

As a kid, Hiko used to stay up late on the Summer nights in late June and early July to watch the half hour NBC program showing the highlights of the day's Wimbledon doings. John McEnroe. Jimmy Connors. Boris Becker. Martina Navratilova. Steffi Graf. Likely due to the dearth of personable American stars over the last umpteen years - tennis has fallen out of the hearts of the denizens of North America over time. But not Hiko's. And he show his versatility and depth as a writer in this preview of Sharapova ... I mean Wimbledon.

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I'm not sure why - perhaps it is the dearth of personable American stars over the last umpteen years - but tennis has fallen out of the hearts of the denizens of North America over time. But not mine.

I still love the one on one fight, no coaches, only a player's will and talent and, yes, luck. I love the stage, the grunts and the screams and the oohs and the ahs and the cheers and the occasional crying baby or noisy cell phone.

When I lived in Miami, circa '95-'98, I worked three years on the Key Biscayne tournament. It was a big tourney, one of the few outside of the Majors that had both men and women, sometimes called the "5<sup>th</sup> Grand Slam". My job was to station stationary cameras at all the outside courts, then run cable to a central room, which then ran cable to the all the sponsor tents so that all the "important" people could know what was going on in all the "meaningless" matches off of the show courts. Naturally, I had a lot of work to do the first day or two, and the rest of the tournament I existed just to plug a cable back in when some fool would trip over one and yank the connection out of the socket. I had a lot of free time.

But, due to my "important" job, I had an all-access pass. I could sit in the photographer pit on the big courts, or just hang out in my

central room which was near the locker rooms. In this central room, I also had a cable TV feed, and the Key Biscayne tourney always took place during the NCAA tourney. So, if there were no fascinating matches going on, I would sit and watch basketball, and the occasional tennis player would wander in and watch with me (Todd Martin and Lindsay Davenport are both big basketball fans, both literally and figuratively).

As the 10 day tournament wound down, the outside courts were bereft of action, so the good stuff was always on the stadium court. We had a camera stationed in the broadcast booth on a tripod, and it was just fine by itself, but I always found an excuse to go up there and "make sure" that it was working OK. It certainly didn't hurt that just outside the broadcast booth was the media room, and the tournament always provided an open bar to the media members, so I would just look judgmental and pretentious and I'll be damned if I didn't drink for free.

Towards the end of each tournament, the broadcast booth got crowded as ESPN started televising matches. One day, there was only myself and Pam Oliver in the room. I watched the match in silence - what do I have to say to Pam Oliver other than sycophantic ramblings? - but she did not. It seems that whomever she was working for at that time had just purchased a tennis contract, and she didn't know much about the sport. So I had to explain the scoring system to her, which, yes, is confusing. But I think I did well enough that Pam almost sounded like she knew what the hell she was talking about when she went down to the court for a post-match interview with Venus Williams.

(And, yes, in case you were wondering, Pam Oliver is every bit as hot in

person.)

I saw Anna Kournikova beat 4 Top-10 players in a row to reach her first Finals (which she lost in three sets to Venus... yes, Anna had a 3 or 4 year span where girl had GAME). I saw Venus and Serena Williams face each other for the first time in a Final (Venus won that one too). I saw Andre Agassi, Pete Sampras, Steffi Graf, Martina Hingis, and Monica Seles play back when they were relevant. That job didn't pay much, but I would do it again every year if I could - it was probably the single most interesting gig I've ever had.

I'm still addicted. The wonders of the Tennis Channel have made it possible for me to watch way more tennis than I should. And, after football, it is the sport that I care the most about.

So, on the eve of Wimbledon, and without any ado, I hereby bring you my preview:

### **Seeds - Women**

On clay, Men's tennis is the better spectacle to watch, but, on grass, I prefer Women's tennis. For men, the ball goes too fast on grass. The serves can be unreturnable. The points are short and brutal. It's hard to even see the ball. Women don't hit the ball quite as hard, so their rallies last a little longer on the green stuff. And that means superior entertainment value.

**1. Ana Ivanovic** - Called by Mike Wilbon of PTI &quot;The Hottest Woman in the History of Sports&quot;; I don't know about all that - my vote still goes to Katarina Witt - but she certainly isn't hard to look at. She's got a good, powerful serve, a deadly forehand, and pretty good movement for a girl her height (6 ft.). Outside of Serena, Ivanovic probably has the best all-around game in Women's tennis. Her only weakness is her nerves, which tend to cost her against more experienced opponents. Still, she just won the French Open, her first Slam, and probably will ride that confidence into this tournament. Look for her to go far.



**2. Jelena Jankovic** - Double J has got a lot of skill, but this ain't her surface. She doesn't have the power of a lot of the players; she wins by playing great defense and being consistent on her groundstrokes. She should be able to make it through the first couple matches, but could have trouble as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Round, where she will potentially play Danish siren

## [Caroline Wozniacki](#)

, who has reportedly been &quot;receiving serve&quot; from Rafael Nadal.



3. **Maria Sharapova** - One of 4 players with legit shots of winning the whole thing (along with Ivanovic and the Williams sisters). When she's on, she's almost unstoppable, such as in January when she plowed through the field on her way to the Australian Open crown. That's the best she ever played - her movement is much better, her shot selection is more varied, and her serve was back. But, as the season wore on, her shoulder issues returned, her serve lost some pace and accuracy, and now she's beatable once again. On grass, Maria is a tough out. That doesn't mean it can't be done.



4. **Svetlana Kuznetsova** - Her game bores the crap out of me. She has a good forehand, and she could probably do well in the tourney, but who cares? She's good - she'll never be *great*

. She's unremarkable. She's just a dangerous floater that will probably never again win it all. And she's not fun to look at.



**5. Elena Dementieva** - One of my least favorite players on tour, Horseface has no serve. You need a serve to be a viable contender at Wimbledon. She is not a viable contender. I'll be rooting for an early exit.



**6. Serena Williams** - She's Vegas' odds on favorite to win it all. She still has more game than anyone on tour. The only reason she struggles is that - oddly - she sometimes shows up for a match with her head up her ass. I judge that she lacks consistency because she and Venus play so few tournaments. They believe they can just show up for a Slam and win it - and sometimes they do. But as she gets older, Serena seems to get more frustrated with her bad play, no longer seeing it as a learning experience. And she goes away sometimes, which is

something she NEVER did when she was on top of the game.



7. **Venus Williams** - You could almost cut and paste from above. Venus doesn't have Serena's fire, and she doesn't have Serena's game either, but she's won Wimbledon 4 times, including, well, last year. A lot of people have written her off for dead. I might be inclined to do the same myself - just not on grass. If she gets past the first 4 Rounds, beware. Once she gets on a roll on turf, she's unstoppable.



8. **Anna Chakvetadze** - It speaks volumes to the lack of depth in Women's tennis that someone like Anna C. could be in the Top 10. A decent player with serviceable groundstrokes, but no real weapons. She's consistent against weaker players, but almost always gets her ass handed to her by the Big Girls.



9. **Dinara Safina** - She made a fan out of me with her dramatic back-to-back comeback wins against Maria Sharapova and Horseface at the French Open. She made it all the way to the Final before losing to Ivanovic, and her confidence has to be at an all time high. I can see her going deep into this tournament. I can also see her losing in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Round.



10. **Daniela Hantuchova** - This girl's game is perfectly suited for Wimbledon, and she's done well on grass before. If you want to know what she plays like, just watch Sharapova. If you want to know what she looks like, just look at Sharapova. If you want to know how her mind works, just drop some acid and try to play Twister at the bottom of a swimming pool. Daniela has a schizoid past, and she can never seem to quite move past it. She was an inch away from the Australian Open Final in January, then she just lost her gourd and, subsequently, the match. Sadly, that same gourd will prevent her from ever reaching her potential.



**Dark Horses:** Lindsay Davenport, who is rusty, but always dangerous. Marion Bartoli, who inexplicably reached the Finals last year. Nicole Pietrangeli, who has all the potential in the world, if she would just lay off Hantuchova's acid. Aggie Radwanska, who always seems to play up for the Slams.

**The Hiko Pick:** Ivanovic. The Williamses are just too hit or miss, and the other players don't fear them anymore. Sharapova's serve is letting her down, and the rest of the girls just don't have what it takes to be a Grass Heroine.

## Seeds - Men

On clay, Men's tennis is the better spectacle to watch, but, on grass, I prefer Women's tennis. For men, the ball goes too fast on grass. The serves can be unreturnable. The points are short and brutal. It's hard to even see the ball. Women don't hit the ball quite as hard, so their rallies last a little longer on the green stuff. And that means superior entertainment value.

**1. Roger Federer** - The Lord of Grass, the Tiger Woods of Tennis. He's won 12 Grand Slams, including the last 5 Wimbledon. How can you pick against him? I'll tell you how. He's never won the French Open before, losing to Rafael Nadal in the Final the last 3 years. And it never slowed him down before when it came to the grass. But he also never got waxed before the way Nadal waxed him this year (6-1, 6-3, 6-0). Nadal took him to the wire in last year's Wimbledon Final. Federer is looking vulnerable. Wilton says "He's done." I don't know if he's "done", but he's starting to slide down the sand dune of his career.



2. **Rafael Nadal** - Perhaps the greatest clay court player of all time, Nadal is starting to round into a force to be reckoned with on all surfaces. One would think his baseline, grind-it-out style would not be as effective on grass, but his serve is improved, and he did get to the Finals last year. And after thrashing Federer in Paris and beating Djokovic in the Finals of a grass court tourney a couple weeks ago, how can you doubt Nadal is a legit contender for this crown? Acid, that's how.



3. **Novak Djokovic** - Why is it that I don't like this guy? He's a great player. He's a fighter. He won this year's Australian Open. He's a real possibility to win this thing. So why is it that I root for him to lose every time I look at him? I guess it's because he just seems like a dick. Cocky, spastic, annoying. Spoiled. High maintenance. But good. Sigh... yes, he's very very good. Dick.



4. **Nikolay Davydenko** - I've watched this guy several times, and he just doesn't impress me. He's steady and he's mobile, but I just feel that he's deserving of a less-lofty ranking, and his presence in this rarified air is due to a lack of true contenders outside of the Big Three. And if you're on TV all the time and you've got as much money as this guy's got, somebody's gotta tell ya that you need to start shaving your head.



5. **David Ferrer** - Ferrer's a clay court guy that has never been to a Grand Slam Final. I don't see him being a major factor in this tournament. How did he even get up this high in the first place? Well, his last 3 Slams he's gone Semifinal, Quarterfinal, Quarterfinal. That's pretty consistent. So even though I don't see Ferrer even sniffing the Finals, I also don't expect an early exit.



0. **Andy Roddick** - Andy Andy Andy. You used to be valid. You used to be someone. You coulda been a contender. But your head... you need to get that fixed. Not that I care one way or the other. I've never been a big fan of Andy's. Maybe it's because he's a spaz. Maybe because he always chokes. Maybe it's because he looks like Stifler. I don't know. It doesn't matter, though. Roddick has the perfect game to compete at Wimbledon, but you and I both know that he probably won't even make the Semis. He'll bump up against someone that plays defense well enough that he can't blow them off the court, he'll panic, and he'll be home in time to celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> of July with the rest of us.



**7. David Nalbandian** - If this guy gets hot, then watch out. But he's been so damn cold this season, I just can't find it in my heart to give him a chance. Still, realistically, he's one of the few players that could go on a streak and beat the Big Three.



8. **Richard Gasquet** - He gave Federer a fight in a grass tourney a couple weeks ago, but that was it - a fight. What that means is that he played as hard as he could and looked like he might keep his head above water before finally sinking. It never looked for a second like he could win. I think Gasquet will be fine at Wimbledon. But he'll end up sinking.



9. **James Blake** - I really like James Blake, but, I have to admit that he just doesn't have the weapons to win a Slam. Oh, he can beat any player on any given day - even Nadal and Federer. But he can't

sustain it. And he always seems to lose the close ones. So, dammit, I have to say that I don't expect to even see James get to the Quarters. Sorry.



**10. Marcos Baghdatis** - This dude's probably my favorite player on tour. He looks a little out of shape, but his effort and on-court expressions make it seem like he really enjoys what he does. He's been hurt recently, and grass probably isn't his best surface, but I expect him to make a little noise before he shuffles off to defeat.



**Dark Horses:** Andy Murray, who'll be the local favorite (despite the fact he's Scottish and probably has no love for the English). Ivo Karlovic, who has an absolute bomb of a serve and the game to be dangerous on grass. Fernando Gonzalez, who is very talented, despite this not being his best surface. And the ghost of Pete Sampras.

**The Hiko Pick:** Nadal. I know - picking against Federer on grass is like picking against Bobby Fischer in a battle of wits against George Bush or a turtle. But Nadal almost had him last year, and I

think he's that little bit better and Federer is that little bit worse. So I'm going against the grain on this one. Place your bets while you still can.