



CHALLENGING START FOR MARIA

Scatter-shooting the first two days:

- * Keep guessing, Maria: Kirilenko was 0-for-7 on challenges in her opening-round win over Maria Sharapova and the women, overall, are overturning challenge calls at only 22 percent. Compare to 36 percent for the men, but it's early yet.
- * Why doesn't Serena Williams just zip it up on her U.S. Open fine. She was asked about it after her first-round win and went on and on about how it was unfair but really a good thing because she's donating money to this or that cause and blah, blah, blah. Geez, all you have to say is, "The U.S. Open? Old news. Nothing more to say. Any other questions?"
- * There's already been an overload of five-setters, but none more underplayed, except in Sweden, than Robin Soderling's cave-in from two sets up. Has anyone figured Soderling out?
- * 17-year-old Ryan Harrison of Texas, who won the playoff in the U.S. for an Aussie Open wild card, competed well but went down in straight sets to Janko Tipsarevic. IMG is putting a full-court press on the "he's-the-next-great-American-player." Pure public relations. Maybe he is and maybe he isn't. Just let the kid play the game and turn off the pressure machine.
- * Justine Henin was at net 27 times in her opening-round win over compatriot Kirsten Flipkens and I was wide-eyed watching her attack even Flip's first serves. She must have had a dozen returns for clear winners. Now let's see her do that against No. 5 Elena Dementieva, whose once-woeful serve is a lot better and who backs up her weaker serves with extremely tough ground stroking. I like Elena in this match. I just don't think Henin is quite ready.
- * Another outstanding second-rounder: No. 16 Yanina Wickmayer, the other Belgian, vs. No. 12 Flavia Pennetta. How is this possible? Wickmayer didn't tell ITF drug testers of her whereabouts last year and her penalty was losing her seeding and having to play qualifying. She just beat Pennetta a week ago in Auckland and I think she'll make it two in a row.
- * James Blake is now 8-0 vs. Arnaud Clement.
- * Excellent opening win for Andy Roddick, but his volleying has to get sharper.
- * It's pretty obvious Sam Querrey isn't fully back from the injury he suffered when he fell on a glass table, but if he wants a spot on the Davis Cup team next month he's going to

have to find his game fast. However, just thinking about it, who else is there? Roddick and Blake have declared themselves out and Mardy Fish's gimpy knee isn't anywhere near 100 percent fit. Wayne Odesnik? Don't laugh. He's into the second round.

* Great five-setter with cramping Mikhail Youzhny winning 6-4 in the fifth over Richard Gasquet. I'm still not sure how he finished this match. He was down two sets and limping in the fifth.

* David Ferrer defeated Frederico Gil of Portugal 6-0, 6-0, 2-0 retired -- not losing a game and only 21 points.

* Gael Monfils is lightening up on his serve and emphasizing location and consistency. Gee, there IS a brain there to go along with the amazing physical ability.

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