facility because we're not connected to Forest Hills any more. You get it at Roland Garros and you get it at the All England Club. There's magic there.

**Q. Had you been told a lot about those guys when you won at Roland Garros?**

JIM COURIER: I think I learned about them the most honestly from Bud Collins and Dick Enberg. I think that's where so much of the history that I learned in this sport came from listening to Dick and Bud as they were covering the big tournaments.

For me, they were my master class.

**Q. You embracing the language, being able to do your speech in French, was that something that was premeditated, that you practiced ahead of time, helped you visualize winning the title? Does that experience,**

**would you say in the end, the big factors of all the success you had there?**

JIM COURIER: Well, there's a correlation there. I liked France early. I played the juniors there, I won the junior doubles with Jonathan Stark. That gives you a good feeling when you're a player to have success early at a location. So I came back, played well as a young pro there before I had my first success winning a major there.

I was always enjoying it. I liked the surface, which is not necessarily the same for a lot of my peers from the States. I had coaches, one that was from Europe, Jose Higuera, and another one in Brad Stine who spoke French because he played the semi-pro tournaments when he was a college player in the summers over there. I had a lot of that culture, the acceptance of that culture, around me.

Once I won the French Open, I just sort of swore to myself if I'm ever lucky enough to win this again, I'd love to say thank you in French. It was a very rudimentary speech, but it still had impact because to that point American tennis players didn't often address the crowd in French.

You have to remember, there were no post-match interviews in those days that went out to the audience. It was done underneath the stadium. The only time people heard you speak was at the end of the tournament as a winner or loser. That helped in the uniqueness of it.

It helped my appreciation of being there. It connects me to the French people in a different way. I'm constantly reminded from the tennis fans that I encounter that are French that they appreciated the effort. It's rewarding now to see Serena Williams speak French so well, embrace it, so many of the other players, whether it's Novak, Rafa, all try and speak in French. It's really respectful to the crowd to do that. I find it really nice.

THE MODERATOR: Thanks, everybody, especially Jim.

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