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Hewitt's lawsuit has little merit

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Sports Illustrated senior writer *Jon Wertheim* will answer your tennis questions every Monday. [Click here](#) to send a question.

Andre Agassi is the winner of this week's annual Player of the Week award. The A-Train won his fourth title of the year at Houston. Along the way he took over the No. 1 ranking and became the oldest player ever to hold the top spot. Bravo. ... In the final, Agassi was trailing 3-6, 0-2, 0-40 to **Andy Roddick**. Agassi hit a backhand dropshot winner to stay in the game. He held serve, broke Roddick a few games later and rolled from there. ... Two observations about Agassi's tremendous feat of reaching the rankings pinnacle: 1) We're not saying the Champions Race needs to be abolished, but this is yet another example of why the 52-week ranking still has resonance. 2) Anyone else get the feeling that, with his anemic playing schedule, **Lleyton Hewitt** is cutting off his nose to spite his face? When he finishes the year at No. 2 or 3 because he's hellbent on entering as few ATP events as possible, boy, he really will have shown them. (More on Hewitt below.) ... In the Houston doubles final, the world's top team of **Mark Knowles** and **Daniel Nestor** beat **Jan-Michael Gambill** and former Illinois standout **Graydon Oliver** 6-4, 6-3. ...



In Fed Cup (slogan: The hottest thing to hit Lowell, Mass., since the Industrial Revolution), the Williams sisters rolled over the Czech Republic team. Good for **Venus** and **Serena** for playing and disproving some idiot cynics who thought they might bail on their commitment. But we're just wondering: With the outcome of the tie no longer in doubt, why didn't **Alexandra Stevenson** or **Meghann Shaughnessy** get a little run? For full Fed Cup scores, check out the SI.com [Tennis page](#). ... Congrats to **Lindsay Davenport**, who wed longtime boyfriend **Jon Leach** on a Hawaii beach this past weekend. ... In Barcelona, hometown favorite **Carlos Moya** beat **Marat Safin** in the final. Moya was ahead two sets to one and 3-0 in the fourth when Safin retired with extreme fatigue. The match was played in front of a sold-out crowd that included the *excelentisimos señores* Dukes of Palma. ... Despite the disappointing finish, Safin has to be pleased with his week, during which he beat **Juan Carlos Ferrero**, among others. ... In the doubles final, the **Bryans (Bob and Mike)** beat the South African team of **Chris Haggard** and **Rob Koenig**. It was the 10th career doubles title for the Bryans, tying them with the **Gulliksons (Tim and Tom)** for the record for a brother duo. ...

Back to Houston: A number of players (most of them Americans) visited the house of former president **George Bush**. And there was no standing on ceremony. The players (including Agassi, Roddick and **Todd Martin**) ate hot dogs and burgers off of paper plates, looked through family photo albums, and posed for pictures for which the 41st president of the U.S. -- we're not kidding here -- made rabbit ears behind the players' heads. ... Weirder still, **James Blake** had an

audience in Houston with unabashed tennis fan . Also, Agassi and played Roddick and **Clyde Drexler** in a charity doubles match. (Roddick was responsible for 99 percent of the hair that was present.) ... According to the International Men's Tennis Association, nearly 60 players have pledged their fealty to the breakaway organization. We're wondering if the ATP is going to borrow a page from the state department and issue decks of playing cards featuring the faces of the various dissidents. On second thought, the players' agents would probably object to the licensing arrangement. ...

So long as you're calling your local cable operator and screaming at them to carry the Tennis Channel, try convincing them to air *She Got Game*, a terrific documentary that pulls back the curtain on the WTA Tour. The documentary was produced by Canadians **Abbey Niedik** and **Bobbi Jo Krals** and uses the ups and downs of the winsome **Sonya Jeyaseelan** as a central thread. But there are plenty of candid cameos by your favorite stars. A well-regarded WTA staffer practically takes to her knees begging for Serena Williams to pose for a simple photo shoot. **Martina Hingis** is as uninhibited as ever and playfully pretends to throw a cake in **Anna Kournikova**'s face. **Barbara Schett** tells you why she has no desire to be a top-10 player. This really is must-see TV for tennis fans. (The **Corey Hart** soundtrack is just a bonus.) If you want to purchase an individual tape, contact Krals at bobbigotgamehotmail.com or dliproductionssympatico.ca, or call (514) 272-2220 or (514) 279-6801.

Lots of excellent questions this week. Sorry I could only get to a handful. Let the wild rumpus begin ...

I know plenty of people will be writing about Lleyton Hewitt's lawsuit against the ATP. From a legal perspective, does he really have a case? The only information I know is that he didn't want to do an interview with ESPN last year. Also, are there any examples of the ATP defaming him in the media, as he has claimed?

—*Huey Kwik, Stanford, Calif.*

There indeed were lots of questions this week about Team Hewitt's curious move of suing the ATP. Or threatening to, anyway. Say this about the tennis world: The plot lines never get boring. First, I think we ought to consider this in context: Hewitt is on the front lines of the IMTA, and anything that weakens (and/or diverts resources from) the ATP presumably strengthens the breakaway organization. There already has been a public call from the IMTA that the ATP address Hewitt's objections.

Anyway, I like the logic here: *This isn't about money, it's about getting my good name back.* Huh? Naturally there's no better way to reclaim your honor than through litigation. In the infinitesimally small chance that a judge would rule in favor of Hewitt, presto, all his past crimes and social misdemeanors are stricken from the record? He'd suddenly be perceived as a cross between **Monica Seles** and **Pat Rafter**? That's how it works, right?

Unless there's a smoking gun of which we're not aware (say, **Mark Miles** drawing a moustache on Hewitt's face in the U.S. Open program), this lawsuit would seem to be about as meritorious as the recent case brought by the obese plaintiffs against a certain fast-food chain. If the Australian legal system is anything like ours, Hewitt, as a public figure, will need to prove malice to recover in a defamation suit -- a hard case to make considering that the ATP markets him the world over and has a vested interest in his popularity. Plus, if memory serves, isn't truth an absolute defense to a claim of defamation? (In other words, the defendants should call James Blake to the stand as their first witness.)

Seems to us that if Team Hewitt -- by which we really mean **Glynn Hewitt**, the driving force behind this suit -- was really concerned about public perception and winning back Lleyton's good name, a better strategy might be to make a rare detour to the high road. End this petty, vindictive, ugly, public feud with the ATP and let Lleyton's unsurpassed tennis and admirable competitive spirit speak for itself.

(This concludes our Rant o' the Week. Sponsorship opportunities are still available.)

Do you think the fact that Venus and Serena Williams play such few tournaments will tarnish their legacy? How will their marks stand up next to the marks of, say, Martina Navratilova, Chris Evert or even Martina Hingis?

—*Rich, Brooklyn, N.Y.*

This is a point we've raised in the past. On the one hand, Grand Slam titles are the coin(s) of the realm. Serena can skip the German Open and exile herself from Indian Wells for the rest of her career, and so long as she bags a few Slams every year, ultimately it won't make much difference. On the other hand, if she falters at the Slams, the paucity of events she enters might come back to haunt her. Several weeks ago we noted that if she lost only once (which, of course, she did two weeks ago in Charleston) she would not be able to claim the best win-loss record in a single year. Why? Because Navratilova only lost once in 1983, but she won 86 matches that year. No way in Jehovah's name does Serena ever play 87 times in a year.

There's also this point that Hingis once raised to me. Consider the source, of course, but I think there's a kernel of merit in there somewhere: Part of being a professional athlete means playing a full schedule and sometimes competing when physically you're far less than 100 percent. If everyone only played when they were in optimal condition, there would be no organized sports. If the top players in the past had only played a dozen or so events a year, there would be no tour.

It seems like not a week goes by without us hearing about a top player pulling out of a tournament. Serena Williams pulls out of the thing in Germany. Lleyton Hewitt pulls out of Monte Carlo. Pete Sampras pulls out of everything. You get my point. When these players pull out do they to keep any of the appearance-fee money they get? I mean, they're not playing, but lots of fans bought tickets thinking they would be, so the tournaments benefited from using their names. What's the scoop?

—*Doug Kerner, Toronto*

A variation of this has been raised by a few of you in the past. As you know by now, we tend to shy from questions that entail research, preferring, as we do, to simply pontificate. (And to simply split infinitives while we're at it.) But this is an interesting point, so I made a few calls. I can see it from both sides. If I'm the promoter, my policy is simply, "No play, no pay." If I'm the player, I say, "Wait a second. You've used my likeness to sell tickets and sponsorships. I've graced your posters and done those insufferable conference calls with local media. By the time the events starts, I've already earned my keep."

Turns out that while a few players (**Ivan Lendl**, most prominently, I'm told) have tried to use the latter argument to recoup *some* appearance money for events from which they withdraw, the general industry practice is that players get no money unless they actually compete in the event.

What's your take on the recent retirement talk coming from Marcelo Rios? I think that because of all his injuries over the last three years he will throw in the towel, which would be a big loss for tennis because he still is a big draw and by far the sickest shotmaker in the

game. What you think?

—Patrick M., Bayonne, N.J.

"Big loss" is probably overstating the case. The guy didn't exactly capture the public's imagination, nor did he much care. (What was the headline of that *Sports Illustrated* article a few years back? Oh, yes. "The Most Hated Man in Tennis.") How many casual tennis fans outside Chile turn on the television and say, "Well, I was going to watch tennis. But since Rios isn't playing, I have no interest"?

That said, among fans in the know, Rios indeed will be missed. As you note, he was/is an unbelievable shotmaker blessed with all sorts of talent. Plus, say what you will about his personality, but in that Safin-like way, Rios was never boring. (Who can forget that match against Agassi in Miami last year in which Rios played out of his mind for a set, lost an entertaining second set and then decided he'd had enough, shrugged, picked up his bag and walked off the court?) One obviously wishes his body and mind had held up and allowed him to fulfill the promise he showed in 1998. But the sport is worse off for his retirement.

Recently Lindsay Davenport said that Serena Williams has the best serve ever in women's tennis. Your thoughts? I'm more inclined to call Serena's return of serve the best ever; it's the most devastating I've seen on the WTA Tour. I started to notice this during her 2000 Wimbledon quarterfinal match against Lisa Raymond. Why have pundits failed to appreciate this side of Serena's game?

—Chris Tate, Memphis, Tenn.

You pick an interesting match upon which to base your case. To this day Serena points to that Raymond match as the closest she has come to perfection. But I would agree that Serena's return might be the most underrated facet of her game. Having a nasty return is like being a skilled shot-blocker in basketball. You have to look beyond the raw numbers and consider how many times the intimidated opponents alter his/her shots. One wonders how many times Serena is able to induce double-faults because an opponent knows that a garden variety second serve to the middle of the box ain't gonna cut it.

I know you don't want any more Hall of Fame questions, but I can't help it!! I am outraged and shocked that you truly believe Todd Woodbridge deserves Hall of Fame entry but not Conchita Martinez. Please take another look at their career stats!! In one breath you say doubles shouldn't count for one player (Leander Paes), but because Todd dominated (which he did) he should be an exception. I really think this guy is just an exceptional self promoter and politician à la Mary Joe Fernandez. Neither should make the Hall of Fame. But based on her Fed Cup heroics alone, Conchita should make it; she and Arantxa Sánchez-Vicario literally took Spain from nowhere to five Cups in the 1990s. Then there are her 30-plus single titles and the Wimbledon crown. She was in the top 10 for more than a decade, not to mention also reaching the French and Australian Open finals. Come on!! What do you mean the standards are too low? I wouldn't mind, really, because she is not my favorite player (Arantxa was). But to nominate Todd Woodbridge ... I hate to say this, but I am losing all respect for you.

*****Please take another look at their career statistics and print a retraction*******

-- Ann, Newark, Del.

Ann, easy. We're only talking tennis here. You're scaring me with all those double exclamation marks and the asterisks. (All that excitement is so un-Martinez, anyway.)

First, you're dead wrong on Todd Woodbridge. The guy has won more Grand Slam trophies than Pete Sampras and is likely to retire with *more doubles titles than any men's player in history*. We love Paes, but Woodbridge entered this year having won more than three times as many career titles. Neither he nor Mary Joe Fernandez are self-promoters; they're two of the lamentably few players who care deeply about the state of the sport and take time to serve on committees, make themselves accessible and generally conduct themselves like adults.

As for my un-Conchy-nable remarks about Martinez, I'm going to refrain from printing a retraction, but you make a strong case and I'll grant you that I was probably somewhat hasty in dismissing her last week. The points against her: She only bagged one Slam, which came early in her career and, while we won't stoop to call it a fluke, she had to beat neither **Steffi Graf** nor Seles to win it. She never achieved the No. 1 ranking and was largely relegated to the margins with the arrival of the Big Babes. Also, much as we all love Fed Cup, the competition's value when making career judgment is highly suspect. Points in her favor: Thirty-two titles is nothing to sneeze at (as **Jack Williams of Arlington, Va.**, points out, that total stacks up favorably against **Jennifer Capriati's** 13 and **Mary Pierce's** 15). Martinez was, and is, a solid doubles player. She has reached the semifinals or better at every Slam.

Bottom line: Perhaps because her style of play is, shall we say, an acquired taste, Martinez probably tends to be overlooked by many, self included. She's not a "no-brainer" to make the Hall, but neither should her chances be dismissed as quickly as I did last week. I propose a truce: Let me buy you a drink and together we can laugh at all the people who wrote in saying that Anna Kournikova ought to be Newport-bound because of her doubles play and the exposure she has given the sport.

Would it be out of line to suggest that the USTA sponsor an all-American professional tournament (like a national championship)? Maybe give the winner a spot on the Davis Cup/Fed Cup team? (Although I realize that the winner probably would be on the team anyway). You could also hold the tournament at a different site every year. Too time consuming? Too naive?

—Larry McCullough, Philadelphia, Miss.

I'm not sure what's in it for the players. Why would Serena or Venus or Andre or Andy play in an event that excluded players from other countries? And given that neither the ATP nor WTA tours would sanction an event that excludes players from other countries (what do you think this is, Dubai?), there wouldn't be rankings points at stake. Here's another idea: What if the USTA used some of its U.S. Open television money and sponsorship leverage and ran the entire North American circuit that leads up to the Open. Too naive? Stay tuned ...

Proof of the Williams sisters' Q rating and role in pop culture: I was catching up on some shows I had on TiVo and heard this comment on CSI -- "A perfect match, just like Venus and Serena."

—Sean Donahue, Washington, D.C.

Nice. Fans of Venus and Serena can only hope that they don't lose their groove this season the way CSI has.

Since the Mailbag has had a long love affair with the concept of marriage spelling doom for

a tennis career, I'm wondering what you think of the respective weddings of Lindsay Davenport and Justine Double-H.

—*Douglas Neman, Dallas*

We'll say up front that the vaunted Marriage Hypothesis has been punctured -- badly -- of late. Look at the last five men's Grand Slam winners: **Thomas Johansson**, **Albert Costa**, Hewitt, Sampras and Agassi. Four husbands and a Hewitt, who may as well be one. Lot of Home Depot runs represented in those five guys. Initially, the theory applied to the men. The thinking was that tying the knot softened their competitive instincts, blunted their passion. When the rest of the field was practicing, they were, you know, caulking the master bathroom and picking out china patterns and pretending to enjoy the banter on *Will and Grace*.

As for the women, an entirely different dynamic is at work, but it will be interesting to see how the newly betrothed perform. At least in Henin-Hardenne's case, marriage hasn't seemed to hurt her game. On the other hand, check out **Anna Pistolesi's** recent results ...

It seems to me that Lindsay Davenport always has gracious comments when she loses as well as when she wins. And I do believe she's one of the most popular players on the tour. She basically tells it like it is and doesn't get into excuse mode. Do you think she'll go into broadcasting when she retires?

—*Kathrine, Austin, Texas*

I'm just speculating here, but my suspicion is that when Davenport retires, she'll take a pass on any second career that requires extensive travel.

It is known that the Williams sisters and Kim Clijsters are great dog lovers. Is having a dog decisive for obtaining a good ranking?

—*Cedric Misseghers, Gent, Belgium*

It's not just the top three players. If you go to a WTA event, you can be excused for thinking you mistakenly have walked into a casting call for the *Best in Show* sequel. Capriati, Pierce, Navratilova and Raymond are among the players who bring their dogs with them to some events. At it's not just the players. I attended a benefit at the San Diego event a few years ago. By chance, I sat next Seles' mother, **Esther**. At one point I noticed that her large handbag, which she had placed on the floor, was moving. I called this to her attention, she smiled, opened it up and out popped a miniature something or other. While having a dog probably isn't "decisive for obtaining a good ranking," I think it does speak to the insularity and loneliness and the weird sense of place that attends life on tour.

Long Lost Siblings

A young John McEnroe (red-headband edition) and Dustin Diamond as Screech in *Saved by the Bell*.

—*Michael, Los Angeles*

*Note: Any *Saved by the Bell* references are given special consideration.

LONG LOST SIBLINGS?





McEnroe



Diamond

Sargis Sargsian and baseball player Nomar Garciaparra.

—Ashley, San Francisco

LONG LOST SIBLINGS?



Sargsian



Garciaparra

Have a great week, everyone!

Sports Illustrated senior writer Jon Wertheim covers tennis for the magazine and is a regular contributor to *SI.com*. [Click here](#) to send him a question or comment.

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