



SERENA MAKES IT A DOZEN

"We've got a momentum change," TV analyst Mary Joe Fernandez told a Tennis Channel audience as Justine Henin began a run of 15 straight points to win the second set and vault strongly into the third of today's Aussie Open final.

Tsk, tsk, Mary Joe. Momentum change? In a Serena Williams match? No such thing. There are bumps and burps and, as long as we're in Australia, walkabouts. But there are no real momentum changes in a Williams match.

I've seen far too many Williams wins where she had a few waffling moments. Sometimes she gets outplayed and loses. Most of the time she shrugs off these dicey stretches and rallies back to win, just as she did Saturday, where she won her fourth Aussie championship and 12th major.

It was a darn good piece of tennis. Not great, but B+ working hard to reach A- and, though I was surprised by Henin's elasticity in the second set, ultimately she tired enough in the third to allow Williams to conclude this 6-2, 3-6, 6-2 victory.

It was, gratefully, the first women's Grand Slam final to go split sets since Amelie Mauresmo defeated Henin at Wimbledon in 2006. We had gone 18 consecutive finals without a lot of thrills. Women's tennis needed this.

And so, there you have it. Williams consolidating her grip on No. 1 and Henin reinforcing everyone's wisdom that she will be a considerable force in 2010.

This was only her second tournament since ending her retirement and only her second loss, having been beaten by compatriot Kim Clijsters in a lead-up final two weeks ago. Her serve was a huge disappointment in this title match, but she otherwise looks magnificent -- in some respects better than before she slipped into a brief retirement.

She has now had 12 matches to showcase the aggressive changes in her game and I'll talk about that a bit in a moment.

I didn't expect her to win the Australian Open because I didn't think she was physically ready to win seven matches, and against a murderous draw. In truth, she pushed farther than I thought she would go, but she was spent in the third set. She had points to go up 2-0 in the third, but when your legs begin to flag, the first thing affected is your serve. Her first serving had already struggled to reach 50 percent effectiveness. Now it was a non-factor.

Henin won only eight of 20 points on serve in the final set and had only five winners to go with 10 unforced errors. Receiving, she also looked a half-step slower. Williams poured in five of her 12 aces down the stretch of this final.

Where Henin had done a brilliant job of neutralizing Serena's serve in the first two sets, in which Williams barely won 50 percent of her service points, Serena was 12-2 on first serve in the third.

Those were the deciding factors.

For Henin, she'll pick up 1,400 points as runner-up, giving her 1,600 for the two tournaments and that should place her mid-30s when the rankings come out Monday.

About her "new" game. More trips to the net. More aggressive service returning, even off first serve. Those are the two key factors she thinks will carry her to the only Slam she hasn't won -- Wimbledon. She's on the right track.

She caught some criticism from the TV mavens in this final for not playing more conservatively, for being overly risky. But I don't agree with that. If you're going to make substantive changes in your style of play, and for very good reasons, you don't retrench just because it's a "big" match.

Too many players promise themselves, for example, that they will take more risks on second serve returns, only to hold back in big matches and just get the ball back in play because they fear the miss. It's better for Henin to stick with her 2010 game plan and tweak or modify as the season moves on.

If you really believe in the changes you're making, then you don't backtrack two tournaments into the season. You stay with it with the sense that at some point it's all going to come together.

For Williams, she'll take a much needed rest now. Toward the end of this match, analyst Mary Carillo tried to make the point that Williams needs to play more tournaments in order to reach No. 1. That was a surprising comment because Williams IS No. 1. And she's no longer playing only 14 or 15 events a year. She's played 18 tournaments in the last 52 weeks and, though most other top 10s have played more, for a player going deep into every draw, 18 is the right number of events.

I might point out that Roger Federer has played only 19 tournaments in the last 52 weeks.

I said before the start of the Open that if you line up the 10 best players in the women's game today, this is the best 10 ever. Nothing that happened during this tournament changes my mind about that.

It's still four months to the French Open, but Henin will be the overwhelming choice to win that tournament and, if she stays with the aggressive style she's working on now, I give her good chances to take Wimbledon as well.

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