

Chatting with Anna K.

by Jerry Magee

She is a celebrity for being a celebrity, a darling of the paparazzi, a person who can't go anywhere without having people gawk. Never mind that her stardom has the flimsiest of foundations.

Paris Hilton, you're saying. Yes, her, too, but the reference is to Anna Kournikova, a tennis player who failed to win a singles championship during her time on the WTA Tour but continues to possess a public presence four years after ceasing to play professionally.

"Weird, huh?" Anna said. She was standing outside the clubhouse at the Newport Beach Country Club in Southern California, where she would be representing the Sacramento Capitals in a World Team Tennis match against the Newport Beach Breakers. I think that was Anna. I have to be careful here. How can I say this? There just isn't as much of Anna as there used to be.

Anna has lost weight. "Yeah, definitely," she said, "but it's exactly four years since I stopped playing professionally, and it's almost impossible to maintain the muscle size of being a professional athlete versus not being a professional athlete. I work out, but it's not nearly on the same level. I was always kind of a small girl, anyway. I was never really big."

In one way, she was big - big in the attention she attracted to a game that can use all the visibility it can get. In this area, she still is. Google lists more than 2.82 million references to her. There are Anna Kournikova fan clubs. Posters celebrating her continue to sell. An ace and a king as a starting hand in hold 'em poker has been named for her "because it looks good."

At a site here seating 2,300, a crowd of about 1,900 showed up last week for her appearance with the Capitals, and I don't think it was because Ramon Delgado, Michaela Pastikova and Sam Warburg were playing.

Before she would go onto the court, Anna, 26, was presented to the media. There were a dozen photographers and three representatives of the print phase. Of the three, one admitted he was not fully checked out on the rules of tennis. Yeah, Anna still has her appeals.

A visitor from San Diego wanted to know if Anna is acquainted with Paris Hilton. "Which one?" she asked. "There are two."

Oh, didn't know that. She was advised that the one he had in mind just got out of jail.

"Yeah, I've met her," Anna said.

Some people liken her to Hilton, Anna was told.

"Never heard of it!" exclaimed Anna. "Never before!"

As Rosie Crews, a WTT vice president, noted, comparing Anna to the Los Angeles heiress is a disservice to Anna. "I would put her in a much more accomplished category than Hilton," Crews argued.

Anna, after all, won two Grand Slam women's doubles championships with Martina Hingis as a partner, both at the Australian Open, in all captured 16 doubles titles and was ranked as high as No. 8 in singles in 2000. Then in 2001 she submitted her left foot to surgery.

"I had a screw put in because I had a stress fracture," she said. "After that, I kind of started protecting the foot and walking weirdly, I guess, and my back kind of went off."

She can get through the abbreviated sets they play in WTT, but she said she has to be realistic. "My back is fine when I'm just exercising one hour a day," she said. "It really doesn't bother me that much. But it's not at a professional level, where you have to be able to compete."

Anna clearly has a sense for playing doubles, which the late Ted Schroeder once recognized. In doubles, she said, she could interact with a partner, which she liked, and did not dwell on her errors.

"I'm too much of a perfectionist," she said. "I took it really hard when I made mistakes."

It was mentioned to her that by rejoining the tour as a doubles specialist, she could make a handsome living. "I don't think it's about money for me anymore; it was never about money," she said. "I loved playing the game."

In the Capitals-Breakers match, won by the Breakers 20-15, Anna and partner Stephen Huss won the mixed doubles 5-3 before the Breakers team of Pastikova and Lauren Albanese defeated Kournikova and Milagros Sequera 5-2 in women's doubles.

One got the feeling that Anna has not been playing much tennis. Her legs were very pale for a resident of Miami. She also was serving only half speed. Albanese, a 17-year-old from Florida who clearly is a comer, was whaling on Anna's serve.

Anna, it seems, has interests other than tennis. His name is Enrique Iglesias, a Spanish heartthrob. A Web site named hollywoodtuna.com has addressed Iglesias, saying, "What the hell does she see in you, anyway? Besides your good looks, silky smooth crooner's voice, Latin dance moves and massive bank account?"

As Anna was leaving the court following the conclusion of the match in Newport Beach, a recording was playing the song, "Pretty Woman." Maybe it was a coincidence.

Copley News Service

Chatting with Anna K. by Jerry Magee