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U.S. OPEN

Seles not No. 1 in many hearts

NEW YORK — No memorable tennis was produced during the 53 minutes Monica Seles needed Tuesday to stroll into the U.S. Open semifinals. But sometimes what doesn't happen tells the story.

Every cheer during Seles' 6-1, 6-2 stomping came on those few points won by the player who was being vanquished, Gigi Fernandez. That silence for Seles' best moments speaks volumes about her peculiar place in tennis right now.

No one talks about the Yugoslav's titles this year at the Australian and French opens. But the matter of Seles' no-show at Wimbledon still inspires a torrent of opinions, and at a fast-forward pace.

If Seles makes the mistake of winning the U.S. Open, and



COMMENTARY
By Tom Weir

ends up with three-fourths of a grand slam plus a bye, it will only get worse.

It's a condition to which perhaps only Martina Navratilova can truly relate, stuck as she once was with being the invading Czech who kept bullying Princess Chrissie Evert out of the

winner's circle.

This is where tennis' Miss Makeover seems to be headed in relation to Jennifer Capriati, the latest dose of teen trauma in a sport that often seems to relish offcourt gossip and juice more than the action between the white lines.

Asked to report what kind of treatment Seles is getting when the locker room whispering begins, Fernandez initially said, "I don't think I want to answer that." But when pressed a little

harder, the ever-outspoken Fernandez said, "I don't think she's very popular in the locker room, but she never was. This is not a popularity contest."

No, it's not, and if it ever had been, even the now-sainted Jimmy Connors would have had a few years that were washouts. But though she wasn't roundly cheered, Seles did linger at courtside Tuesday, signing autographs.

"Most of the top players don't hang out (together)," Fernandez said. "There's nothing wrong with that. It's what you have to do. It's very difficult. It's difficult to have a friend even if you're No. 20."

Seles freely admits her circle of friends doesn't include anyone from tennis' lower ranks but adds a fact about her popularity problems that predate this year's Wimbledon.

"I think every young player has it. They always say she's only going to last a year," Seles said. "I still have a lot of players I beat when I was 14 and

they're still like that. I say 'hi,' and maybe they don't say anything back, so I say forget it."

Of Steffi Graf, the rival she will battle for the year's No. 1 ranking, Seles said, "We don't hate each other. We have respect. But I'm not going to ask about her personal life, and she's not going to ask me about my personal life, either."

Of Capriati, Fernandez said, "It's amazing. See her in the locker room and she's friendly, the one friendly person."

Great, but meanwhile, how fair is it to punish Seles for growing up at the same light speed with which she speaks English?

Peter Paul Balestrieri, the New York court reporter who has been transcribing quotes from U.S. Open news conferences, said Seles' chatter sometimes exceeds even the 280-word-a-minute pace he had to contend with while becoming state champion.

"She goes well over 300-a-minute at times," Balestrieri

said of the fastest quote machine he has had to deal with, a fascinating circumstance for someone who isn't speaking her native tongue.

Like Navratilova, Seles doesn't allow thoughts to be cut off by clock-watching officials who try to keep news conferences short, tight and uncomplicated. If she has something to say, she presses on, as she did Tuesday while articulately taking on the case of equal prize money for women.

"She's turning into a woman," said Seles' brother, Zoltan. "She has a lot of freedom, and we give her all the freedom she needs."

Somewhere in the still-murky story of Seles' decision to skip Wimbledon, that evolving freedom likely played a role.

"She had some bad moments, but she wasn't very serious about it," Zoltan said. "She learned a lot from it."

And how much more can anyone ask from a 17-year-old?