

Tennis Channel

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Jim Courier

Media Conference



ERIC ABNER: Thanks, everybody, for joining today. Just a few notes before we open it up to questions. I want to start by saying this is a special year for the Tennis Channel.

I think most of you know that on last Monday we celebrated our 20th Anniversary on air. If you remember, 20 years ago tennis fans in our country could go weeks without seeing the sport on television, if not months sometimes.

Now it's daily or nightly, depending on the time zone. It has the same regular coverage other sports have had for years. If we don't have it live on Tennis Channel, then you guys know we have 93 percent of this sport live on Tennis Channel, it's live on one of our partner networks and on Tennis Channel later in the day.

Tennis is live for American television every single day of the calendar now, and that's a landmark change in the history of the sport for American tennis fans.

For us going into Roland Garros, this is our 17th year of doing our crowned jewel. What's really new for us this year in addition to all the stuff that we've been doing for a while, the round-the-clock coverage, the stuff on Tennis Channel Plus, we're really excited about our second network T2, which is available on Samsung TV Plus.

It is also going to be launching on YouTube TV, as well as Tennis Channel, on June 1 in Roland Garros. T2 is free, and there's going to be 100 hours of French Open coverage for free on T2 this year. These are matches that you cannot see on Tennis Channel. These are matches that if you have Tennis Channel and T2, you can bounce back and forth.

Just to let everyone here know, we're in talks with everybody, all the different connected TVs, all the different platforms out there. And T2 is going to be coming to you very soon.

Like I said, it launched in March of 2022 it, and it's already in almost as many homes as Tennis Channel is in year 20. Keep your eye out for T2. There's going to be daily

tennis for free to million of Americans, a new paradigm.

Finally, I'll say at the French Open again this year we have our Hall of Fame line-up. Martina Navratilova, Pam Shriver, Lindsay Davenport, and, of course, Jim Courier.

Jim, I want to thank you for taking the time to be here with us today. I think everyone knows what Jim did in Paris. I'm not going to talk about that.

Thanks so much all of you. Doug.

DOUG DROTMAN: Very good. We will open it up for questions.

Q. Everybody is talking about kind of the wide-openness and the void created by Rafa's withdrawal from Roland Garros this year, and I have two questions for you: One is, as you look at this year's championship, is there anybody that we are not focusing on that we should be focusing on? Then, my second question for you, I want to ask you about Cam Norrie really on every surface, what's his up side and down side?

JIM COURIER: Look, Cam Norrie is someone who has shown he can play on all surfaces. He won in Rio this year, beat Alcaraz. Albeit Alcaraz got injured in that match, but they played the final the week before as well in Buenos Aires. That was in February.

He has proven he likes the surface. Made semis of Wimbledon last year. Clearly he plays well on the grass. Very valid on the hard courts as well.

He is a player who reminds me a little bit of a left-handed version of a David Ferrer. He is very difficult to beat, doesn't get tired, doesn't beat himself often, but also doesn't have that one big weapon that scares the very, very best. If they have their sort of B-plus to A-game, it's difficult for him to overcome those players at the next level.

Having said that, there's opportunity now at Roland Garros with Rafa not in the draw. I mean, look, we don't know what level Rafa would have been able to bring had he been healthy enough to give it a go, but he is still Rafa there, and there's an intimidation factor that is clear.



Now there's a little bit of open space. Not a lot because you still have Djokovic and Alcaraz, who are the top-line favorites. But Norrie I think deserves to be in consideration as sort of the third level of guys with eyes on the prize.

Players that I'm looking forward to seeing, not necessarily that are going to go terribly deep in the draw, but I'm really fascinated with this young French player, Arthur Fils, who has made some really nice progress in February.

Clay may not be his best surface, but he is a terrific talent and very young. Maybe he is turning 19 soon, but I believe he is still 18 years old. I would keep eye on him.

As far as a dark horse, someone who probably hasn't been talked about because he hasn't played much in the last few months, but we know can play well on clay, Sebastian Korda.

Q. I knew you were going to say that.

JIM COURIER: Why wouldn't you look at Sebastian? He has a very calm demeanor. He is a very good all-court player. Played well in Australia before he had the wrist problem.

Maybe he could get a match or two under his belt and make some progress, but he is a guy that's proven he can make the second week there.

Q. I know you are -- 1983, but we're celebrating the 40th year of the incredible title at Roland Garros. I wonder if over time or even when you were a youngster do you have thoughts on that and maybe some perspective of the importance of this title and how special it was?

JIM COURIER: Well, those moments which we've been lucky enough to see on replay for so many years of just the sheer joy and pandemonium in the stadium the moment that Yannik had with his father on court. That struck me as sort of the first time that I had seen that type of celebration. Maybe they were there before, but I was 13 years old, so it is a little young in my memory bank.

That seemed like the precursor to Pat Cash going into the stands to celebrate with his team at Wimbledon, which also sort of broke down that wall where the players just used to stay on the court and be isolated.

So that connectivity with Yannik and his father and all of France really at that moment still stands out to this day. Obviously it's the seminal moment. You felt it. There was magic in the air that day.

He was a huge underdog against Mats, and he still overcame all of that. Plus, the weight of pressure and expectation that have been a lot to handle for a lot of players over the years. It was an awesome moment. It still is an awesome moment to relive on video.

Q. If I can give you a quick second, I have a technical question, a little bit of a project. Comparing the drop shots of Carlos Alcaraz and Ons Jabeur, such as what are the similarities, what makes both of them so effective with that shot, and maybe what are some of the differences that you see?

JIM COURIER: Well, I think that one advantage that Carlos has is that he has just a little more of a speed difference between his top speed shots on the forehand, the backhand, and then the obvious gap to the drop shot, and that gives him probably a little bit more space to work with.

He has very a good disguise. It's a late grip change on both of his shots, so that helps him. He is also by sheer nature of the force available creating more space in the forecourt.

Jabeur is more of a magician. She needs more sleight-of-hand in a way to work her wizardry because she's not able to back the players off of the court with as much as the firepower coming off of her groundstrokes.

So I would give her the edge as far as feel. Her drop shots have to be more accurate, more precise to do the damage; but I would love to have both of them, if I could, in my arsenal.

It's become something to see players have options on both sides with the drop shot because, typically speaking, that's only been on one side, like Djokovic you rarely see hit a forehand drop shot. When he does, it's nowhere near as good or as effective as his backhand drop shot.

Historically most players hit drop shots off of their forehand wing because it tends to be a shot that has more force in general and creates that opening and availability for the surprise weapon.

Q. I wanted to ask you about the term that used to be around on tour I believe back when you played about so-called surface specialists, particularly when it came to clay. It kind of seems as if that's a thing of the past. First, do you agree with those premises that that sort of player existed more back in your day and doesn't as much now?

JIM COURIER: Yes, I do agree with that.

Q. How did that affect the way players might have looked at draws in France in terms of seeing those players who fit into that kind of category? Then, why do you think it's changed? Is it more about surface speeds being more similar across the board nowadays, players who are more versatile, a little bit of each?

JIM COURIER: I think it's all of the above. I think players are more versatile and more balanced, and I think technology, particularly the string, has helped the players become better.

The racquets are lighter. The strings give more natural spin, and the players I just think they've gotten better technically. Maybe the coaching has gotten better over the course of the years, but it just seems like there are more complete players than there have ever been in both men's and women's tennis, and that's awesome to see.

I think, also, a part of the change has been that, by and large, in the last 20 years or so the surface speeds have narrowed. The grass has gotten firmer under foot and slower than it was. The clay courts in some respects I think the balls maybe have increased the speed on clay. Now clay is dominated by players who can finish points with offense more often than not.

We see some examples of a player like Medvedev who has that magical combination of a giant serve and then is primarily more defensive-minded, although his forehand was very offensive this past weekend in Rome.

But, typically, it's the players that can finish with force that win across all surfaces these days, and clay used to be the domain of the defensive player and players who started points with kick serves and then worked the point around, but they didn't have necessarily the same all-court skills as some of their fast-court brethren and sistren, if you will.

It's just changed. The game is played fairly similarly across all surfaces in the way that players had to make major adjustments, especially on grass. It felt like baseline tennis was just not available, and now it certainly is.

Then, you get on the clay, and you feel like you can play the same way apart from the sliding as you play on an Indian Wells hard court. That has to give comfort to players that are less comfortable on clay.

Q. A bit of an off beaten path question, I guess, but you stand out in my memory, anyway, as someone who kind of surprised people a little and certainly thrilled the locals by speaking to the crowd in French

when you were winning that tournament in the early '90s there in Paris. Nowadays it seems that everybody is trying, some with better results than others. If you wouldn't mind sharing, how did that come about for you? Why did you learn French and how? How did that affect, do you think, the way the crowd maybe was pulling for you once they heard you do that?

JIM COURIER: Sure. Well, back in the 1990s they didn't have on-court interviews after the matches; right? So there were very few chances for a public to hear a player speak, whether it was in English or in their native tongue. So there were less chances for connectivity than there are today.

You see a lot of the players doing what you are suggesting, where they're making those attempts to connect to the audience on a match-by-match basis, which has been wonderful to see.

I definitely surprised people when I spoke in French after the win in '92, and I learned the language for a couple of reasons. One, Brad Stine, who was one of my coaches. Brad had spent a lot of time in France and spoke French. He certainly led the way there.

I also dated a French woman. That gave me an impetus to learn. More than anything after I won the title the first time, I just challenged myself and said, if I ever got a chance to win that title again, I want to at least say a few things in French.

I was able to pull that off. I studied literally every day just with a little book for, like, six months, and then started speaking it in the run-up to Roland Garros to taxi drivers and anyone who would listen to me. It must have been pretty odd for them to be talking to a 21-year-old man who sounded like a 6-year-old French kid.

But they put up with me, they tolerated me, and I was able to get a chance to speak to them not only that time, but also when I lost in the final the next year to Bruguera, I was able to speak again in French.

That definitely has helped me be connected to that audience in the same way that me jumping in a river in Australia connected me to an audience there. They're just surprising things that came out of left field, and people remember them because they were so different at the time.

Q. Slightly related to Howard's question, how has Roland Garros kind of changed over the course of the Rafa era and the place it holds as well among the four majors compared to when you were winning it and the way it sort of is now?

JIM COURIER: Well, it's changed from a geography standpoint. The footprint of the place has changed. It's much bigger. I think it's traversed that challenging divide between retaining its ancient roots and modernizing the way that Wimbledon has as well.

The new stadium built around the old rectangle of dirt is a perfect example of how they've kept the connective tissue of the origins of Roland Garros while still being a modern event. So I think they've done really good work from that standpoint.

I think both Australia and Roland Garros were considered second tier majors quite a while ago. There was a big difference between how they were viewed from the public and the playing group between Wimbledon and the US Open. Wimbledon was always the No. 1. Wimbledon was always right there as the No. 2.

There was a big dropoff between Roland Garros and the Australian Open and with the facilities and the general public perception. I think that gap has closed dramatically because of the way that had it's been updated, upgraded, the way that it's also viewed these days. The way that someone like Tennis Channel has it on from first ball to last ball as opposed to being on the weekends or maybe a few hours during the week.

So I think technology has also helped close that gap because people can see and experience Roland Garros from afar in a way that they couldn't back in those days.

Q. It's kind of interesting, just to follow up, that that's happened also at a time when you just keep having the same winner every year.

JIM COURIER: Yeah. Well, same winner on the men's side, for sure. Lots of different winners on the women's side.

Some people might argue that seeing someone do something like that 14 times gets boring. It never has been to me. It's always been exhilarating to see someone do something that, unique at least in tennis, and be able to still find ways to win, through injuries, through a changing field, through generations of players that are coming and going. That one person was still able to keep going.

Personally, I loved being able to witness that. I never found it anything but exciting.

Q. Listen, the first one I had was based on what you have seen of Novak and you have seen him with the elbow sleeve, you seen him trying to shorten points.

Are you concerned, or do you still view him as the clear favorite? I saw his comment after the Rune loss where he said, on best of five I like my chances against anybody on any surface. You have to respect that given his record. My second questions is, you won Rome and Paris in '92. I think you nearly did it again in '93. How much of that will the Rome runs of Medvedev and Rune, how much will that help them in Paris? Also, if you could just talk about the court, the center court difference because it's so narrow in Rome. I would think in Paris that could help Medvedev. He could really stay back against -- there's so much more room. Those were my two questions. Thank you.

JIM COURIER: We'll take them in kind of reverse order. Starting with Medvedev, the court will definitely help him. Center court shots will definitely help him more as far as being able to defend more and feel more comfortable in the sideline exchanges when he is out returning those wide serves. He will have space to do that, which he didn't have in Rome, and he was still able to overcome that.

He and Rune should feel a lot of confidence after Rome. Rome is very similar conditions-wise to Paris, apart from obviously the weather this year. Hopefully Paris will be a lot better than Rome was.

But it's at sea level roughly. The ball flies roughly the same way as it does in Paris. That's far more predictive than Madrid, which is a couple thousand feet of altitude, and the ball moves just moves in a different way there.

Rome I think is a very good leading indicator, especially for confidence, right, because that's our last look at these top players, male and female, prior to the start of Roland Garros. It gives us a good look at their health, also.

I thought Novak's health, to get to him, looked pretty good in Rome. He didn't seem to have the sleeve on as much. He seemed to be fine with his serve numbers, his forehand numbers, backhand numbers. All looked normal. Didn't seem to be any increase in speed, which we saw in Australia this year when he was trying not to have to play defense to protect his leg issue.

So I think overall his health and confidence are trending in the right direction and best of five just gives all these supreme players more time to problem-solve if they run into a hot player.

It's easier for them to wait them out, as Novak has done against great players in the past there, like Tsitsipas in the final and with Stef a couple of years back when he won the first couple against Novak. Novak was never in danger of losing that match. He just lost the first couple of sets. That

has to give him great comfort, I would think, looking ahead.

Lastly, I don't consider Novak the clear-cut favorite. I think he and Alcaraz for me are co-favorites on the men's side.

Q. If I could ask one quick follow-up. I like your commentary. You use analytics a lot, like you just did with the forehand and backhand numbers. I wonder, if you were a player and you had access to today's analytics, what would be the one or two that you would really focus on for your own game? Then, the second follow-up would be, you mentioned Korda earlier. If you had to look at a couple of other guys that could break through and win a maiden major, whether it was Tsitsipas, or Casper Ruud, whether it was Sinner, Musetti, any of these -- Rublev, any of these guys, who would you really target?

JIM COURIER: I think that Holger Rune has a lot of confidence, and he has no fear, and he has no scar tissue. That's pretty dangerous.

I love what Jannik Sinner has done with his game in the last year. He has made huge strides, and I think he could make a big run.

He has been close before. I'm sure in his mind he could tell himself that he could already be a US Open champion. He had match points against the eventual champion last year against Alcaraz in the quarters, so he has been close. He has been building.

I like those two young guys believing in themselves. I might give Rune the slight edge in that belief department just because he is younger, he is fresher, and kind of when you are young and fresh like that, you don't really worry about what might have been. You just go, oh, this might be. There's real value to that.

As far as the analytics go, if I was to look inward in my day when I was playing, what I would be looking at, I would be looking at my speeds and my spins on my groundstrokes to see surface-wise where I'm optimizing. Where am I at my best? Where am I at my most effective?

I would be looking a lot at my court position. Where is any average shot being hit? Am I giving up too much space in matches that I lost? Am I being too aggressive in matches that I've lost and making too many errors because of that? There are so many ways you can dissect this. It's everywhere.

That's kind of where I would be looking if I were inward looking. Outward looking there's so much to look at as far as where people are serving to you, where you're serving

to them on break points, all that stuff. There's a lot to dive into.

Q. Going to try to sneak in two here. It seems like a lot depends on the draw if Alcaraz is the one seed and Novak is the three, they could potentially immediate in the semis; right? Can you just talk about how important the draw is and what would be at stake there if, say, they were to meet in the semis? Then my second question is just about the American men. Three of them got to the quarters in Australia, but obviously clay is not their strongest surface. Where do you kind of assess American men going into Roland Garros?

JIM COURIER: I think the most interesting aspect of the draw ceremony will be at the moment to determine which half had Djokovic goes into. Medvedev winning Rome, that put him back at No. 2. That obviously makes that important.

I'm sure neither Alcaraz nor Djokovic want to see that semifinal as a possibility. Clearly understanding that they might have to play each other to get the title anyway, and does it really matter whether it's the semis or the finals? Not really.

Why it also matters a lot is to the other players. Someone like Stefanos Tsitsipas or a Sinner or a Rune who are looking at their chances, or Medvedev knows if they're on the upper half, he has a chance to make a great run, too. Probably likes his chances against most players besides those guys.

It's meaningful. It's a lot of conjecture. Obviously, people can lose. There are upsets in tournaments, but they'll be a big focus for sure for us at Tennis Channel on that aspect as we build towards the tournament.

The second question, the American men. Look, Tommy Paul and Taylor Fritz played the junior boys final there. They're comfortable movers on the play.

Tiafoe is quite viable on the surface. He won in Houston this year on the red clay there. I've already mentioned Sebastian Korda. I think there's real reasons for optimism.

I don't see any reason why the American men, even though they haven't necessarily played their best in the run-up to Roland Garros, give it a run. Believe in yourselves.

You've got the fitness. You've got the game. You've got experience. Now is the time to use it. Best of five can favor them as well in some of the earlier rounds and give

them time to problem-solve and move forward.

Q. Just overall would you say their best chances are more at the US Open and maybe Wimbledon?

JIM COURIER: I think their best chances are probably not at Roland Garros. I think the other three majors they can look at with probably slightly more confidence, but look, I remember watching Tim Henman and Pat Rafter making the finals in Roland Garros, and no one gave them a chance, so it can be done.

No one was thinking Medvedev was going to win in Rome. You just have to be ready for your opportunities and take them if they're there.

Q. Roland Garros has increased their prize pool, especially for early round players. What do you think that's going to do for the growth of the game?

JIM COURIER: Well, that's been the trend that we've been following on Tennis Channel for probably about a decade now, which has been a wonderful trend to see, and it's been led by the top players in the game. I'm talking about players like Federer and Djokovic and Nadal and Venus Williams. Going to bat for the lower-ranked players and saying when prize money increases come annually, we need to make sure that we're taking care of the players who were losing early in the tournaments.

We don't need a check that's \$3 million this year to be \$3.5 million next year. If it goes up to \$3.1 million, which is kind of what the trend line has been, and then first round prize money goes from \$25,000 to \$40,000, that's a better use of that money. We've seen that trend continue really for the last decade.

What that that is done is it's obviously increasing the security for the players who sometimes have to dip into the minor leagues when you are ranked kind of 70 to 100 in the world. You don't always get access to the top tournaments in men's and women's tennis that have smaller draws. You might have to play in tournaments that have a total purse of \$100,000. If you win it, you win \$18,000, which is a good week, but it's not like playing on tour where a good week will have more zeros behind it.

That has given them more financial security. There's also another sideline to that is that the pension plans for the players, especially in the men's game I'm more familiar with than the women. Those pension plans are becoming substantial now, which will help these players when they're retired when they're 50 years old, and they can gain access to that kind of financial security on an annual basis.

The other outshoot of this is it's adding years to players' lives because now if you are a top 100-ranked player, you are guaranteed to make somewhere in the neighborhood of \$500,000 just by being in all the top events, even if you don't have a great year.

It used to be that those players would be making maybe \$150,000, and they might look at it and say, hey, I can go be a college tennis coach or a head pro at a club or I can be a coach for another player and make the same amount of money, especially if I want to stay home and get into more of a stable life with the family and not travel as much.

I can make as much money as I was doing. So players retired normally around sort of 30 years old. Now we see players having some of the best years of their career in their early 30s and kind of 35 being more of a target for stopping playing. So it's increased the life span of the lower-ranked players, which has been amazing to see because it's all because the top players said, we don't need it, let's make sure they get it.

Q. Yeah, that's great insight on that. Just to follow up on the pension part, I'm actually not familiar with that. Where is that pension coming from, and how does that work?

JIM COURIER: So every tournament on the ATP Tour, some of the prize money is held back and put into the pension. Players earn a credit of every year of quote, unquote service, which means being ranked at a certain level.

After a certain amount of years of service, you get a pension that will be prorated based on how many years you achieved that goal of being of service.

So if you have five years of service, your pension will be X amount of money when you hit the pension day, which is around 50 years old. If you get ten years, you'll have more money. It will be X plus Y. If you have 15 years, X plus Y plus Z. The more years of service, the more money you receive annually from these pensions, and they're starting to add up.

Q. Roland Garros is the one major that does not use Hawkeye. Do you think that tournament needs to get with the times?

JIM COURIER: I think 2025 will be where the rubber meets the road there because in 2025 the ATP is mandating that all tournaments on every surface use automated lines called.

Hawkeye is largely in use at most of the tournaments

around the world. On clay there's a tournament in Madrid recently that had used FOXTENN, which is a similar company to Hawkeye, but it uses actual high-res, slow-motion cameras as well as the virtual world to get a call.

We'll see which one that the clay court tournaments end up going with because they're all going to have to do it in 2025. Roland Garros is not an ATP Tour event. It's a Grand Slam event, so it makes its own call.

They don't have to, but we'll see if the players ask them to or if they decide to on their own accord. We'll see.

Q. There's been a lot of insight all hour long. I kind of want to ask you more about being in Paris, in France, and traveling there a number of years now in a row. How does it stay exciting? Are there places that you visit more frequently that you always like to go back to? What do you like to try that's new, especially now learning French and being more involved with France than other players on tour.

JIM COURIER: I think more of the players these days venture out than maybe in past years where they tended to stay a little bit more in their rooms.

I think Paris is one of the great cities in the world. It's also one of the great walking cities in the world, which is what I tend to do when I'm there and have a little time off.

I like to go for walks. I like to go to the left bank in Saint-Germain. Sometimes I've stayed over there. Always try to get down to the Louvre and take a walk just in that complex because it's just magical.

Over the years you start to develop restaurants that you know and you love and you like to go back to, so I have a few of those that I make sure I try and hit, although that's getting more challenging now with night tennis at Roland Garros.

Paris is just one of those cities that I think would be very hard to get tired of going to and enjoying because it has so much to offer. It's changing, but it also is kind of similar to Roland Garros. It's modernizing, but also very much in touch with its past.

It's an awesome time of the year to be there as well. Springtime in Paris has a nice ring to it. I much prefer that to the fall. They have an indoor tournament there that I played for many years. While I still enjoyed being there, it wasn't quite the same. It wasn't quite as fun to walk around with winter coats on.

If you are lucky enough to get to Paris for Roland Garros, it's about as good as it gets.

Q. Just a quick follow-up, compared to the other three Grand Slams, I know New York City is also a very exciting walking around, but compared to the other three, which would you say you enjoy more scenically during the two weeks?

JIM COURIER: Scenically? Oh, I think Paris wins scenically. They all have their charms, but Wimbledon is outside of the city. Roland Garros is attached to the city. It's a little bit closer in.

They all have their own magic, and they all have their own feel and sounds and scents, but Paris to me, I don't know, it would be hard for me to pick over that, that's for sure.

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