

Tennis Channel

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Lindsay Davenport

Media Conference

ERIC ABNER: Thanks, everybody, for joining us this morning. Happy New Year to you all. Hope you all had wonderful holiday seasons.

This is Eric Abner, Tennis Channel communications. My direct line is 310.314.9445. Email is eabner@tennischannel.com. Feel free to reach out with any questions.

We're really excited to be underway with the new season at Tennis Channel. I think everyone on this call knows the sport doesn't really seem to take a break, but it's nice when we get to January, start with a clean slate.

For our 16th year of Australian Open coverage, we're going to have a daily news show at 5 p.m. eastern time, starting Sunday, January 15th. We'll also have on court replays and highlights every day. Start times on that vary. Our website, tennis.com, is the best place to stay on the schedule.

The team this year includes former players Paul Annacone, Prakash Amritraj, with announcers Brett Haber and Steve Weissmann. We also plan to have remote visits from hall-of-famers Martina Navratilova and Jim Courier, as well as former player Chanda Rubin.

Additionally we're going to have Hall of Famer and 2000 Australian Open singles champion Lindsay Davenport on the team, as you know, and is here for today. She'll appear every night on Tennis Channel Live at the Australian Open.

Thank you for joining us this morning.

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: Thank you for having me.

ERIC ABNER: We'll start with questions.

Q. What are your thoughts on what it is for players to take this off-season and pretty much have to dive right into a slam?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: Yeah, I've never been a huge



fan in general, right? It doesn't seem like one of the four biggest tournaments should be played in the second or third week of the season. Certainly for the men it poses even a greater challenge to be play seven three-out-of-five-set matches.

It is extremely tough for the players, too, especially starting off the year. Some players might take a little bit longer to hit their strides, other players might get that immediate confidence right from the very first match.

In an ideal world probably the first major is more like in March and maybe there would be a little bit more of a runway to that. But I certainly understand why Tennis Australia wants to keep it in January, their summer holidays, their school break.

It is a huge physical challenge for the players, no doubt.

Q. What is the key for the players to really maximize their talent to make the most of it?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: Yeah, I think that you have to kind of begin thinking about that in September of the previous year, kind of try and work backwards from the start of the Australian Open. For players that are really in it to try to win the tournament, you work backwards. How am I going to peak let's say at the end of January, January 20th range? How many weeks do I take off? When do I physically train, ramp up the tennis? There's a whole lot of thought that goes into it not only the player but from the coach and trainer, to try to get the players ready for that challenge.

I think the players that have experience with it, as well, it's obviously a big advantage. They know how they perform best, how many matches they need going into the first slam of the year, what does that look like, how many tournaments.

More than anything, it's between the ears, right? If you're doing the work and you believe in it, obviously it's going to be a lot better for them, a lot of the other players, that have some question marks.

Q. Just curious your thoughts on particularly the women's field. A year ago the landscape was very different. A year ago you have Ash Barty winning,



then retiring a couple months later. Also on the men's side last year Novak Djokovic wasn't allowed into the country. Your thoughts on the difference a year has made on both sides?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: Yeah, it's been really kind of a crazy 12 months. If you would look back last year at this time, there would be such a dominant No. 1 in WTA. Maybe you choose Iga, but at that time everyone was kind of looking at Ash to maybe dominate potentially the next couple of years.

There's some players that we thought were on their way to huge breakouts in 2022. A lot of people thought Badosa would win her first slam, maybe Collins would continue the great run she had in Australia. Just didn't work out like that.

I am very happy that Novak is back in Australia and being able to compete. I think that's amazing for the men's tournament, obviously for him as well.

There's just so many kind of crazy and just stories that were detracting from the actual tennis that was being played. I'm hopeful that this year's tournament is all about what's happening on the court and between the lines.

But it's definitely a tournament of opportunity on the women's side. Swiatek obviously the heavy favorite going in. Didn't look super confident when she lost to Pegula last week. The courts from what I've heard are playing a little bit slower than last year. That will probably help Swiatek a little bit. Maybe how does that help Gauff a little bit, too? You have to see who gets through the first week, especially on the women's side where so many upsets happen in this day and age.

On the men's side, it's hard to see anyone but Novak winning. Rafa with a storybook tournament last year. You have some up-and-comers playing, but I think Novak is a pretty heavy favorite.

Q. For people who may not be totally immersed in tennis, can you identify some aspects of Novak's game or his athleticism that have lent themselves to his success in Australia on the hard courts there that explains his nine titles? What is the synergy, what works for him so well there?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: Yeah, I mean, it's remarkable. Every year the court speed plays a little different. It's not like you can say he loves them super fast, whatever it might be, because he's able to adapt no matter what.

He is obviously ready to go in January. There's no doubt

he knows what he has to do, he's ready to play. He's obviously so comfortable moving on the hard courts. For maybe some of us that didn't move so well, it's so hard to watch him because he makes it look so easy, right? In and out of the corners, changing directions, keeping so centered, the balance.

He is really one of the first tennis players to come along that is flexible like a gymnast. He is quick like a sprinter. Keeps his balance and changes direction with ease. That kind of flowing ability, that kind of balance, gives him such a huge advantage against everybody else.

He doesn't have the biggest serve, doesn't necessarily hit the hardest, but he can play the shots wherever he wants, get to anything on the court, and get there and be on balance when he makes contact.

The fact that he knows exactly how to manage himself through those 14 days and to give his body a chance to recover. A couple years ago when he played, we thought he was so hurt against Fritz, but he's got a great team around him, physically he gets it all back together and is ready to go again. He keeps his gas tank as full as possible, and that's hard to do when you feel like you're always depleting some energy.

He's remarkable. I just don't see it changing this year. Maybe it does. Maybe some of the young guys really kind of come up and break through. Hard to bet against him in Australia.

Q. At the risk of sounding like Pollyanna, is there any scenario where his limited play, self-enforced, COVID-related play, at age 35, works to his advantage in terms of freshness or longevity?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: Yeah, I mean, that's the thing, right? Does it work either way? Does he not have enough matches or does he?

His body does not have the normal wear and tear on it at 35 that you see with most players, just with how he's able to take care of it throughout the year, his ability to kind of recover. It just doesn't seem like the mileage is that great on his body. He still walks around like he is in his early 20s. He still moves like no problem.

He didn't get tons of hard court tennis last year, right? He wasn't able to play anything in the States. Obviously we know what happened in Australia. Does that maybe catch up to him or is it the opposite, he feels so free? I don't know. We could probably argue either way when we see the final results of it.

I think that his hard court tennis is still superior to anyone else's out there on the men's tour right now.

Q. We saw Sofia Kenin break through and win the Australian Open a couple years back. If you had to pick somebody on the women's side to break through, who would you pick and why? My second question is on Venus, unfortunately had to withdraw. You had such a great rivalry with Venus. What made her such a unique and special opponent? What is her future for this year? Do you see her attempting to continue to play?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: I'll take the Venus question first, even though it was number two.

We had so much excitement when we saw the announcement, then I kind of read she lost in Auckland and had to withdraw. Wasn't sure exactly what the injury was, but obviously a big blow to the tournament.

I am continually amazed and impressed that I believe at 42 she still is out there giving it her all and doing her best.

I think we'll see her for a handful of tournaments this year. I don't think that anyone could expect her to play obviously a full schedule or anywhere near that. She's dealt with a lot of injuries, a lot of health issues over the years.

But her attitude is remarkable, and her fighting spirit, you always see it on the court, even if things are not going her way.

It's hard to know because she doesn't really give up a whole lot in terms of what her own plans are. But I would imagine, my guess is that she is wanting to play the majors again this year with an eye probably towards the US Open.

Obviously an amazing tournament last year with all of that support for her sister and all of that energy. Maybe she wants that, as well.

I think it would probably be different with Venus. I don't know if we'll get an announcement. We might just get it post her last match. But she's remarkable in her ability to compete. I'm not sure we've seen anything too close to that in women's tennis throughout the years.

On the women's side of who is going to break through, I mean, there's a number of players that that could happen to. We've seen that happen the last couple of years in women's tennis. Rybakina obviously at Wimbledon. That was a little bit of a surprise.

Listen, Coco Gauff is going to win a major. I said it at the beginning of last year, I thought it might have happened in

2022. It did not. She got close at the French. She is so good that it's hard to deny that's going to happen.

From what I've heard about the courts in Melbourne, they are a little bit slower. That will help her, give her a little bit more time. I think the fast courts are going to be probably a little bit more of a challenge for her.

Another player, I still believe in Badosa. I think last year was a really tough year for her kind of defending being such a top player for the first time. But I think she's got a great head on her shoulders, a great game. Something great is going to happen for her, as well.

I think Sabalenka, too. I think she might put it all together after going through all of her trials and tribulations last year. I think that's probably taught her a lot, probably a better understanding of her game also.

Q. Nadal, what are your thoughts on him as he enters this year?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: Gosh, it's so hard also, similar to Novak, to go against Rafa at a major. But I'm not sure his record has ever been what it is right now. I don't want to misspeak, someone can correct me, but he's 1-6 in his last seven matches, something around that record. Maybe he got two wins or something.

For a player that normally needs a lot of confidence, I can't imagine he has tons. Watching him last year at Melbourne was something out of, like, a storybook fantasy it seemed like. For his ability to not only obviously get his way to that final, then to come back two sets down, almost a break down in that third set, to win, it was awesome. Still gives me goose bumps talking about it.

I think that he needs a good first week to really give him that kind of extra push and confidence to get through the second week. We all know he can do it, right? We all know that he has the ability. Looks like physically he's doing better, doesn't have the ab issue. Hopefully that stays away. His foot seems to be okay.

I think he needs a couple of matches where he plays really well early on in Melbourne, doesn't get too fatigued out there, doesn't get injured, gets that confidence up. If he's able to enter the second week with that kind of belief, then look out. Everybody knows that.

It will be interesting to see what the draw deals him in that first week. Maybe he's not quite yet at 100%, trying still to find that A-plus level.

Q. By a good first week, do you mean not physically

too taxing? You don't mean two rough four- or five-setters?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: There are some times players need to be tested and to come through. I think he needs a couple, like, great matches. That could be winning 3-3-3, something like that, where he's feeling good, feeling like his game is there.

For some players that does come from a huge challenge, being able to hold at 4-All in the fourth, Love-30, some example like that.

I think he's just looking for his best tennis. If he's able to find it in that first week in that situation or roll through a great player in one great set, I think it's as simple as that for him. I think the flip gets switched almost immediately if he can find that level.

Q. On Coco, I don't know if you had a chance to see any of her tune-up in Auckland, but are you able to comment on what aspects of her game seem to have taken a step forward from last year, if any? Where do you think she is on the arc of reaching her full potential?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: I think really the sky's the limit for her. The arc of her potential, I think she can continue to keep on improving for years.

I think her game is good enough now. Getting into the top 10 and kind of establishing herself there, that's a big step forward, especially at her age. That is not easy to do.

It was a tough end of the year for her. Those are some of the kind of growing pains you go through when you are all of a sudden a top player or a ticket seller, you kind of get pulled in all these different ways. I got to play, but maybe I'm not ready... It's a lot of different pressures that maybe you're dealing with for the first time.

I really felt for her at the end of the year because she looked like she was ready for a break. Like maybe the season was just a couple weeks too long for her. That's when you learn. She's very young. Teams learn, coaches learn, she learns most importantly as a player.

Everything about her game got better. The forehand, she can manage it really well at times. It's obviously not a huge strength right now, but I think her other strengths on the court, her movement. I think her serve has gotten much, much better. Much more consistent. We didn't see the double-faults like we've seen a couple of years before. You know she's been working really hard on that. Her backhand is one of the best in the business.

You know what she does better than anyone else: finish points at net. If she sees a short ball, she never back pedal. So many players get in the mid-court, they don't trust themselves or have that experience. This is a huge advantage for her, that ability. Seamless. Short ball, hit it, move forward. She has so much confidence in her volley to finish points up there. That is going to win her a lot of points.

I think there's a couple things on the forehand. It did look cleaner in Auckland. You never know if it kind of comes back. Again, if the courts are a little bit slower, they're bouncing up, that's really good for her.

Her forehand is good enough to get her through, no doubt, to a title.

Q. If we were going to look at the North American men, Fritz, Tiafoe, Felix, Korda, Shapo, people like that, what is the ceiling there? Your commentary career is almost as long as your pro playing career. Is there any epiphany you've had as a commentator that you wish you knew when you were playing, technical, emotional?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: Oh, my gosh, you're aging me so much, but that's okay (laughter).

You know what's funny is when you're playing, you have no idea what else is going on, right? There's this whole other world at tournaments. You're kind of obviously, and rightfully so, caught up in your own self or your own game. You don't realize everything else that goes on.

I would have been so much more patient with interviews, waiting around for things. Once you cross that line into the media, you realize how important those kind of things are to whether your telecast, fans around the world, answering questions on the court. Those kind of things I think are super important. You don't realize it when you're playing.

When I first started commentating, you don't have the TV skills, right? You don't maybe have the proper ins and outs, know how to wrap up your thoughts in 10 seconds in between serves or something.

But you have such an advantage because you have that advantage of playing all the players or what it feels like to return a serve, Justine Henin's slice, whatever those players are playing.

All of a sudden 10 and now 14 years have gone by since I've played, it is much tougher. Rybakina's serve looks amazing. I've never been on the receiving end of it. I can

kind of relay what I think is happening and why it's so good.

But there's obviously a huge advantage for the players that come right off it, know what it's like or get a sense of where someone is going to go because that's what happens when you're out there and you're playing.

It's a blast trying to figure it out. I did that as a player with a lot fewer resources in terms of statistical data or the ability to look up on YouTube how an opponent plays or something like that. You try to figure out other ways.

Obviously nothing beats actually facing an opponent and their fight or their shots, than just actually being out there.

Specifically North American males, the long list of players that have some good chances. Fritz on a hard court, Southern Cal boy with a lot of confidence. He looked good at the United Cup. He's going to make a pretty big breakthrough at a slam. I know he was pretty bummed at the US Open going out first round. It wouldn't surprise me if he's ready to go.

Felix, the way he ended the year, his game. We've known it for a number of years. I think now that right mental space that he trusts his game and backs it in the biggest moments, where maybe it took him an extra year or so to get to that point.

Korda, how well he played in the first tournament of the year. Match point against Novak. Looked like he really spent some time on his serve in the off-season. Now we just have to see physically if he can handle three-out-of-five sets and how many of those matches in a row.

Q. On the 50th anniversary of the WTA Tour, what do you think the most impactful moments over the 50 years of the WTA Tour were?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: Start up with an easy one (laughter).

It's funny because I was born in '76. I started playing tennis in the early '80s. Back then it wasn't maybe as accessible, as easy to watch matches, it wasn't as easy to maybe follow some of the players week in and week out of the tour.

Impactful? I can just speak from my experience growing up in tennis and everything. I remember first being truly captivated by it all in Chrissie Evert's last US Open, what it meant to the fans there. I remember staying home and watching it. I remember watching her beat Monica. It was definitely Labor Day weekend. I remember going, Oh, my goodness, this is such a huge event. That kind of event

really kind of captured me as a young junior player.

Then obviously you start to live that life. Obviously seeing Venus and Serena playing a first nighttime, prime time US Open final, that was huge. To see specifically the USTA but also everyone really back women's tennis in the '90s, I was part of that generation that saw prize money get taken away at a major, some of the male players not speak great about female tennis.

To see equal prize money come back at Wimbledon in I think it was the 2000 years, really a lot of it due to Venus and her fighting for us, that was a huge moment. To see Andy Murray hire a former female pro as a coach was a huge moment. On the court, to see all the breakthroughs, to see Serena going for all the records, watch records get broken by Serena, that was always kind of exciting.

To see her get to 18 at the US Open and get the trophy from Martina and Chris, I remember being in the booth just crying watching that happen.

We've been blessed with so many amazing moments that those are the ones that kind of naturally stick out to me.

Q. Given that you played from the mid '90s into the new century, how do you think the game has changed from the early days when the tour started?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: Yeah, it's a different kind of business almost. When I first started playing pro tennis in the early '90s, there was a little going into like pre-practice warmups, a little bit going into the post-practice cool down.

Now these players, all of them, if you look down the list, are just amazing athletes that you feel like would be successful in any sport that they had chosen.

There's so much more that goes into the 24-hour day of making these players better tennis players, better athletes, than what was around in the '90s.

Jim Courier started to tap into that in the '90s. The emergence of Venus and Serena was like, oh, my gosh, we all need to get a little bit faster, a little bit stronger.

Now in this day and age, it's just normal. It's normal to do everything that they can. Because of that, the sport is better. The players are faster, they get to more shots, there's more power, more ability to keep the points going because of the athleticism and the physicality that the sport now has.

Q. You were part of a generation that played with extraordinary power. You and Kim Clijsters also



followed the Monica, Steffi generation when players really kept to themselves. Now there is so much more camaraderie on the WTA Tour. Does that surprise you at all?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: I think it's great. I think in the era I played in, players weren't posting pictures about like what they were doing in their off time. There's no question it is a friendlier, more supportive tour, locker room, than certainly when I came up in the '90s.

I feel like things were starting to change towards the mid 2000s, 2004, '5, '6, in that generation, because of players like Kim and because of players like Federer. A lot of the players emulate what they see. If they see the players being friendly, still being able to win, being patient, treating people behind the scenes really well, obviously that starts to become contagious.

That kind of started I feel like towards the end of my career. Blissfully has kind of stayed the course. Of course, you're always going to have a couple of spats or whatever, but for the most part it is a much more supportive, much more just healthy environment for everybody out there playing.

Q. What is your one wish for the WTA Tour? What changes do you see forthcoming?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: That's interesting. You know what I would wish is that everybody is healthy and playing each other. The sport is great when the best players are competing week in and week out, able to stay as healthy as possible.

We don't really have that huge rivalry right now where the last couple of years it would have been great to see Barty and Swiatek really develop. Obviously that's not the case.

That is what the WTA really needs, is a standout rivalry where these players are playing their best tennis in the biggest matches against each other, especially given what we've seen on the men's tour the last 15, 16 years or so, how they've been able to do that.

The second part of that question was?

Q. What changes do you see coming?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: I think it's always kind of like the same. I don't think we'll have anything kind of hugely impactful coming. You can always tweak the schedule a little bit here and there. Some of the tournaments I think are a little bit longer this year.

I think the sport is great. I think we just need the top players to be healthy and be able to play at their best a little more frequently.

Q. If you could change just one thing in tennis, what would it be?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: Pro tennis, the game, the sport, the rules?

Q. I'm talking about pro tennis, the rules, tradition, whatever you choose.

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: Okay (laughter).

We touched actually on it at the very beginning of this call. I actually wish that we could, for pro tennis specifically, kind of start over with the calendar. It's always hard to have a major in week three of the new season. It's incredibly difficult to play two majors or two different surfaces, now I get it with three weeks.

Ideally you would have a longer runway into Australia played in March. You would maybe have the French in May, Wimbledon... You would just try to space it out a little bit better, give the players a little bit more time to be at their absolute best for those tournaments.

I get why every tournament wants to stay where they are, but ideally I think that would make for maybe a better product at the bigger tournaments. It would give all the different surfaces a little bit more time to get ready for the players.

Having now experienced it a little bit just watching either collegiate tennis or the higher level of the ITF circuit and the juniors, I do think just get rid of lets. There's too many that aren't called. There's too many problems that come around it. I've come around to that maybe the last two years or so.

Q. The sons, daughters, nieces of great players are really beginning to do well. What has it been like to be a tennis mother? What's your prime tip?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: Listen, I have like the greatest people I can go to for advice in Tracy Austin and Mary Joe Fernandez. I am the spoiled one. My little generation, with some of my best friends, I can learn from two of the absolute best.

It's really hard. My son is younger than certainly Brandon and Nico or whatever. Like I get a lot of tips from them, which is super helpful. I don't go to a lot of tournaments, which is super helpful.

It's funny with kids, you've got to let them just kind of figure it out themselves, which is really hard to do also, right? It's a club sport. A lot of us are out there who have lived it, played it, certainly at varying levels. You're still watching a lot of kids develop, like Lleyton Hewitt as well.

It's a fun time, but it's just as challenging I would imagine as most parents watching their children in any sport.

Q. If I recall, I believe you said it was just a matter of time before Coco won a slam. Thoughts on her game, her development?

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: Yeah, I think it's going to happen for Coco. I believe I said it at the beginning of last year, she got really close in Paris.

Swiatek was able to improve her game so much more drastically than the other players. That doesn't happen necessarily every year, where a player is able to play twice as well.

Coco has so many great attributes to her game. Her serve is much better than it was a couple of years ago. There's obviously been a lot of time put into that, getting it to be not only a weapon but also not a weakness any more.

We didn't see those matches come where there were a lot of double-faults. She looked like she had more confidence, and more importantly more control of her contact points.

Her ability to finish points off at net is arguably maybe one of the best in tennis. I think her forehand is good enough. Does she believe that? I think she will.

I think the confidence of winning in Auckland, combined with the courts playing a little bit slower in Melbourne than maybe some of the past years, I think it could be really great for her.

ERIC ABNER: Just want to say thanks again, everybody. Appreciate everybody's time today. Thank you, Lindsay. Let's enjoy the Australian Open and the new season.

LINDSAY DAVENPORT: Thank you, guys.

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