



STEVENSON QUILTS AGAIN

It's with a certain amount of sadness that I report that Alexandra Stevenson, who had more than 15 minutes of fame at the 1999 Wimbledon, has retired from a match with injury for the 41st time in her heavily mismanaged career.

I'm not sure whether it was the shoulder again. It always seems to be the shoulder, doesn't it? Or was it something else. Does it matter? The latest walk-off came when she was trailing Andrea Hlavackova of the Czech Republic in the opening round of the Australian Open qualifying a few days ago.

Stevenson is 29 years old now and who knows why she keeps hanging on. My guess is it's her mother, Samantha Stevenson, who has been living vicariously through her daughter since she gave the kid her first tennis lesson at age 4 and then declared she'd be there when Alex won Wimbledon. It was more fantasy than a dream.

A few months ago Sports Illustrated ran a warm, fuzzy story about how Alexandra had buried years of anger toward her once-anonymous father, basketball great Julius Erving. It was a touching story and who couldn't be happy that an alienated child had finally found peace with her estranged parent.

But the piece missed by a country mile the much wider story of a young woman who could have been a very good player. Could have been healthy had her injuries been dealt with properly. Could have developed her game had her coaches not been constantly alienated by her mother's dominance.

Stevenson was just 18 years old when she shocked the tennis world by reaching the quarters of the 1999 Wimbledon, where the news was revealed that Erving was her father while her mother was holding press conferences to attack alleged lesbianism in the women's locker room. Somehow, even in those golden days, you knew the kid was in for a rocky ride.

She had been in 19 Grand Slam events since and not reached the third round. She had gone out in the first round of 15 of those majors. She hasn't been in a Slam since the 2004 U.S. Open, where her record is 0-7.

Her vagabond life now consists of travel to one-horse tennis towns to play Bush League matches or to try to use her ranking (low 200s) to qualify for regular WTA events. But she hasn't been able to get into a regular WTA tournament since Charleston in April of 2009 and she hasn't won a match in a regular WTA event since Charleston in 2008.

Why she continues to play is a mystery. When she was on top of the world at Wimbledon 11 years ago she professed a desire for a career in show business. Maybe that can still happen. Certainly, the last 11 years have been a melodrama.

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* The Aussie Open: This is about as fair a men's draw as anyone has a right to expect. You've got six bonafide suspects out there in (my order) Rafael Nadal, Novak Djokovic, Roger Federer, Andy Murray, Juan Martin Del Potro and Nikolay Davydenko and things look like they could be pretty quiet until the quarters. Down to the final eight, we could have Nadal vs. Murray, Federer vs. his new nemesis, Davydenko, and Djokovic vs. the non-suspect no one wants to play, Robin Soderling.

* The Williams sisters, both in the top half of the draw, can't meet in the final, or is that plot line becoming stale after all these years?

* Andy Roddick vs. Sam Q-Ball Querrey in the third round. That will be fun.

* Don't get confused: For the sixth time in the last two years we've got Caroline Wozniacki vs. Aleksandra Wozniak. Wozniacki is the more famous of the two, seeded No. 4. She 19, Wozniak is 22. Caroline is Danish, Wozniak is Canadian.

* Taylor Dent, everyone's favorite comeback story, takes his No. 86 ranking into a first round match against Fabio Fagnini of Italy, ranked 54 and obviously no gimme. That's the best opening day match on the men's side. On the women's side, Melanie Oudin of the U.S. vs. Alla Kudryavtseva, who hasn't done much since she stunned Maria Sharapova at the 2008 Wimbledon and then told reporters, "I don't like her outfit."

* I told you something like this could happen because Justine Henin is unseeded, and there you have it. Henin vs. No. 5 Elena Dementieva in a probably second-rounder.

* Final note: I know half of you are already trying to figure out the "next-day" clock in Melbourne, Australia. Let me make this easy for you. There is a 15-hour time difference between Melbourne and U.S. Eastern Time, which means if it's 11 a.m. in Melbourne, it's 8 p.m. the previous evening on the east coast of the U.S.

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