

Keeping pace with the pros

BY SUSAN FESTA FISKE, Associate Editor



MONICA, HOW DOES IT FEEL TO win your third French Open?

"It is very special. I mean, the first one is always going to be special because I was very young. I don't think I ever expected to win it at that time. This final today is always going to stay in my memory because it is the most emotional."

Come again?

Trying to scribble notes at a pace equal to Seles-speak (read: forget about pausing between words) can be a frustrating exercise in pencil aerobics for a reporter. Thankfully, every one of Seles' words is recorded by Peter Balestrieri, a court reporter who, three years ago, brought his skills to tennis' post-match press conference, transcribing tennis players' answers to reporters' questions and then providing the media with verbatim transcripts.

Working at the French Open, ATP Championships, Virginia Slims Championships and U.S. Open—where he'll return this month—Ba-

Balestrieri's fingers don't just do the walking—they often run through the pros' press conferences.

lestrieri has mastered Seles-speak as well as the Rambo-like intonations of Goran Ivanisevic, the laid-back, articulate thoughts of Michael Chang and the intriguing, always-surprising comments of Andre Agassi.

Still, Balestrieri's most daunting task has been catching the rapid-fire ramblings of Seles. A court reporter for 15 years and a New York State Speed Champion, Balestrieri has been clocked at transcribing 280 spoken words per minute on his stenotype. Seles speaks at more than 300. A reporter once joked that Balestrieri should chug-a-lug an espresso or two before a Seles press conference to prepare himself for the verbal assault.

"I don't know if I've become used to Seles or if she's slowed down," he says. "The trick is not to think about what you're doing. Once I start thinking, my fingers don't move where I want. . . . In the courtroom there are a lot of breaks. There's no one to calm down a press conference. I hope for a pause, but if there isn't one, I can't think, 'I'm retaining 15 words and I need to get them into my machine.' When you get frightened, you don't do well."

He also tries to gauge what kind of mood the players will be in when they enter the interview room. "The

losers are usually low-key, so I wind myself down," explains Balestrieri. "I have to control my fingers and not go too fast."

But there are exceptions. When John McEnroe was ousted in the first round of the French Open this year, Balestrieri correctly figured that Mac wouldn't limit his answers to the match alone. Says Balestrieri: "McEnroe's tough. He cuts off sentences and changes thoughts. He tells you a lot."

And there are anxious moments that catch him unprepared, such as when Britain's Jo Durie beat ninth-seeded Anke Huber in Paris. "The room was filled with British press," says Balestrieri. "The accents threw me off."

It also took Balestrieri some time to understand tennis lingo. He now has 6,000 of the players' most-used expressions programmed into the computer connected to his stenotype machine.

But there is one thing about tennis players that didn't take Balestrieri any time to adjust to—their rebuff of certain questions. "They're better than politicians who don't want to answer the question, but will say something anyway," he says. "Tennis players will just say, 'I'm not going to answer that.' And they don't." ●