

Venus Williams to head US Team

The USTA and US Captain, Zina Garrison, have announced that Venus Williams will lead the US Fed Cup team in its World Group Quarterfinal tie against Belgium at Delray Beach, Florida on 21-22 April.

Williams help the US team to the Fed Cup title in 1999 when it defeated Russia in the Final. Her last Fed Cup appearance was in the 2005 semifinal. The five-time Grand Slam champion missed the Australian Open with a left wrist injury and will return to competition in Antwerp.

Zina Garrison commented, "Venus is ready to return to competition and we are excited that she is eager to come back to the US Fed Cup team".

A teleconference was held with Zina Garrison on 29 January. The transcript is as follows:

TIM CURRY, USTA:

Thanks for joining us today. We have Zina Garrison, United States Fed Cup Captain, with us. As we announced last week, the 2007 Fed Cup by BNP Paribas Quarterfinal between the United States and Belgium will be hosted at the Delray Beach Stadium and Tennis Center on April 21st and 22nd. We've got Zina with us today to talk a little bit about that, her first media availability since the announcement, and also to make an announcement about the first player named to the U.S. team.

ZINA GARRISON:

Good morning, everyone. I'm excited to be here in Delray doing this press conference. Excited to come back to Delray once again; this is a great place to host the event. We will play our first match against Belgium. I'm excited to say that my first player that will be announced is Venus Williams, who is really looking forward to playing Fed Cup this year and to hopefully bringing the cup back to the United States.

Question:

Can you tell us a little bit about how you got Venus to come back to the team, if she contacted you? Also, what is the situation obviously with Serena, especially now that she won the Australian?

ZINA GARRISON:

Yeah, actually Venus contacted me at the end of November, somewhere in November, basically said she was really interested in playing Fed Cup this year, really looking forward to coming back and trying to bring the cup back to the United States. She's very excited about playing. She's really excited about trying to bring the cup back to the United States. She's really enthusiastic about playing this year, looking forward to coming back. You asked about Serena. I have been in talks with her agent Jill Smoeller, as well as a couple of messages to Serena through text. After that great win in the Australian Open, hopefully we will have her.

Question:

Do you think the locale being in her backyard gives you a little bit of an edge there?

ZINA GARRISON:

I think it gives us a lot of an edge. If I was a player, I would like to play somewhere close to home, have the opportunity for people that you practice with and see all the time to watch you play as well. Delray is a great place to play. The community is really supportive of the players as well as the USTA and Fed Cup because we've been here before.

Question:

There were so many people who seemed to doubt Serena all the way through the tournament. As you

were watching her, can you just describe your thought process about her performance? How much of a chance did you give her to do well at the start and how did you feel as things went along about her performance and her form?

ZINA GARRISON:

Well, I'm really not a betting person, but I actually won a couple hundred dollars on her (laughter). I actually thought when I saw her I guess in her Round of 16 match, I thought she was hitting the ball well. The most important thing is she was very eager and hungry to be back on the court. I felt that she had just as good a chance as anyone out there. I think that's probably the best match that I've ever seen her play when she played Sharapova in the finals. I know a lot of people are trying to figure out, what did Sharapova do wrong, but it's just that Serena did everything right. She was hitting the ball very clean. I'm excited that Wilson got her to change racquets. I've never liked the other racquet that she played with. She just had a much cleaner ball with this new racquet.

Question:

Can you go into more detail on that?

ZINA GARRISON:

The problem with the other racquet to me was she just sprayed a lot of balls. She needs a more flexible kind, not stiffness. This racquet seemed more balanced all around. There are no weak spots within the head.

Question:

There was an awful lot of talk, particularly at the beginning, that she was out of shape, shooting herself in the foot by being out of shape. Do you think that was unfair?

ZINA GARRISON:

I think it was really unfair. I'm glad you asked that question. I spend a lot of time defending her first and foremost. Serena, she's a true athlete, she's going to have a lot of muscle mass. She's only ever going to be so small. When I saw her, I looked at her legs, I thought she had been doing some work. You can pretty much tell she looked in better shape. A lot of times you can tell what kind of shape they're in when that point lasts really long, what do they do in the next point? She was coming right back. That's when I knew she had been doing some work.

Question:

What is the state of Venus' health? How has her training been going? Do you know what her schedule will be like preceding the Fed Cup, what tournaments she'll play prior to Fed Cup?

ZINA GARRISON:

I know her first tournament coming back is Antwerp. She's looking forward to playing that. I do know she's been training exceptionally hard. The thing I like the most, the fact that I actually tried to get her to come out to the press conference here in Delray (but it conflicted with her practice schedule). She likes to stick to her schedule. When she does that, that means she's very focused on what she needs to do and what she wants to do, and she's not really veering from it. That's always a great sign.

Question:

If Serena doesn't choose to play, is there anyone you can let us know who you're looking at, like Jackson or Perry, any of the women you had last year?

ZINA GARRISON:

Well, actually I'm always looking at the list. I knew that I was going to wait till the Australian Open to make a serious push for who I did want next. But I'm always looking all the way up until the end. I'm not trying to think that Serena won't play. I'm trying to stay up on the positive end. Hopefully the fact that it is in her backyard, she won't have to go that far. But I think it would be a great added asset. We have Vania.

Jamea has been injured. We have Shenay, we have Ashley Harkleroad, Lisa Raymond. There are a lot of good players out there.

Question:

The last conference call you did late last year, you were talking about how you thought it might be a good idea for Serena to just try to play more consistently in an effort to combat the injuries. Do you get the impression she will do that? I know she's entered in Dubai.

ZINA GARRISON:

I always look at her interviews. To me I think she seems very hungry, very eager to get back on the court. Sometimes injuries can do that to you. You really don't have the opportunity to really sit and pick and choose. You're kind of happy to be back on the court, and have a tendency to play as much as you can because you don't know when that next injury might pop up. She seemed very confident and very humbled for the fact that she's been injured and hadn't been able to do what she wanted to do last year. As I said in October to a couple of friends, I thought this year was going to be her year; she was going to come back and come back strong.

Question:

Can you talk about playing against Belgium and reflect when you played them before at Delray.

ZINA GARRISON:

Actually, when I played them here before I had the best team you can ever possibly think about having. It was pretty funny, when I learned we had the opportunity to once again play them here in Delray. I actually think about Clijsters, we might have an opportunity to play against Clijsters, because I think she probably will play because it's her last time. I don't exactly know, Justine I'm pretty sure, going to have to see the way it goes the closer we get to Fed Cup.

Question:

What do you think of the atmosphere in Delray Beach?

ZINA GARRISON:

I love the atmosphere in Delray. It's just a wonderful tennis crowd. But I think it's also not only that but what I noticed from last time is you get people that want to come from across the country that you're in. You're in Delray. You're in Florida. They want to come down and watch as well. I think it's a great place to have it. We've been nothing more than welcomed here. The city just kind of rolls out the red carpet for us, so it's great.

Question:

Can you talk about Vania King, some of these other kids, where you see them going, kind of the new wave?

ZINA GARRISON:

Vania, she's an exciting player. I think more than anything, a lot of times, I love Vania's heart. I don't just like it, I love her heart. She's a hard worker. She wants to be a champion. I definitely think she has the capabilities. I always tell her, I compare her hands to a Lindsay Davenport, and her heart as well. I think this year's definitely going to be an interesting year for Vania. She came out as a great little young kid last year, kind of went up the ranks. Now everybody will kind of be used to her. I think she'll have a good year. She didn't do quite as well as she wanted to down in Australia. She definitely has been working extremely hard.

Question:

Would you have her sing the national anthem for you?

ZINA GARRISON:

I would love to. I was one of them pushing her at the US Open. I didn't get a chance to see it. Even before in Belgium, all the USTA staff, we were kind of like coaxing her into doing it. She loves it. She loves that type of atmosphere.

Question:

You've had the misfortune of playing most of your Fed Cup ties away from home. Talk about having the opportunity again to be at home.

ZINA GARRISON:

I can't even imagine. I'm so excited. I mean, when I heard I had the opportunity to actually be home possibly two times, I said to the staff, are you sure? This is the best because I have been away. You know, also it's good for the young women as well to be in their home country and not always be away, to also feel the excitement from our crowd instead of always being on the down end of it.

Question:

Were you able to take note of Madison Brengle's promising result in the girls' singles final? A close score.

ZINA GARRISON:

It's funny because Tim Curry has been sending us email updates from the Australian Open. I did know she was in the finals. I did see the score. I was like, oh, she was so close. I'm really excited for her. That's great. She was one of our young guns that came to Fed Cup. She's a great young kid. Young lady I should say. Hopefully this is the start of a lot of young Americans that are coming up. I know Jean with the USTA is doing a great job of pushing, trying to get some American champions.

Question:

Maybe have her as a practice partner down the road?

ZINA GARRISON:

She actually came the last time. We always try to change it up, get different young players to come. That is a great asset for Fed Cup because a lot of them leave there and they want to be able to play Fed Cup and they know someone like Vania was also a young gun, and Jamea Jackson. A year and a half later they're playing Fed Cup, playing for their country. I think that's a great thing that we incorporated. We're really starting to see some great value to it.

Question:

You touched on Kim Clijsters earlier. Is that when you took out of her last at the end of the Australian, she was definitely committed to playing a full schedule, including Fed Cup?

ZINA GARRISON:

Once again, this is just my opinion. I noticed how much she loved playing for her country. She was really a team person. When you look over there, you might see her standing up on a chair and really cheering, the atmosphere. I can imagine she wouldn't want to go out without that. Once again, that's my opinion.

Question:

Would you address the doubles situation? When you went with your young team last year, obviously you had a couple younger players that hadn't been in that situation before. What is Lisa Raymond's status?

ZINA GARRISON:

Right before the Australian Open, I sent out press packages and everything to them, also asking them if they would be interested in playing if asked. She did reply that she would be interested if she was asked. She also sent me a happy holiday. Definitely Lisa is the first one on my list for doubles. Unfortunately for her, she is so used to winning Grand Slams, she didn't win at the Australian Open, but she has a great record in doubles and definitely would be somebody we would be interested in.

Question:

Obviously you have to pick the best players available for singles. Does it concern you if you have the Williams sisters back that some of the younger players might perceive there's a bottleneck, it might be a while before they play again?

ZINA GARRISON:

I think it's a different type of I think this younger crowd, like I said earlier, because they have come in as young guns, they look at it a little bit different. Even when I was assistant to Billie Jean, when you have Venus, Serena, these younger players now know they can get so much experience at Fed Cup, learn so much. If I was them, young and given the opportunity to sit next to Venus and Serena, I'd be there in a heartbeat whether I'm sitting on the bench or hitting with them or doing whatever, learning as much as I possibly can.

TIM CURRY:

That will conclude the call. Thanks for joining us. Tickets go on sale the week of February 12 for the tie, which is April 21-22, at the Delray Beach Stadium and Tennis Center. We will keep you apprised of any additions to the roster between now and then.