

# Los Angeles Times

September 4, 1991, Orange County Edition

## MONICA CAN HOLD COURT AT WARP SPEED

By Mike Penser

A court reporter in real life, Peter Balestrieri is moonlighting this week at the U.S. Open, letting his fingers do the walking as the players do the talking, at least until Monica Seles takes her turn in the interview room.

Seles talks the way Al Unser drives — 180 miles an hour, in and out, around and around in circles — except there is no pit stop. Nouns trample verbs, verbs trample adjectives, thoughts veer right and then left, leaving skip marks where most people settle for commas and periods.

Seles had Balestrieri bobbing and weaving Tuesday. Run, don't walk is the only chance a stenographer has. By the time Seles was finished discussing her quarterfinal victory over Gigi Fernandez, the '92 Olympics, Federation Cup, Jimmy Connors, equal prize money for women, sports journalism, Jennifer Capriati, Wimbledon, and whether or not her colleagues actually like her, Balestrieri looked up from his keyboard to accept an offering from a sympathetic tournament official.

A towel. And a bottle of Evian.

"Got it all," Balestrieri proudly declared. He was pushed, though. The New York state speed-typing champion in 1989 — he lost in 1990, he claims, because he choked — Balestrieri has been clocked at 280 words per minute. That's about 100 word a minute faster than the average person partaking in the average conversation.

And Seles?

"She went well over 300 words a few times," Balestrieri said. "She's the fastest I've ever heard, certainly the fastest here. Jimmy Connors is second, but Jimmy is articulate, forceful and clear. He also takes a breath now and then."

The U.S. Open hired Balestrieri this year to transcribe player interviews so the working media doesn't need to work quite as much. So now, listening to Seles is no longer everything. Seeing is believing, too.

Q. When you sit down with Steffi (Graf), what do you talk about?

A. Steffi, we don't sit down much. We just say, 'Hi, how are you?' and I ask her... I say congratulations for Wimbledon. She says congratulations for the French. And afterwards, you know... it's not that... we don't hate each other. I mean, we have respect but we are not... I am not going to ask about her personal life; she is not going to ask about my personal life, either. That's it with all the friends. We will comment on the Jimmy Connors match, a few words... Whenever we say anything, we are not going to talk about each other with any of the players and I think that is the one rule you do. I am not going to say in the locker room with Gabriela and Jennifer there, 'Great match, Gaby,' and 'Too bad, Jennifer,' because I am very good friends with both. I think it would be very unfair on both sides and on the same way they are. You know, because I see them when they lose. They see me when I lose, and they see me when I am happy and we see both sides. Then you kind of learn: Some players tolerate when you lose better; some don't. Then I know the feeling. I never talk to anybody about tennis, you know, on the court and off the court. The only thing I may say if somebody beats the player, I might say, 'Congratulations about tennis,' but that is the only thing I am going to say about tennis and I think for me, at least, it makes me feel a lot better because I really don't like to talk too much about tennis in the locker room or at home because I see enough tennis during the day.

Since Seles won Tuesday, she still has one, probably two, postmatch rap sessions in her.

Balestrieri needs to re-negotiate right now.

Fernandez got Seles' motor running when she was asked how the other players were treating Seles after her no-explanation, no-comment no-show at Wimbledon.

"I don't think I want to answer that," Fernandez said before hemming and hawing and finally giving in.

"I mean, what I can say is I don't think she is very popular in the locker room, but she never was."

Fernandez also said that Seles and "most of the top players don't hang out. They are not friendly with anybody. They go, they play and they leave. So it is hard to be popular when you do that."

When Fernandez's observation was relayed to Seles, she said she half agreed and half disagreed.

In not so many words.

"I never was a friend or anything with Gigi," Seles said, "because she is a very outspoken person and I was always more quiet inside. (The top-ranked players) always have separate locker rooms and I would say out of the top 16 players, I am good friends with 15. I have two or three of them, I might say 'Hi,' but I am not going to ask them, 'How was your week?'"

"With lower-ranking players, I don't talk that much. Before, when I was playing doubles, I would talk to them more, but now, really not much. I will talk to the few players who are in the locker room at that point. I might call a few, who I feel the closest to . . . (But) right now, from the lower-ranked players, I really couldn't say that I have anybody that I would call friends, you know."

Seles claimed she hadn't received any post-Wimbledon coolness after rejoining the tour.

"To me, personally, no," she said. "Not from the top players -- and from the lower-ranked players, you know, we don't talk . . . I just walk by her and she walks by me. That is the whole contact that we have.

"Secondly, really, nobody mentioned it to me. Two players mentioned that 'You did the right thing' and that was it. There is really not much talk about it. Because I think you know we are around each other and we don't talk about some other player's problems, either. Whenever we talk, we really talk about very different things, not tennis at all, I think."

Seles didn't deny any anti-Seles sentiment among her colleagues -- just any new anti-Seles sentiment.

"When I came on the tour, a lot of players were against me," she said. "I think every young player kind of has it because (the older players) are a little jealous. They say, 'Hey, she is going to last a year.' Then when you get better, when they see that you are there to stay, they kind of get better, but I still have a lot of players who I beat when I was 14 who don't talk to me for that reason.

"I said, once or twice, 'Hi,' and they didn't tell me back and I say forget it. There are just three or four players like that and with the rest, I am totally normal."

Minutes later, Seles was gone and Balestrieri was finally unchained, standing to stretch his arms and, at last, his fingers.

"She not only has great passing shots," Balestrieri said, "she has passing words. I've got to keep reaching back for them."

Balestrieri stared at his stenographer's machine and wondered about his next encounter with Seles.

"I've been thinking about getting a foot pedal for it," he said. "Maybe now's the time."