

# Tennis Channel

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Culver City, California, USA

## Jim Courier

### Media Conference



ERIC ABNER: Thanks all of you guys for calling in this morning. Hope everyone is doing well.

This is Eric Abner, Tennis Channel public relations. I want to get my name and contact info into the transcript. My direct line is 310.314.9445. You can find me on email at EAbner@TennisChannel.com.

Before Jim gets here, I want to throw a few things out about a recent development at Tennis Channel. This year we have our usual coverage in Paris that you have come to know, the 5 a.m. eastern time starts, live competition all day, encore matches all night.

On-air teams of Hall of Famers, coaches, announcers, analysts who really understand this sport better than anyone else out there.

Roland Garros has roots that go back all the way to 1891. This year we're very excited because for the first time ever we're going to see night sessions. That means this Monday, Memorial Day, May 31st, at 3:00 eastern time on Tennis Channel, we're going to see the latest chapter unfold at Roland Garros.

Another important development for us this morning that I wanted to share a few words about before we get going. This morning we announced the relaunch of Tennis.com. That's the world's top trafficked website, a website we've had since 2017. Since we purchased it, we had plans to try to make it the absolute go-to tennis destination for fans, people in the industry, for people that care about the sport, reporters, et cetera. We're pretty proud of it. I would encourage everybody to look at it.

We've introduced a new app, Tennis.com, complimentary app, that's similar to the site. What we like about it is that no one has ever put so much tennis information and content in one place. Live scores, schedules, rankings, head-to-head match histories, downloadable tournament calendars that integrate all tours, live blog cheat sheet, lots of other bells and whistles.

A lot of sites have live scores. That's not new. What is

unique about this site is Tennis Channel has the exclusive rights in the U.S. of ATP and WTA Tours. When you go to live scores, you're going to have the opportunity to click on the match, watch it live. The match is over, you can call it up and watch it on demand, or watch highlights.

You would need to be a Tennis Channel subscriber or Tennis Channel Plus subscriber to do that. In the case of everybody here, if you not a subscriber, please reach out to me after the call, we'll get you comped.

The other things that are nice about it, we have wind probability gauges, some other stats and information on the players that haven't been out there readily available. One of the things that is completely unique is an estimated start time algorithm that takes the guesswork out of trying to figure out when matches start.

As you know, typically an order of play will come out, 11:00 court starts, followed by matches. Based on what players have done in the past and in recent matches, we have a system that will allow fans to have a more accurate idea if they want to watch that third match on, on a certain court, when they should check back in, when that is most likely to happen, based on the players who are scheduled to play.

At any rate, I wanted to encourage everyone to take a look. I think it can help everyone in the industry. The app is free to anybody in the world. Again, to watch some of the stuff in the U.S., you have to be subscribed to Tennis Channel and Tennis Channel Plus. Openly available to all.

As far as Jim, I'll just say we're going to do about 30, 40 minutes with him. As you know, the only American to win back-to-back titles at Roland Garros in the Open Era. He's returning to Paris for us again this year. Thank you, Jim, as you get ready to head over.

Jim, welcome.

JIM COURIER: Thank you.

ERIC ABNER: We'll start with questions.

**Q. I want to ask you to look ahead a little bit beyond Roland Garros. I've got two questions. The first is regarding Wimbledon. Obviously you were runner-up there to Pete in '93. This year is going to be unique.**



**It's been really two years since most players have stepped on grass. What do you think it's going to be like for the men and women who are re-approaching grass and Wimbledon?**

JIM COURIER: I think it will be rejuvenating in so many ways for the sport as a whole. Wimbledon is such an anchor for all of us, especially for the non-core tennis fans it's something they really point to. Generally speaking, it's going to be a relief in many ways that Wimbledon is back and going to be visible again.

For the players, I think they'll be refreshed and ready and eager, I would imagine. If there are people who are optimistic about playing on grass, they'll be just jazzed to get a chance to go back and do it again.

Wimbledon, as I think all of us know, is that perfect blend of sort of the old and the new. They've really gotten it so right in so many ways. We missed it.

Especially for someone where the sand is coming out of the hourglass for Serena and Roger, Wimbledon offers probably their best chance to further add to their legacy. They'll be jacked up. They've got to be.

**Q. A little bit to the US Open. Dominic Thiem coming back there. He talked about the burnout, like Mats Wilander when he reached No. 1 in the world. When he goes back to the US Open, especially after last year, does he have a chance to repeat? What do you think it's going to be like for him? What will it take?**

JIM COURIER: I think that's a good question. We're going to learn a lot about Dominic here at Roland Garros, a tournament where he's done very well in the past. Came close to winning it a couple times. Clay is probably a more natural surface to him than the hard courts.

I think we'll figure out where his motivation is. We'll find out if he's going to be as competitive as he's been in the past somewhere between here and the grass court season. Grass I think is a tough one for him. I think we've learned less about him as it relates to New York.

We'll see. He's obviously got so much game. If he's got his head in the right place, he's definitely a threat to repeat.

**Q. I think you said on air one of these recent days Novak was the biggest threat to Rafa at the French. Novak hasn't beaten Rafa on clay in like five years. What do you think the chances are of him, if he plays Rafa, beating him, or anybody really beating Rafa in Paris? Do you want to take a guess on big picture who winds up with the most majors? Most people think it's**

**going to be Novak. Do you think there's a chance Rafa can end up first?**

JIM COURIER: I'm feeling more and more like most people based on your questions (smiling).

We all know Rafa is the huge favorite. I think those of us who were lucky enough to see Novak take him down at Roland Garros years back recognized that if they both play at their best, Novak has a chance tactically and technically to take him out. It's not easy. It's obviously been incredibly difficult to do.

Just from a matchup standpoint, Novak matches up I think better than anyone else against Rafa shot for shot. There are always the outliers, Isner, who took Rafa to five sets. Take the racquet out of Rafa's hands, that can cause problems. Over best-of-five, it's so hard to punch through.

Novak, I thought he showed a lot in Rome. He came in in a huge physical deficit in that final and still put up heavy resistance. It was still a nip-and-tuck match. If you're Novak, you take encouragement from that.

Last year's final he got beaten pretty badly by going away from his normal patterns. He overplayed the dropshot and lost his way quickly rather than trusting his normal good stuff would be enough.

There's a few things to look through and reasons for optimism if you're Novak. Of course, Rafa has every right to be the most optimistic of all, even though he'll doubt it more than anybody ironically.

**Q. Big picture, do you want to chime in on...**

JIM COURIER: Big picture, I do think Novak will have more bites at the apple as far as chances to win majors, assuming they both stay healthy. I think he's a little bit more viable across the other surfaces. I think you look at the balance of where their majors have been won, I think that's true given three of the four are not on clay. We'll see.

Rafa, it's hard to see him not winning at least two to three more based on how healthy he seems right now, how much of a prohibitive favorite he is in Roland Garros. If he punches out the 22, 23, Novak has a lot of ground to make up.

He seems to be likely to have a longer career. He's a year younger, tends to be in pretty good health. As long as he can stay away from the operating table and stay focused, I think he'll be viable till he's 40 years old. I hope Rafa is. It's amazing that he's still going so strong right now given

the toll that his style of play takes on his body.

But we'll see. Doesn't matter what I think. All that matters is what they do. We're just lucky to get a chance to watch it.

**Q. Your thoughts on night matches this year? What are your thoughts on that?**

JIM COURIER: Well, first and foremost, I think any chance that tennis has to expand an audience is worth exploring. Night matches have done that at both the US Open and Australian Open historically. It shines a spotlight on the center court matches. Players look forward to it. Fans look forward to it. There's something special and electric about those atmospheres.

I think Roland Garros is wise to explore it. It's a shame that we're not going to get a full crowd for these night matches. It's going to be pretty sparse until the last one, from what I gather, due to the local regulations.

I still think there's huge value there to be able to expand your day, open it up to tennis fans that are not in that time zone. It will help a lot in America for kids that come home from school, there will be live tennis on, which is exciting. I think there's definitely value there.

There's obviously economic value for the organizers that they need to explore to keep up with the Joneses. First and foremost, it's just about what does it do for the sport as a whole. I think it's a big positive.

**Q. I don't know if this could happen, but in the event Rafa were to play a night match at Roland Garros, obviously he's a tremendous creature of routine, how do you think that might impact him?**

JIM COURIER: Well, he got a taste of it last year. We had some weather issues that backed up the schedule. Rafa actually started his quarterfinal with Jannik Sinner at 10:45 p.m., 10:30. They finished well past midnight. While he's a creature of habit, he's shown he can adapt over the years to all kinds of circumstances. I don't think it will impact him too much.

Organizers have the benefit with the roof now to protect players like that to have to play early again a couple days later, or having to come back day after day, so I think it will be okay.

**Q. You know what it's like to defend a major title. Iga Swiatek is coming back to try to do it. What is your take on Iga's level of play and the challenges and pressures she'll face trying to defend? I was**

**fascinated in Rome, your coverage, you had the camera right on the court behind the players. You explained that you can't stick with that shot because it doesn't give you the whole court. From a visual perspective, anything that we can look forward to for the French Open, upcoming tournaments, that kind of brings the viewer right on the court?**

JIM COURIER: Just to clarify on the camera, when we're covering a tournament like Rome, we're taking the feed that's controlled by ATP Media. They're producing it on the ground in Rome, we're accepting what they bring, talking over those pictures.

If we wanted to have that camera all the time, I don't know that it's technically feasible for us to do so. That's more a question for Bob Whyley, Ross Schneiderman at the Tennis Channel.

We all enjoy seeing that ground-level camera because it gives you a feeling that you're in the match with the players. I think there's a reason that the president of the FFT will sit basically where that camera is to watch the matches, because it's the best seat in the house. You can see the height of the ball, angle of the ball, the amount of spin, how they're dropping at the last second. It just gives you a much more realistic feel of what the athletes are dealing with.

The problem is it's hard to get the full spectrum of the court from there. Sometimes the cameras, they're a little too close.

I love it. We talked a lot about how much we love it. Maybe there's a way to get a dedicated feed to that camera given all the amazing technology we have on Tennis Channel Plus to be able to have like a dedicated feed on center court of that low camera where you can just watch it, have at it.

That's my take on it, is I'd like to see more of it. We're not in full control of those cameras if we're not the host broadcasters.

Iga Swiatek, I'm equally as impressed as you are with watching her form and poise, above all. I think the poise she possesses is what will give her a good chance to defend the title. Not going to be easy. There are so many possibilities in women's tennis. She and Ash Barty have I think put their hands in the air as the form players this spring, along with Sabalenka, on the clay. They're both defending champs because Ash didn't come back to defend last year, so this is really her defense as well. It's going to be interesting to see how that plays out.

Swiatek has a great game. She seems not at all to be bothered by the moment. That's going to serve her well, I think.

**Q. Coco Gauff, 12-3 on the clay this year, recent title. We spoke about her in the same press conference last year and you were high on her abilities to perform well on the clay. Now that a year has passed, do you think she can make a real impact on the draw this year in Paris?**

JIM COURIER: I really think she can. I think she's come a long way working on some of the things that needed working on with her serve and forehand. There's still some room to improve there.

One area that it's hard to see her getting much better at is court coverage. She's so good at getting in and out of the corners, it's hard to get a ball by her. She's had a wonderful run up in this clay season. Above all, she's gotten more experience. I think that's the thing that was probably a little bit lacking last year. She got denied a period of time to polish up her tournament toughness in a way that some of the more veteran players didn't need that. Maybe they benefited more from the rest in some ways to heal up. She really needs tournament play because she's new to it. She's coming onto the scene.

I think this year she should be in more of a rhythm coming into Roland Garros. Seems like she should be a real factor, draw dependent obviously. I wouldn't want to see her in my section of the draw.

**Q. Another player that I find intriguing, Bianca Andreescu, has just three WTA level matches on clay under her belt. We all know she hasn't had that many matches at all on any surface of late. She's back. We think she's going to be in the draw in Paris. Do you think she's good enough to make an impact on the draw?**

JIM COURIER: Look, I think her game is so interesting because she has so much variation, so many options. Movement is a real strength of hers, too. I don't see why she wouldn't be a real threat at Roland Garros if she's healthy. We certainly hope that she will be.

Just needs to get a little bit of luck with her body, a little bit of momentum to get going. She's one of those players that they can confound the opponents because she can hit the slice forehand, she has the dropshots, the moon balls, all the change of paces and speeds and spins. She has the gumption that we all saw at the US Open. We know once she gets going, she's tough to stop. It's been unfortunately difficult for her to get any momentum.

**Q. Aryna Sabalenka, she has made some great strides on the clay this year. She's played 13 Grand Slams in her career, yet to reach a quarterfinal. Did you see anything in her game or mentality that would lead you to believe that breakthrough is coming?**

JIM COURIER: Yeah, I definitely think the breakthrough is coming. She's a player that has a little bit less margin for error than some of her peers. When she's hot, she's hot, she's tough to stop. She moves well, rips the ball through the court.

If you can get on the front foot on clay, depending on who you're playing, you can really do damage to go behind them. It's a very good surface to play offensive tennis on, especially in this era when everyone has ample power given the equipment.

I think she can be a real force. For me, it's one of those scenarios where if she's confident, she is tough for anybody to beat because she can cover the court and she can dominate from the center. I see no reason why she wouldn't be able to break through that quarterfinal drought very quickly in Roland Garros, and if not there Wimbledon and the US Open.

**Q. I would love to get your thoughts on Reilly Opelka. You've seen the damage that John Isner can do. Reilly had a breakthrough in Rome. He called it a fluke. Do you think there's something more to his success in Rome and can he follow up on it?**

JIM COURIER: I hope that Reilly really doesn't believe it was a fluke. He surely must know when he's on song, if you're going to beat him, you're going to beat him in the tiebreaker. It is very much a redux of John Isner from a scoreboard pressure standpoint. He's impossible to break if he's having a good serving day. That puts so much pressure on his opponents.

Reilly should be feeling pretty confident. He's had his ups and his downs with his body, too, so maybe that puts some doubt in his mind. I'm so bullish on his career, I think if he can stay healthy, it's inevitable he's a top-10 player because of the inability for people to stop him.

It's all about shrinking the margin of error in his game. If he can eliminate a number of unforced errors on a daily basis, literally like two or three unforced errors can be the difference in him being ranked 30 in the world and 10 in the world. The margin in his matches are a couple points here and there. There's a lot to like about Reilly.

**Q. Are you of the opinion that the sort of edgy,**



**emotional Novak is more dangerous than the calm, self-controlled Novak? We've seen him win big with both emotional dispositions. What would be more effective at a tournament like this? Could you sort of forecast what you see for Tsitsipas, Rublev, Casper Ruud, the next-level guys that are really exciting, haven't made a major final yet.**

JIM COURIER: First of all, emotional Novak is the best Novak from my point of view. I think in the time when he had the elbow troubles and he seemed to be less engaged mentally, more calm on court, the peaceful Novak wasn't the warrior he needed to be.

There's a balance there. Obviously we all saw what happened in New York. He has to kind of control the fire that burns brightly within him. If he doesn't have that fire going, he's not the same player.

I remember vividly when he lost that quarterfinal match in Roland Garros a few years ago, I think Cecchinato is the one that beat him, he got super emotional in that match. It was very surprising that he lost it. Yet when he left the court, I said on air, I think he's back. I'm paraphrasing what I said: I think if you're a Novak fan, you should be glad you saw him get emotional because he's not that far away. Then he turned around and won Wimbledon a month later.

Without the fire he's not the same. It's just about walking that line of not crossing it. Obviously now he knows he's done that in the past and how much it cost him. He'll be wary of that, I'm sure. He can't go out there and be a robot, he just doesn't play the same if he does.

Anyone else on the call surprised he's playing this week? His brother is the tournament director, but for me that's surprising he's playing the week before a major. I don't remember any of the top guys doing that lately. Bizarre. A few may agree, some may disagree, but I was surprised.

On the other side of the ledger besides Rafa and Novak, Thiem for me is a question mark. I hope that he's able to kind of reignite his passion. Feels like he's a little bit in the same boat Novak was a few years back when he seemed not to be able to find his passion. I'm hoping Thiem can.

Then you have someone like Tsitsipas who is so obviously passionate. Boy, should he be confident. What a run he's on. I love his game, attitude, zest for life. He's very close to the big breakthrough, very, very close.

Rublev, very close as well. He's maybe a little less dynamic than Tsitsipas. I can say that because I was a player who was less dynamic than almost everyone. I'm

not throwing rocks in glass houses there. When he's on, the Rublev power is something to behold. Takes the ball early. He's terrific.

Alex Zverev, he's been so resilient I think is a good word that I would use to describe him because he's had his off-court issues and he's had his on-court issues. He keeps on chugging along, in the top 10, winning big titles, being present. Obviously was very close in New York last year. I cannot wait for him to get back into a major final and see how he plays the next time. I think there's only one way to go, and that would be better.

Casper Ruud has been fabulous. What a player. He has more topspin on his forehand than Nadal. For me I thought that was impossible. Great forehand, very sound backhand, great attitude, moves well. There's just a lot to like. He's kind of like the new Dominic Thiem where he's so good on clay. We're waiting for him to pop through a little bit on some of the other surfaces, although he did make a nice run in Australia this year to the fourth round. I think he'll do better and better on other courts as well.

One other player I would point out who is a real threat to make a run to the semis, maybe even a final if the draw breaks, is Berrettini. Like Rublev, offensive minded, more weapons than Rublev from a power standpoint, bigger serve, bigger forehand. Backhand isn't probably as good as Rublev's.

My dark horse is a guy that went deep last year, Jannik Sinner. Love to see what he does if he gets a decent draw. Those are my thoughts.

**Q. Federer played his first clay match in nearly two years. Not huge expectations. If you're a fan of the game, what do you look for his first match back at the French Open? Are you looking at his movement, serving accuracy? Just revelling in the fact he's playing?**

JIM COURIER: We'll start there.

The movement, how is he holding up in the corners. Is he able to get to the shots as easily and effortlessly as he did in the past. What do those two knee surgeries do. Maybe best-of-five will give us a little bit more data to look at than best-of-three as he fatigues in a match, which everyone does. How does he hold up. Then how does he bounce back.

I think there will be a lot to glean. Paul Annacone and I were chatting about this yesterday, realistic goals for Roger going into Wimbledon, which we all know is his target, and he said so.

If he can win one or two matches at Roland Garros, it may not be the worst thing for him to lose in the second or third round, get a couple of matches, more information on where he is physically, then go on to the grass. I presume he's playing in Halle. Hopefully get two or three matches there. He has kind of five matches or so in his belt before Wimbledon. I think he'd have a pretty good feel of what he's capable of.

You hope along the way he settles into being able to close out matches like he always has, which is challenging in his last match on the clay the other week. He talked openly about that. That's something that even the great ones have to kind of remember how to do it. I would imagine he'll figure that piece out between now and Wimbledon.

That's the big lens for him. That's I think the lens that I'm going to be looking at, is how does this point him directionally for Wimbledon.

ERIC ABNER: Everybody tune in 5:00 eastern time this Sunday. Be sure to watch the night session 3:00 eastern time on Memorial Day. Download the Tennis Channel app and let us know what you think.

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