

I would love to have met Serena in the final, says Venus Williams sisters destined for quarter-final showdown

US OPEN

Howard Fendrich in New York

Less than two months ago, the Williams sisters played each other in the Wimbledon final.

Because of the quirks of rankings and the vagaries of tournament draws, they are on track to meet in the US Open quarter-finals.

Is that disappointing?
"Obviously, yeah," Serena Williams said. "But I've had over a week to think about it. So right now I'm just hoping to win my next match."

Neither Williams had the least bit trouble advancing to the fourth round at Flushing Meadows. Both won 6-2, 6-1 against seeded opponents.

The number seven-seeded Venus Williams beat number 27 Alona Bondarenko of Ukraine, and not long after, in the same Arthur Ashe Stadium, number four Serena Williams defeated number 30 Ai Sugiyama.

"I would love to have met Serena in the final," Venus told the crowd. "My biggest worry is that she's so good. Sorry, but I'm thinking about how I'm going to get past her."

One statistic was particularly compelling: Venus compiled a 32-4 edge in winners against Bondarenko.

"She's playing really well, and I'm glad she feels like she's playing her best. It's nice to feel like that when you're playing your best," Serena said. "Right now I'm not playing my best, but that means I can do so much better."

First things first, though.

Venus will face number nine Agnieszka Radwanska of Poland, who eliminated number 18 Dominika Cibulkova of Slovakia 6-0, 6-3. Serena will meet Severine Bremond of France, a 7-5, 3-6, 6-4 winner against Tathiana Garbin of Italy in a match that ended shortly before midnight.

In Radwanska, Venus takes on someone who upset then-defending champion Maria Sharapova at the US Open last year. And someone who beat Venus the only time they played.

Still, Venus said: "I have a very good feeling about the next round. I saw Serena play against her. I don't know how to say her first name too well."

For the record: ag-nee-ESH-ka.

There aren't many household names left in the women's field. Not only are the Williams sisters the only past US Open champions around, consider this: Venus and Serena Williams have won a total of 15 major singles titles, while the other 14 women



Serena Williams celebrates after defeating Japan's Ai Sugiyama 6-2, 6-1 in the third round. Photo: AP

who will be in the round of 16 have a combined total of two major titles.

From 1999 to 2002, one Williams or the other won the US Open. But neither has even been to a final at the hard-court major championship since that run - Venus has only reached the semi-finals once, and Serena the quarter-finals.

Yet ever since both bowed out at the French Open, the sisters have been playing quite well.

With players such as Sharapova, Justine Henin, Ana Ivanovic, Lindsay Davenport and Svetlana Kuznetsova out of the way at the US Open, things only get easier for the Williams pair.

Except, of course, in the quarter-finals.

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Coin's dream run comes to a halt

Rachel Cohen in New York

It was standing-room only in a small secondary interview room. Rafael Nadal was holding his post-match news conference nearby, but reporters crowded around a woman ranked number 188.

Julie Coin's magical run at the US Open had just ended. The Frenchwoman stunned top-seeded Ana Ivanovic of Serbia. It was the first time since the WTA computer rankings started in 1975 that a woman ranked so low beat a reigning world number one.

But yesterday Coin lost 6-4, 6-4 in

the third round to countrywoman Amelie Mauresmo, seeded 32nd.

Coin said she was tired, and perhaps all the extra obligations after her huge victory contributed to that. Eventually, she will reflect on the magnitude of what she accomplished.

Mauresmo is 3½ years older than the 25-year-old Coin, and the two don't know each other well. When they chatted in the locker room the other day, it was the first time since they were junior players. "She said, 'You were 12, so you've changed a lot,'" Coin said.

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Julie Coin of France. Photo: EPA

Li, Zheng to the fore as world takes notice of China's might

Jason Dasey

If ever there was conclusive proof that the mainstream tennis world was taking Chinese players more seriously, it came on the sun-drenched first Wednesday of the US Open.

In the compact seating of court 13 at Flushing Meadows watching the second-round match between Li Na and Italy's Sara Errani was Richard Williams, father and coach of the Williams sisters.

After Li's shock victory over Venus at the Beijing Olympics, the Williams patriarch wanted to see first-hand the razor-sharp skills of China's top singles player even though both his daughters were on the other side of the draw.

"He didn't make it to Beijing so it was the first time that Richard had watched Li," said US tennis writer, Richard Kent. "He arrived with his entourage during the first set and left at the end of the match very impressed."

Two hours later on court 11, Zheng Jie's three-set battle against Annabel Medina Garrigues, of Spain, attracted more attention than an early-round match involving two non-Americans might normally. In between changeovers, a group of playful American spectators joined in the chant of "Zheng Jie, Jia You! (Come On!)", started by Chinese fans of the Olympic bronze-medallist.

"After Beijing, people know more about China and maybe a little more about me, too," said Zheng who lost a hard-fought match against Jelena Jankovic in the third round on Friday at Flushing Meadows.

At this year's US Open, China had five women in the singles competition, more than established tennis nations like Australia, Germany and Japan and only one fewer than superpower Spain. And they feel right at home. Instead of making the 30-minute journey each day from Manhattan, they're staying less than 2km

A few years ago some people didn't understand tennis, but now it's changed a lot

Zheng Jie, on the rising popularity of the sport after the Beijing Olympics

away in the town of Flushing - the Chinatown of Queens - with a wide choice of regional cuisines.

With barely 24 hours separating the start of the US Open and the end of the Olympics, most of the Chinese players had little time to reflect on their Beijing achievements before flying out for the final grand slam of the year.

Li, who beat former US Open champion Svetlana Kuznetsova as well as Venus on the way to the Olympics semi-finals, took a 10-hour train ride to her home town of Hubei to visit her mother for two days at the end of the tennis competition.

"She was too nervous to actually come and watch me play so I wanted to go because I hadn't seen her for six months," she said. "But then I had to take another long train ride back to Beijing to catch a flight to New York."

Li's Beijing success was remarkable given that she underwent major knee surgery in Germany at the end of March and only returned to the circuit in June after a three-month lay-off.

She played just two grass-court tournaments ahead of the Olympics after being forced to cancel other proposed warm-up events when her freshly rehabbed knee swelled up.

"Going into Beijing, I didn't feel much pressure because I hadn't been playing much," she said. "I told myself: 'You've got nothing to lose.'"

Even considering her impressive



Zheng Jie.



Li Na.

form before knee and rib injuries limited her to a handful of tour stops in the previous 12 months, Li's singles' campaign went better than anyone could have expected.

Given little chance in her first-round match against world number three Kuznetsova, she survived a tough first-set tiebreak on the way to a 7-6, 6-4 success.

Victories over Japan's Ayumi Morita and Kaia Kanepi followed before slaying the mighty Williams, the reigning Wimbledon champion, in the quarter-finals, overcoming a 1-4 first set deficit before winning 7-5, 7-5.

Li described the scene at the Beijing Olympic Green Tennis Court as dreamlike when she realised that she'd pulled off the biggest upset of her career.

"After the match, all the fans were calling out my name," she said. "I was pinching my legs, to see if it was true or not. I told myself: 'Don't cry, don't cry.' I was so excited."

The next day, an exhausted Li lost her semi-final to Roland Garros runner-up, Dinara Safina, and then missed out on a medal when beaten by another Russian, Vera Zvonareva, to finish fourth overall.

Li, a two-time WTA tour winner who rose to a career-high ranking of number 16 in the world in January last year, said she is now targeting a spot in the top 10 by the end of the year and a possible spot in the season-ending Sony Ericsson Championships in Qatar in November.

As for Zheng Jie, her rise in singles - including her run to July's Wimbledon semi-finals that elevated her from 133 to 40 in the rankings - leaves her with the minor dilemma of where to focus her career. She said she doesn't want to neglect her doubles partnership with Yan Zi that saw them win a bronze medal in Beijing.

"This is a tough question for me because my partner is my best friend," she said.

According to Zheng, the Beijing Olympics will be a more important stepping stone for tennis than the 2004 Athens Games where Sun Tian-tian and Li Ting won the gold medal in the women's doubles.

"A few years ago when we played tournaments in Beijing, I felt that some people didn't really understand tennis, but now it's changed a lot," she said. "During these past four years, Chinese tennis has seen a big change. China has a lot of good players now."

The sport's growth means that an estimated six million Chinese are now playing tennis at some level. And yet, without a player ranked inside the top 400, the country's male contingent is still lagging behind.

Murray has the stamina for a fight

Claudia Parsons in New York

If anybody doubted Andy Murray's fitness, the British sixth seed proved them wrong when he came back from two sets down to win a marathon five-setter.

He celebrated his 6-7 (5-7), 4-6, 7-6 (7-5), 6-1, 6-3 third-round victory over Austrian Juergen Melzer by pumping his muscles in a gesture that seemed to say "take that" to those who questioned whether he had the stamina.

Plagued by injuries and doubts about his fitness in marathon matches as a teenager, Murray went to Florida at the end of last year in the off-season and increased the intensity of his training, working hard and sweating it out in the gym to improve his fitness levels.

Now 21, he said he's grown up and able to train hard.

"When I played Wimbledon the first time, I had never played four sets in my life, never mind five," Murray said.

"I did start to work hard after that. But you have to respect your body as

well. And I was still doing a lot of growing.

"You can't push yourself too hard. It's not good for your body. Now I've finished growing and I can do more weights and train harder."

"It's much easier to do all that stuff now. When you're sort of 17 and 18, I think it's tough on the body to push so hard," Murray said, after enduring a match that lasted three hours and 52 minutes in the heat and humidity of New York.

The 27-year-old Melzer, who took the first two sets and looked like he might call halt on Murray's march but then suffered cramps and was struggling to run down shots in the final set, admitted he ran out of steam. "In the end I think the fitter player won," he said.

Murray said he felt good and paid tribute to his trainers.

"There are a lot of different emotions going through your head, when you're training and wondering why you do all the work and feeling sorry for yourself," said Murray, who will next face Swiss 10th seed Stanislas Wawrinka.

"You kind of push through and keep working. Then when you have moments like that on the court, you feel like it's all worth it," he said.

Murray said the match was even harder than his five-set win over Frenchman Richard Gasquet at Wimbledon.

"I was in danger in both matches but I felt like today Melzer was playing so well that it was going to be really tough for me to get back into the match," he said.

Murray, who beat Novak Djokovic to win his first Masters Series title in Cincinnati last month, has now equalled his 2006 performance at the US Open, but he said he was not ready to rest on his laurels.

"There is a chance that I could win the tournament," Murray said.

"I think it's better to set the bar high and maybe you don't reach it."

"I might not necessarily win this tournament but if I go with the intention of doing it, it might not come as such a surprise if I do go deep," the Briton added.

Reuters



Andy Murray of Britain pumps his fist during his third round clash with Austria's Juergen Melzer at Flushing Meadows. Photo: EPA

Querrey earns date with red-hot Nadal

Sam Querrey is so young that there isn't a trace of irony when he mentions growing up rooting for Andy Roddick and James Blake, two guys still very much on tour and still in their 20s.

Querrey is so young, so new and so eager that he clearly means it when he plainly explains he's "looking forward" to facing number one Rafael Nadal at the US Open, a matchup the 20-year-old Californian set up by knocking off a seeded player for the second time in the tournament.

It's Querrey's first berth in the fourth round of a major championship. "And, you know, it's great that it's the US Open," Querrey said.

"It's the one that, you know, if I had to pick one to win, it would be this one."

Heady talk for a kid who is ranked 55th, owns one career title and has lost more matches than he's won on tour - even after upsetting number 14 Ivo Karlovic 7-6 (7-5), 7-6 (7-5), 6-2 in the third round.

Associated Press

Fish ends best pal Blake's challenge

Rachel Cohen in New York

Pleased as Mardy Fish was to reach the fourth round for the first time, he wasn't thrilled that he had to beat James Blake to do it.

Fish and Blake are pals. Before heading out on court at Arthur Ashe Stadium for their third-round match, they hung out together in the locker room, watching college football highlights. Next month, Blake will be a groomsmen in Fish's wedding.

Setting all of that aside for about two hours, Fish constructed a 6-3, 6-3, 7-6 (7-4) victory over the ninth-seeded Blake, who was born in New York and always draws loud support from spectators at Flushing Meadows.

Blake's best showings at grand slams have come at the US Open,



James Blake congratulates Mardy Fish (right) after the match. Photo: AP

where he was a quarter-finalist in 2005 and 2006.

"I never want to see James lose. He is definitely a close friend of mine," Fish told the crowd afterwards. "James is obviously extremely tough out here. It feels like he's got 20,000 friends screaming in my ear."

Fish served for the match at 5-4 in the third set, but he double-faulted twice and got broken.

But in the tiebreaker, it was Blake who had problems. He moved to a 4-2 lead, before Fish's five-point run.

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US Open Digest

Master-class



Nadal tackles Troicki in style
World number one Rafael Nadal rolled into the fourth round, winning his final 11 games to answer a fightback. Wimbledon and French Open champion Nadal (pictured) raised his game when challenged, showing the form he needs to win his first US Open crown in beating 71st-ranked Serbian Viktor Troicki 6-4, 6-3, 6-0 for his 41st triumph in 42 starts. "I have started playing better," the Spaniard said. "Today I served very well. I have more confidence and I hope to continue to improve my tennis. I know I have to keep improving my tennis if I want to win." AFP

Bouncing back



Safina rebounds to stay alive
Sixth seed Dinara Safina (pictured) weathered a spirited challenge from Swiss teenager Timea Bacsinszky to win 3-6, 7-5, 6-2 in the third round. Since May, the Russian has been the in-form player on the tour and has reached six finals in seven tournaments. But Bacsinszky, playing in the third round of a grand slam for the first time, came out fighting from the start. She broke Safina's serve to take the first game and held her nerve to take the opening set. Despite a flurry of unforced errors, Safina managed to hold off Bacsinszky to take the other two. Reuters

Listless show



Nalbandian falls to Monfils
Seventh seed David Nalbandian was dumped out in the third round for the second successive year when he lost 6-3, 6-4, 6-2 to French 32nd seed Gael Monfils. The Argentine (pictured) produced a listless performance but Monfils was hugely impressive as he stormed into the fourth round at Flushing Meadows for the first time. After the athletic Monfils had taken the opening set, Nalbandian looked like he might stage a fightback when he led 3-0 in the second. But that was as good as it got and the Frenchman won 12 of the next 15 games. Reuters