

Stars align for Venus; Capriati next

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NEW YORK -- Jennifer Capriati wasn't playing Venus Williams last night. That comes tomorrow.

How fortunate for Venus. Opposing Capriati playing tennis as she did in a 6-3, 6-4 conquest of Amelie Mauresmo would be a chore for anybody, including the defending U.S. Open champion.

Venus earlier in Arthur Ashe Stadium had lots of rough edges before she could complete a 6-3, 6-1 victory over Kim Clijsters that resulted more from Clijsters' failures than the winner's excellence. A Williams vs. Williams women's final still is a possibility, but Capriati clearly won't be dismissed easily.

In the other women's semifinal, Serena Williams is to engage Martina Hingis.

Capriati is in the semifinals for the first time in 10 years following 10 days in which her game has picked up with every outing. "I'm very happy, joyous, ecstatic," she said. "It shows me I've been getting better in each round. I feel I'm ready for the next round."

She is 0-3 against Venus, but two of the matches have gone three sets.

After her victory, Venus was asked if she has any plans for Saturday night. "Eight o'clock sharp at the dance," said Venus.

The women's final is being offered for the first time in the evening and on prime-time television (CBS).

Venus might not have to be concerned about her dance card if in the semifinals she doesn't play more effectively than she did yesterday. "My unforced error count was just really high," said the senior of the tennis-playing Williams sisters. "I wasn't stringing together the points the way I'd like to."

Clijsters is known for her defeats more than her victories. There's a reason. She has only one pace and precious little variety. When her strokes aren't going in -- and they weren't yesterday -- she is powerless to alter the flow of a match.

Against Venus, the teen-ager from Belgium played a horrid match, with only five winners and 38 errors. Clijsters did have nine break points, largely because Venus wasn't playing well, either, but she could convert just one. On most of her break points, Clijsters failed even to put a return in play.

On her first two service games, Venus committed five double faults and finished with a total of eight. Williams was arcing in her second serve in the 70-75 mph range, but Clijsters whacked many of them out.

"You have to remember that I haven't been able to practice a lot here," said Clijsters. "I didn't want to put too much pressure on my leg when I had rest days."

Clijsters played through the opening rounds with her right thigh taped because of a muscle injury.

At that, Clijsters achieved one thing: She became the first player in the tournament to score an ace against Venus.

La Jollans lead team

William Kellogg is the Patrick McEnroe of the 35-year-old set. Kellogg, president of the La Jolla Beach and Tennis Club, is captain of the U.S. Italia Cup team, which is for 35-year-olds what the Davis Cup is for younger men.

From New York, Kellogg is going to Austria, where 21 nations are to participate beginning next week in the Italia Cup. A mainstay of Kellogg's team: Brett Dickinson of La Jolla.

Patrick McEnroe, of course, is the captain of a Davis Cup team that opposes India on Sept. 21-23 in Winston-Salem, N.C. McEnroe is to name his team today. Expectations are he will choose Andy Roddick as one singles player and the doubles team of Jared Palmer-Don Johnson. As the other singles player, McEnroe could choose between veteran Todd Martin and young Taylor Dent.

One change in the U.S. Davis Cup format: The team is to have a coach and a captain. The coach: Jim Courier.

Teacher and pupil

San Diego native Brian Teacher, the Australian Open champion in 1980, is coaching Max Mirnyi, the tall serve-and-volleyer from Belarus who gave Gustavo Kuerten such a stern argument in the third round.

"Watching Mirnyi, I can see some of the Teacher volleys," said Angel Lopez of the San Diego Tennis and Racquet Club. "Teacher's volleys were some of the best."

Lopez is involved in youth development and has been attending a conference dealing with advanced teaching methods.

Excuse him, please

By Gretchen Magers' account, the highlight of her week was getting kicked off a court by Kuerten.

The San Diego woman was practicing with her partner in the women's doubles masters championship, Pam Teeguarden, when Kuerten came along and asked to use the court.

"Only if we can watch," Magers said she answered.