

Interrupted in her prime, Seles fit tennis to a 'T'

by Jerry Magee

Research began in my closet. In there somewhere among the T-shirts had to be one bearing the message, "Yo Monica!"

Here it was, hanging over here. I might note that I have only one suit that fits and not many sports jackets or slacks, but I have a great many T-shirts (that somebody else in my house frequently advises me to winnow down). One T-shirt I would be loath to surrender is this one relating to Monica Seles.

Let me tell you this story. In 1995, Seles was due to participate in the U.S. Open for the first time since she had been stabbed in April 1993 during a changeover in a match against Magdalena Maleeva in Hamburg, Germany. Her assailant was Guenter Parche, 38, an unemployed lathe operator from Germany who viewed Seles as a threat to supplant Steffi Graf as the No. 1 women's player and for this reason attacked her with a 9-inch boning knife. Parche never did a day in jail.

As part of our coverage of the Open, we daily were publishing a box in which we listed the stat of the day, the quote of the day, that type of thing. One category dealt with something that was happening off the court. A concessionaire representing Yonex, manufacturer of the racket Seles was using, was selling these "Yo Monica!" T-shirts, \$18, if I recall correctly, and I inquired of the man behind the stand how the shirts were selling so often that finally he said, "Here," and tossed me one.

The best T-shirts are free T-shirts. I have been trying to remember what I wrote when Seles played her first-round match. The words elude me. It was something about the Big Apple and how Seles' return had stripped it of its sophistication. The U.S. Open is corporate America's picnic, but the giants of industry had had their hearts in their throats at the sight of seeing Seles again.

Seles did not win that Open, but she came agonizingly close, Graf defeating her in the final 7-6 (8-6), 0-6, 6-3. Seles would win the Australian Open in 1996, but being stabbed seemingly had weighed on her psychologically. She would linger on the periphery of women's tennis, but she would not capture another major championship. The other day, now 34 and hindered by an injury to her left foot, she officially retired from professional tennis.

Let me cry out one final time, "Yo Monica!" You were a joy. She sounded like a Valley Girl, this native of Novi Sad, Yugoslavia. She said "for sure" a lot and she had one of the most infectious giggles that ever came out of the throat of a teenager, which she was when at 19 she was attacked. Had she not been knifed, she almost certainly would have placed her name alongside those of Maureen Connolly Brinker, Margaret Smith Court, Martina Navratilova, Helen Wills Moody and the other greats of the women's game.

Seles, please remember, was on a tremendous run when Parche made his sneak attack. At that point, she had captured eight Grand Slams, and seven of the last eight in which she had participated. In the one she had not won, she had been a finalist at Wimbledon in 1992. She had never lost at the Australian Open, winning in 1990, 1991 and 1992. She had scored in three of the four French Opens in which she had played, failing only in 1989, when she was 15. She had taken the previous two U.S. Opens.

Her seventh Grand Slam victory had come in her 13th Slam. Only Court had a superior record, taking her seventh Slam in her 10th event. Seles was the youngest player to hold seven Slams, winning her seventh at 18 years, 3 months, thus undercutting Brinker by three months.

Around San Diego there have been some stellar matches involving players of both genders, but none, I would argue, to rival the final Seles and Jennifer Capriati offered at the La Costa Resort and Spa in 1991. Seles was 17, Capriati 16. Capriati won in a third-set tiebreaker.

I want to remember Seles as she was when in March 2001 she was invited to read from Dr. Seuss' work to first-graders at the Gerald Ford Elementary School in Indian Wells, Calif., which is just around the corner from the Indian Wells Tennis Garden. Monica put on one of those long, flowing "Cat in the Hat" creations. After holding up her book so her audience could see the pictures, she would ask the little ones to recite the lines after her.

The closing line:

"Until every person on Earth is Up."

Having said that, Seles heard the words chorused back at her. Stay Up, Monica. You're entitled.

Interrupted in her prime, Seles fit tennis to a 'T' by Jerry Magee