

# U.S. Open 2000 observations

## On assignment for *TENNIS* magazine

By Warren Florence

Day 1

Paparazzi life is tough. We'll, how I imagine it. Because I suck at bothering people for an interview.

There's a ton of press here at the U.S. Open wanting personal interviews from the big names. Regardless, I'm prepared to take down every answer to a dozen or so questions I need to ask when the mood, best—nerve—strikes me. I've got my pad filled with paper, a pen filled with ink, four blank mini-cassette tapes and enough AA batteries to power a stun gun. And though I don't have one, I'd try it. Zapping a marquee name like Andre Agassi or Venus Williams here at Arthur Ashe Tennis Stadium seems easier than walking up them and saying, "Hi, I'm with *TENNIS* magazine. Can I ask you a few brief questions?"

They all roll their eyes, look at their watch, and suggest later in the tournament. Probably when they're knocked out and on their way home. Rejections taken personally, I look focused in the corner (to the untrained eye) writing something, of course, very important, often looking up to see what's going on.

The lower player's lounge during the opening day of the 2000 U.S. Open is covered with 240 (120 men and women) of *the* absolute best tennis players the world has to offer. From Martina Hingis to Pete Sampras, even to the legendary Ken Rosewall who will be here later in the week for the senior divisions, are all here in New York, because for the next two weeks, tennis exists only here. Just look at the pros hanging out: Lindsay Davenport stands a few feet away. *Geez, she's tall. And whoa!...* Marcelos Rios. I've never seen him in person before. *Not tall.* And Tim Henman. And Jennifer Capriati. I used to have a huge crush on this chick, substance abuse and all. And Billie Jean King, though she's obviously not playing anymore, mingles with all the players.

Walking by is up'n comer Jelena Dokic. Even Mark Philippouss is larger in life. Through all of my private gawking, I feel out of place. Like this is private domain. But they do this week in and week out and act indifferent to everything around them.

The lower lounge, long, but angled like a boomerang, has on one side tall glass panes, a wall of them facing outside to a small, private courtyard for properly credentialed people and kids of the players. (There is a quaint patch of grass, two or three benches, and a small plastic clubhouse of yellow, red and orange for 4-8 year-olds. Some kids are in it now, pretending its on fire and must be saved.) This area, and the lounges, are not accessible to the public or the photo press.

The outdoor area is on the backside of Arthur Ashe Stadium where much of the USA Network and CBS editing and producing trailers line a heavily secured road. The opposing wall in the lower lounge—the slightly shorter, inner side of the boomerang—has two doors, nearly on opposite ends, leading into the men's and women's locker rooms. Two cubicle offices sit against the wall near the women's locker room door, and a United States Tennis Association employee—a dumpy looking fellow in a white, button-down

Polo shirt (with the guy on the horse)—sits in one of the cubicles searching for airline info through a laptop. It's his job to get the players on to their next tournament as efficiently and economically as possible. Being the first day, he's not very busy because everyone is still in the tournament and meandering around, ready to practice in T-shirts or play in a well-tailored, well-endorsed outfit. He'll be extremely busy over the next two days and half as many in the field get knocked out of contention.

Downstairs, off the court, out of the heat, hidden from autographs on shirts, hats, pants, shoes, oversized balls and U.S. Open programs, and among their elite own, the players nap, wait, sit, snack, and drink water. They'll play solitaire, wait, nod to whatever is piped through their personal headphones, drink water, wait, set up practice times with one another, spin their racquets, drink water, and wait some more. They'll have a message to ease relentless muscle explosions, a steam to calm their nerves of New York's irreverent crowd. Then during silent, introspective moments to themselves, you'll notice one or two players tunneled into a stare, out of this room and onto the tennis court, moving specific, well-constructed patterns that videos and scouts suggest will work down their opponent. Or they're just exhausted from the relentless travel. Or brain dead.

The top-seeded, well-oiled machines know they have much to defend; the gangly rest will play with nothing to lose for an engraved silver cup and \$500,000 to each man and woman champion going to the last standing gladiator. But to win the last Grand Slam of this year, just one match isn't enough: you must string together seven intense matches over two weeks. When you're knocked out, that's it...the party's over, baby. And as this week rolls by, obscure and seasoned names will get tossed behind like a sandwich wrapper. Stick around and you'll get more, or first-time press attention, sponsor attention, autographs, more money. And whether you've been on the tour for five years or not, but just broke through to your first Grand Slam second week of action, we The Press will ask for the first time, How do you spell your name again, and, Where are you from, and, You trained where? Upsets mean they've gained our attention. Oh, they'll bask in the light for a little while, but they all come to loath us.

Players continue to stare, wait. A few people scattered about read, but those are mostly girlfriends—of both the male and female players.

Now sitting in the chair on which I've been leaning for the past 20 minutes is Gustavo Kuerten, the No. 2 seed of this year's Open. His wild, blonde, curly hair is tamed by a red bandana, and he props up his legs to watch match scores flash in real-time on one of a dozen cable-fed monitors. Sitting across from him in a semi-circle of big comfy chairs are members of the unofficial Spanish Armada: Carlos Moya, Alex Corretja, Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario and Conchita Martinez. They're laughing together, in Spanish, and I think it's about me. Maybe not. They're throwing towels and Alex.

Peeete! Peeete! Peeeeeete....! Pete Sampras, coming from a practice court, is ushered through a mob of fans held back by a metal barrier. Sitting by the door, it's easy to hear their pleas. Inside now, and past two sets of security personnel, he heads straight for the locker room, stealthily nods at a few people along the way. Many more eyes than mine are on him. He's a living legend now that he holds the most number of Grand Slam titles at TKTK. He's much bigger only a few feet away.

Anna Kournikova, decked out in black Adidas, sits Indian style in the corner, unnoticed, with a cell phone to her ear. She's close enough to hear me whisper to someone. Her trademark blonde ponytail snakes through the back of her black ball cap, around her neck and flops in her lap to her fingers, where she's sifting the ends for what I think are split ends. I can't help but to stare, and she's caught me looking her way a few times now. Great, I'm a stalker with media credentials. Hey, that's what we all are anyway. Anna talks in her native Russian, occasionally looking from underneath her eyebrow-riding ball hat, eyeing passer-byes. Perhaps avoiding autographs from family members of other players, or redundant questions from reports like me. Too late, a young kid asks her to sign a program and she half-smiles. Anna's got the kid's fat, black magic marker on his program the length of time it takes to scribble your initials, not your name. He says, "Wow, thanks!" She half-smiles again and ducks back under her hat. Joyful, the little kid runs with a whisper, "Mom! Mom! Look. LOOK!" The mom strokes her hair and asks, "Did you thank her? Yep." I have to think, now, she's being rude, ungrateful to those who support her and rubber-stamp any endorsements she's getting. But as I look around, there's nowhere for her own solo time.

On the other side of the room I notice Chanda Rubin. Depending on the rest of her year (she's hovering between 10 and 15 on the WTA Tour charts; a good year compared to the early thirties two years ago), she may be perfect to interview during November's Chase Championships back here in New York for Tennis's March issue.

Respecting Lleyton Hewitt's request for personal privacy, I will avoid discussion here about his relationship with another young, scrappy power-player, Kim Clijsters. They're cute together, though, chatting on the bench outside.

Monica Seles frantically rushes in and out of the women's locker room to check on court Armstrong court, where she plays next after the current match. If a player is watching, say, Jerry Springer or a news channel, Monica on the way to changing it back to the match scores without asking, says, "I'll switch it right back." And she does. No sign yet, at least for me, of last year's 1999 women's U.S. Open winner, Serena Williams, and this year's favorite to win, sister and 2000 Wimbledon Champion, Venus.

One hour later...

Alex Corretja, my personal favorite player (finally nabbed someone for questions) sits 20 minutes through unimposing questions for short, fun stories I'm writing for *TENNIS*. I ask, At what level can men and women compete together? What do we do as fans that completely annoys you? Where are your favorite places to vacation?, and, If you could pick your own tribe of people for the game show *Survivor*, whom would you take with you?

And, because our readers have curious minds, I also ask about favorite movies, television shows, best stock market picks and which charities they give to. No, reader, they're not deep questions concerning inner self and world peace and the secrets of success, but you still read shit like that of your favorite personalities. I like Alex, but he gives some pretty dull answers like, "Women are playing great with each other, why mess it up?" And, "I'd trust God to help me out of tough situations." But he adds, "At least I'd like to hope so."

Alex's reaction to annoyances was great, though. If he's not playing well and somebody yells, 'C'mon, man. Wake up!' (In front of me he throws his hands up in simulation of frustration while being on court) He

says he wants to one day angrily yell up in the stands, “Does it look like I’m sleeping?” No stock picks (he doesn’t follow them), but the sap goes on and on about *Shakespeare In Love*, and *American Beauty*. He’s the dark’n handsome, romantic type women—young and old—mush over. I’m the romantic type, too, women...just not a dark’n handsome gene carrier.

The most interesting quote I got this morning my editor will surely enjoy, but not printable; the magazine would get too many letters. It was from the obnoxious, but funny six-foot-six power-server Marc Rosset. He says, “There’s no competition on the tennis court between men and women, except in bed.” Word for word! Right there on my pad, from a full pen and even taped for proof! No, it’s not provocative, but tennis readers will think so. He’s a shock-value type of guy anyway and chuckles through the line again, *Except in bed, You know?!* Rosset doesn’t quite possess lady-killer looks, so I wanted to say, “Like you’d know.” But didn’t.

Just being a tennis player gets you abundant sex. The original question on sexes, however, is based on the beefed-up attention the women’s game is getting. They’re hitting with incredible pace these days and serving in the 110s to 120s. Really, I take my hat off to them. And just as my editor and I were settling on which questions to focus most, my concept picked up a little more spin. John McEnroe, in a recent interview with *The New Yorker*, suggested a good college tennis player could beat any woman on the tour. Having a fellow insider/journalist/colleague in my piece will add more credibility. Can’t wait to catch him in the press center.

The extremely personal and shy Amanda Coetzer says, “But I never have anything clever to say for you guys.” She offers tomorrow, but I know it’s just a blowoff. Nicolas Keifer clearly ignores me. Richard Krajicek and Natahlie Tauziat all suggest tomorrow, too. I’ll try upstairs.

On the way downstairs, a favorite among females, six-pack-abs Jan-Michael Gambill (one of two or three promising American players) smiles over a comment his mother made. They’re sitting on a bench as a walk through the large foyer, between the lower lounge and childcare room, where most everyone walks through to either head up stairs, or stand and wait for car service (as Gambill is doing), or reserve courts at a large counter area that sits left and somewhat behind the stairs. The place is crazy busy, like a New York street. A short distance from the foyer, down a cement hall, and you’re standing on Arthur Ashe Court. I walk up cool-like to Gambill because if I don’t interview everyone I can over the first two competition days, they could be on a jet home before you know it. Turns out that Mr. Squeaky Clean Smile is a sci-fi freak. Without hesitation on the Survivor companions he says he’ll gladly take Kurt, Spock, McCoy, Commander Warf and Data from the Next Generation. Then adds, “They’re used to getting in and out of hostile environments. There’s no way I’d last a day without their help.”

Gambill, The guy with a gazillion Jaguars also wears (as I’ve asked everyone of their favorite jewelry they may wear on the court) a pinkie ring and occasionally a silver necklace from his mom, or a beaded necklace he picked up at Disney Land. The millionaire likes to watch Who Wants To Be A Millionaire, Star Trek Voyager—all of them—and John Litgo in Third Rock from the Sun. Jan-Michael gets interrupted by someone. I chat with his mom for a few minutes on his charities. He gives money to a cat foundation. And I don’t mean any ‘ole cats. Big cats...like tigers and bobcats and lions. She gave me a picture of her son holding a bottle for a baby tiger. In the picture, the cat’s paw is gently perched on Gambill’s arm. Gambill,

smiling as usual, strains to keep his arm up; the cat's paw is the size of Gambill's head. I leave our chat feeling triumphant, like how I want everyone to trust me. I'm suddenly a real charmer.

Up a single switchback of black metal stairs, I enter a massive room with higher ceilings (some ridiculous 40 plus feet), tons of couches and chairs and tables and pillows. In little side rooms players check email (through one of the largest U.S. Open sponsors, IBM), use banking services, pick up food vouchers for the huge dining room adjacent to this room. Most importantly, they're spending time and more time with parents, coaches, girlfriends, and boyfriends. Some are draped over one another, others hug, kiss cheekly once or twice. These people are important. They are a player's honest support group who've been there through the defeats, bad press and long-distant calls, when they were defeated, and especially when he or she broke into the top twenty. Then ten. Some are obsessive parents living a second life through their children. Some are just tough parents who really mean to give their children the very best. Up here, too, because of the abundant space, are brief meetings with agents, accountants, attorneys, and clothing, racquet and shoe manufacturers. Though this is not the place to sign anything, these people are all here to support their bread'n butter clients.

Legendary tennis writer, commentator and overall tennis encyclopedia, Bud Collins loudly strolls in, not matching as usual. Says with a nod my direction, "Hello, Flowers." I don't say anything. I probably muttered my name when we met in the pressroom a few years back. I find it funny, too, because it's what my younger cousin once called me when she was too young to pronounce Warren or Florence.

"Hi, Mr. Collins," I say with respect. Nearly everyone of the players who didn't have five minutes for me earlier, gives 10 minutes or more to Bud. I'm a little miffed. But hey, it's Bud, ya know? He's put his time in.

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