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BY LINDSAY BERRA

MARTINA HINGIS WAS ONCE THE YOUNG QUEEN OF TENNIS. AS SHE MOUNTS HER COMEBACK, WILL ANYTHING LESS THAN THE THRONE BE GOOD ENOUGH?



It is a postmortem press conference like any other, athlete reigning supreme, talking down at reporters who are as much an inconvenience as an obligation. Years ago, in another decade, another century, another time, Martina Hingis was indeed a queen. Now she is simply a member of the court, trying to work her way closer to the throne.

Not an hour earlier, on this August evening in San Diego, Hingis pushed one of tennis' current nobles, world No. 2 Kim Clijsters, to 7-5 in the first set before crumpling in the second. Now Hingis, sitting on the dais, is refreshingly candid and self-effacing, typical of this, her second go-round on the Sony Ericsson WTA Tour. She is happy she pushed Clijsters, but she is not happy she lost in



the quarterfinals. Physical and mental fatigue took their toll, and doubt now invades her once-steely psyche.

So as the last question is called for, Hingis, 25, asks one of her own: "How would you judge my game today? You are all professionals, I want to hear from you. How do you see the progress in my game, or maybe not?" There is no hint of sarcasm. This is not a throwaway question to set up a door-slaming exit. At first, the dozen or so reporters are silent, but she is waiting, literally on the edge of her seat. Hingis wants answers.

THERE WAS a time when she had all of them. Off the court, there were the mischievous retorts to the press. On the court, there wasn't a shot she couldn't make, an opponent she couldn't read, a situation she couldn't handle. Despite the pressure that comes with being a child prodigy, Hingis was a bona fide star. She was dainty and aggressive and smart. What she lacked in strength, she made up for in guile. She was the puppet master, pulling strings to dictate points—opponents knew what

play they would make only after Hingis had decided it. But in San Diego, Clijsters out-drop-shot the best drop-shooter in the business. "I couldn't get to them. And once I got them, I didn't know what to do with them," says Hingis. "She hit every single line. I used to do that when I was on top."

This wistful uncertainty is from the same Hingis who beat Mary Pierce at the Australian Open in 1997 for her first Grand Slam title; the same Hingis who reached the top of the WTA ranking that March, becoming, at 16 years 6 months, the youngest No. 1 in history; the same Hingis who won four more Grand Slams and spent 209 weeks in the No. 1 spot. It is certainly the same Hingis. But she is very different.

Hingis expressed her doubts just one month after the weaknesses in her game were exposed on the grass of the All England Club. Back in 1997, she defeated Jana Novotna in the Wimbledon final. But against Japan's Ai Sugiyama in the third round this year, Hingis' second serve plummeted to an average of 81 mph. She couldn't win points on serve, and the pressure it put on her baseline game, with which Hingis says she is still not 100% comfortable, took its toll as her ground strokes weakened. Sugiyama won 17 of 23 net approaches because



Hingis kissed her first Slam trophy in Australia in 1997 but lost to Clijsters in the first two majors of her comeback.

Hingis, once a master of the passing shot, couldn't force one by her. Hingis even lost her famous footing a few times, stumbling across the grass.

"Wimbledon was not good," she says. "After Paris I was flat, and I didn't do enough to prepare. Mentally, I was tired. On any other surface I can dig deep. I can tell myself, Okay, I'm going to win this point, and I'll do it because I can run. But out there it's so fast. One mishit, one bad shot, and you're gone."

Through much of her first stint on the Tour,



Twice as nice

Okay, here's the deal: If you want to see an American win a U.S. Open title, don't waste your time watching singles. Ain't gonna happen. The smart money's on the twins from California.

When Mike (the righty) and Bob (the southpaw) Bryan won Wimbledon in July, they became just the third men's pair in the Open Era to win all four Grand Slams. Their seven consecutive Slam finals appearances is the most in history and, if they repeat at Flushing Meadows, they'll finish the year No. 1 for the third time.

Did we mention they chest bump on court a lot? And that they're telepaths? "We don't have to talk much or use many signals, and yet we still know what the other is thinking," says Bob, who was born two minutes after Mike and is an inch taller and 10 pounds heavier. "It's that connection that gives us our confidence."

That connection started early. Their parents, Wayne and Kathy, introduced the boys to tennis when they were 2 and kept them from competing against each other early in their junior careers. When they became doubles partners, they quickly established themselves as a force, reaching No. 1 in every age division in junior play and winning the NCAA doubles title while at Stanford.

"They have literally spent only a few days in their lives apart," says their father. "The longest fight they've had in their lives was like 15 seconds. Even if they weren't twins, they'd still be alike."

And liked. They routinely hold marathon poker matches with Andy Roddick, James Blake and other players, and their band, the Bryan Bros., is a draw on Tour. Then there are the celebrations—hand slaps, laughter, chest bumps. "We'll even sing songs out there," says Mike. "We play best when we're loose."

Guess they haven't been uptight for a while.

—ANNA K. CLEMMONS

Hingis rarely had negative thoughts. Steffi Graf and Monica Seles were nearing the ends of their careers and the curtain was yet to rise on the slamming sister act of Venus and Serena Williams, giving the *über*talented Hingis the perfect opportunity to shine. But the game changed between Hingis' last Grand Slam title at the 1999 Australian Open and her premature departure at the end of 2002. During that time, the Williams sisters claimed eight majors and Jennifer Capriati won another three. Said Hingis when she announced she was leaving the game, "I have no plans to ever return."

Her departure was a shock. According to popular opinion, Hingis, whose best serves topped off at

semifinals of the 2004 Australian Open. An exhibition in Thailand. A season of World TeamTennis in 2005, in which her NY Sportimes won the championship. And last November she had a final heartfelt conversation with her mom and coach, Melanie Molitor. Soon after, she announced that she would return to the Tour in 2006.

But Hingis wanted to play on her own terms. Originally, she planned to feel out the Tour on the doubles circuit. She called old partner Anna Kournikova, with whom she won the 1999 Australian Open. But Kournikova, tabloid-thin and struggling in WTT matches, said she wouldn't be ready until the Nasdaq-100 Open in



Hingis was pleased with her play at the Aussie, but Wimbledon left her scratching her head.

105 mph, had been bludgeoned off the court by the huge serves and blistering ground strokes of the new regime. She simply did not have enough power to win: Her record against The Sisters fell from 12-8 through 1999 to 16-16 by 2002.

Maybe Hingis, already guaranteed a spot in the Hall of Fame, was tired of the fight. Ever the proud competitor, she claimed her feet had chased her away. She would require two surgeries and months of rehab to repair torn ligaments, stress fractures and chronic inflammation. But two years into her retirement, bike rides and jogs in the woods in her native Switzerland were doing nothing for her boredom. Her competitive fire couldn't be quenched by weekend show jumping with her horse, Montana. "I played tennis at the highest level possible, and when you're number one at one thing, you want to be there in anything else you do," Hingis says. "But I realized it wasn't going to happen."

So she started hitting again. Weekends with countrywoman Patty Schnyder, who made the

"I couldn't get to them. And once I got them, I didn't know what to do with them."

March. So Hingis was forced to make a choice. "I just didn't want to waste time anymore," she says. "So I had to play singles."

Which, to tennis fans, is the way it should be. At the Australian, the crowd hollered, "We love you, Martina!" at every break. At Wimbledon, she was serenaded with a boisterous rendition of "You Take My Breath Away." And at a Sportimes match in Mamaroneck, N.Y., a towheaded toddler twirled her pink dress and sang, "Mar-tee-na, Mar-tee-na, Mar-tee-na," prompting the same chant from the crowd.

To hear others tell it, the comeback has gone well. Clijsters says Hingis is hitting the ball harder than ever. Lindsay Davenport says she's still the

smartest player on the Tour. Maria Sharapova says no one sees the ball better. But despite her early success—she reached the quarters of both the Australian and the French, beat Sharapova in Tokyo, pushed current world No. 1 Amelie Mauresmo to three sets in Berlin, won her 41st career title in Rome and climbed to No. 12 in the world in just eight months—Hingis still has to convince herself she belongs at the top.

Tennis, being a fluid thing, changed again while she was away. Venus and Serena discovered life away from the court. Capriati and Davenport struggled with injuries. The Russian Revolution began, and tiny Belgian Justine Henin-Hardenne demonstrated that the all-around game still has a place in tennis, winning four majors during the Hingis hiatus. Women's tennis now boasts the artistry of Henin-Hardenne, the relentlessness of Clijsters, the fitness of Mauresmo and the strength of Maria Sharapova. This lineup is formidable, but far less intimidating than the Williams-Capriati stack of five years ago. And while power certainly still has its place, the gap between powerful and powerless has shrunk significantly.

In this new environment, Hingis is being attacked by players wielding different variations of her old game. She knows she can't turn back the clock, even though her skills remain sharp. Still, her game is lacking one crucial element. "Martina is missing that swagger of invincibility she had in 1997 and 1998, and started to fritter away in 1999," says former No. 3 and current ESPN analyst Pam Shriver. Back then, the pressure from the new generation of heavy

hitters got to Hingis. Yet even if the Williams sisters were to return, they would be unlikely to reach the level of untouchability they had at the turn of the century. So the pressure on Hingis now comes from a different place. She's no longer a child prodigy. As a tennis legend, she has nothing left to prove. Her only setbacks may be the ones she creates for herself.

Just take a look at her. When Hingis won her first Wimbledon, she weighed about 145 pounds. Now the baby fat is gone and she has 130 pounds of muscle packed on her 5'7" frame. Her quadriceps pop when she plants her right leg for a backhand and her biceps bulge when she cracks a forehand. But in this rare case, thinner and leaner do not

necessarily mean stronger and fitter. Half a season into her comeback, Hingis still tires in the second set, especially in the heat. Though she says she's thrilled to be back, Hingis has never liked the gym and still questions her motivation to train. In her three years away from the Tour, she grew accustomed to free time with her horses and her boyfriend, world No. 9 Radek Stepanek. "You see one side of life and then you see the other," she says. "You know you should be going one way, and there are many ways that distract you from staying on that road. That's where I have to keep my focus and work day in and day out. You're either strong enough or you're not, and you can't get around it anymore."



Forehand winners don't come quite as easily for Hingis.

Preretirement, Hingis heard only Molitor's voice telling her when to get up, what to eat, how to train. But Hingis is now influenced by outside voices. In late July, she allowed criticism of her weak second serve to get to her head. She spent a week at her home away from home in Florida, trying to undo 20 years of muscle memory, trying to teach her feet, which normally splay when she leaps to serve (à la Federer), to move together before her takeoff (à la Clijsters). The idea was to harness extra power from a stronger jump. But after a few days of practice, the only extra juice Hingis developed was lactic acid. "It gave me a sore stomach," she says. So Hingis came to San Diego and, while she did register an impressive 112 mph offering against Clijsters, delivered a 58 mph second serve in her first-round victory over American Meilen Tu.

After that win, Hingis waited in the afternoon

sun as the on-court emcee rattled off her list of career accomplishments. She wore a skinny-strapped, low-cut black tank, a slinky number the collar-shirted Hingis of old never would have chosen. The emcee then passed her a crystal vase, the tourney's Corina Morariu award for comeback of the year. "It kind of reads like a fairy tale," Hingis said later. "But somehow that's one part of my life. Then I was doing other things and now I'm back here, but it's been five years. I feel more like a rookie than a comeback."

NOW SELF-DESCRIBED as a middle-aged rookie ("not 17 and not 30"), Hingis needs help. Her mom told her to keep her head up, not to quit. But from her seat on the dais, Hingis is looking for more, be it criticism or reassurance.

"You don't want to know what we think," says one reporter.

"No, I do," answers Hingis. "I'm interested in what you have to say."

A writer says her backhand is great when she's not pressing, that her forehand down the line is just "eh," that her volley is excellent when she goes to the net. Hingis says she's scared. She says that many times, she hit a good shot and got into good position, then panicked and overhit when Clijsters was in the right place. She admits she doesn't like the running forehand, that she hits too many of them inside-out because she doesn't feel she has the power to bring the racket around. And she raises her eyebrows at the suggestion that, instead of using the inside-out backhand, once her most lethal shot, she's shuffling around to hit an awkward forehand. "Right, I'll have to think about that," Hingis says. "Good point."

This is no longer the oh-so-confident teenager who ruled the tennis court from her perch on top of the world. But not teenagers, who know so little of the world, always fancy themselves the center of it? "We were kids in the candy store back then," Kournikova says. "Martina is grown up now."

She is calmer, more humble, perhaps wise beyond her years. But she still has goals. At No. 7 in the Tour's championship race, she should make the year-end Championships in Madrid. With good performances at Montreal and the U.S. Open, she may crack the Top 10 overall. But with doubts already seeping in, will that be good enough? Can a former queen be content to merely look up at the throne? Or will the mistakes brought on by her own frustrations, and intensified by the constant drubbing from the rest of the field, wear her out?

"The U.S. Open, I think it will be better," Hingis says. "What do you think?"

We don't know, Martina. You'll have to ask us afterward.

Federer is the men's pick, but who's hot on the women's side? E-mail us at post@espnmag.com.

Youth Served

Roger goes for his third in a row, Andre says goodbye and Rafa continues his crossover success.

Serena and Lindsay are back and gunning for Kim's crown. Yes, the top players are obvious, but these young guns are next in line for single-name status.

MEN

GAEL MONFILS, FRANCE

A freakish athlete, the 6'4" 19-year-old has reach, touch and a powerful inside-out forehand. He made the final in Doha (lost to Federer) and the semis in Rome (lost to Nadal). He won three of four junior Slams in 2004.



NOVAK DJOKOVIC, SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO

"Nole" sports a killer backhand and an all-court game. The 19-year-old lost to Nadal in the French quarters but finished first and second in back-to-back tournaments in July.



TOMAS BERDYCH, CZECH REPUBLIC

The 20-year-old has a powerful baseline game and a serve big enough to match his 6'5" frame. Berdych upset Federer at the 2004 Olympics but lost to the Swiss master at the French and at Wimbledon this year.

WOMEN

NICOLE VAIDISOVA, CZECH REPUBLIC

Just 17, the aggressive Vaidisova has already breached the Top 10. She overcomes a lack of quickness with 115 mph serves and baseline blasts from both sides. She smoked Amélie Mauresmo and Venus Williams in reaching the French semis.



ANA IVANOVIC, SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO

The hard-serving (122 mph) Ivanovic reached the Top 20 in 2005, proving she's more than just a teen hottie with a slick website (www.anaivanovic.com). The 18-year-old is building a rivalry with Mauresmo, whom she's beaten twice in their past four matches.

JELENA JANKOVIC, SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO

After a slow start this season, the 21-year-old has gathered steam, thanks to a solid backhand. A win over Venus at Wimbledon gave her confidence to push Clijsters to three sets in recent tournaments.

-JOHN GUSTAFSON

