When it comes to likable players, Kim Clijsters takes the cake

by Jerry Magee

On its Web site, the WTA Tour is inviting those who tap into it to identify what they regard as Kim Clijsters' ranking accomplishment. The choices:

- 2005 U.S. Open.

- World No. 1.

- WTA Tour championships.

- 2005 comeback.

Give me "None of the above." My "X" would go into a box for "Greatest person." Clijsters had a quality that Louie Kelcher had when he was playing for the Chargers. She was lovable. Tennis, as confrontational as it is, tends to make those who engage in it at its highest level snippy, shall we say, but through her career, which was too short, Clijsters was never anything but gracious.

I am thinking of one time a year or two ago when the Belgian woman was competing in an event at The Home Depot Center in Carson, Calif., and in the press room they had a cake for her. She had arrived at a milestone in her career, precisely what it was I don't recall. She had many of them. She cut the cake and shared it with those in the room, after which I had to excuse myself, probably to look in on a match.

About 20 minutes later, I returned. Standing outside the press room, passing out slices of the cake to persons from the crowd, was Clijsters. How nice. How like her. May she go happily into her new life away from a game that was enriched for having her in it.

"I hope people won't be too sad now that I've decided to stop playing tennis," she said of her decision to step away from tennis at the age of 23. "A new chapter in my life is about to begin and I hope I'll be seeing everyone somewhere down the line. Remember, whatever you do, do it with a smile on your face."

Watching Clijsters, I gained the feeling that she could have been a champion in just about any sport. She had extremely strong legs, which were at the source of the success she had. She could go wide for a shot, very

wide, wider than any of her peers, doing the splits to make a return, and her legs would propel her back into position to continue the point.

If anything, she was too athletic. How she played taxed her. Injuries, to her shoulder, to her wrist, to her hip, made beginning her days a trial for her and she decided that she had had enough of competing.

"With injuries that wouldn't go away and life after tennis drawing nearer, it became harder to push myself," she admitted.

Clijsters is not going to be remembered as one of the greatest of the women tourists, nor should she be. She played in 21 Grand Slam events before she won one, the U.S. Open in 2005. She would not win another. She never was as much as a finalist at Wimbledon. But she was a champion in so many ways.

Without Clijsters and without Lindsay Davenport, another player of the highest personal qualities, one has to look hard, it seems here, to find someone in women's tennis to like. Justine Henin, the current No. 1, does nothing to endear herself to the tennis community, refusing to adorn herself in any way and competing so fiercely that her zest for battle at times can be interpreted as gamesmanship.

Maria Sharapova has a queenly presence about her that can be off-putting. Amelie Mauresmo in her dealings with the media comes across as the most genuine of persons, but her on-the-court demeanor is too businesslike and devoid of emotions for her to touch audiences. The Williams sisters are greatly gifted, but it is difficult to develop an attachment to players who absent themselves from tennis in the degree they do.

One player I enjoy is the chatty Svetlana Kuznetsova. A real person, to my mind. Just like Kim Clijsters.

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