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The Internet and Tennis Get Married

She comes at you from the left, from the right down the line, over your head and rushing at you with the hot-bloodedness of Pete Sampras closing in on a floater volley. She's Kournikova.com-part virtual reality, part aloof princess-and she's growing ever closer to her adoring fans, thanks to tennis's engagement to the Internet revolution.

Since Kournikova.com made its debut on November 23, 1999. few observers have been surprised that Anna's new official web site has registered such enormous popularity, because the 18-year-old sex symbol is widely recognized as the Internet's most clicked-on female athlete. However, what her debut did show was that for the first time, a pro tennis star and her advisers believed that they could control her image on the web. Say good-bye to Anna doing the early morning talk show routine- say hello to Anna launching e-mails telling you she still likes steak and still won't talk to you about Sergei.

"This isn't just the future of tennis, this is the wave of the future, period," said Kournikova's agent, Octagon's Patrick McGee.

The future of tennis on the Internet is as of yet undetermined. Like most traditional sports, tennis still is attempting to discover how it can become an integral part of the Internet revolution. More to the point, tennis's biggest companies and organizations are trying to figure out whether they can make a sustained profit by having a major presence on the web. One thing is certain: Every day, more people are using their computers to search for information on and more intimate interactivity with their favorite athletes. So tennis's presence in "dot-com" land only will grow in the coming years. To what degree people will lessen their dependence on traditional media and purchasing sources still is up for debate, but if the past five years have been any indication, it's (yellow) bombs away on the web.

"At Wimbledon '99, the final barrier was broken when, for the first time, the All England Club admitted a purely online journalist," said Liza Horan, the editor of Tennis.com, the official web site of *Tennis* Magazine. "If the most conservative tournament recognized the Internet is here to stay, then you can pretty much say that it's a done deal."

Christophe Gobel, who heads the ATP Tour's web site, ATPTour.com, says the men's circuit plans on being a front-runner in tennis on the Internet. "I believe that the Internet will soon grow into the most important information outlet that we have."

The US Open was the first major to credential online journalists, and USTA Broadcast and Promotion Manager Brian Beglane says the web and the US Open now go hand in hand. "We place a high priority on the US Open web IBM involves thousands of hours over roughly a six-month period. It is an important part of the tournament, to the point where we now can't imagine a US Open without a web site."

Tennis magazine recently polled its readers on their media habits and found that 59 percent of its readers have Internet access, compared to 32 percent of the U.S. population, and that 46 percent of readers had been online in the past 30 days, compared to 22 percent of the U.S. population. With an estimated 70 million Internet users in the United States and the fact that advertising dollars on the Internet are said to have tripled in 1998, yellow ball fiends who don't use a computer had better go buy their introductory model soon. Otherwise they'll be left watching old tapes of Solomon versus Dibbs while their neighbors are plugged into a frolicsome Williams sisters practice session from 3,000 miles away.

Six years ago, there were no major players on the Internet's tennis scene, But the Big Blue—IBM—got into the act, developing web sites at the four grand slams in conjunction with the tournaments' national tennis associations. It could be argued that in 1999, more people read about the slams on their official web sites than in the newspapers.

"The growth of the audience for the grand slam web sites has been staggering," said IBM Executive Producer of Special Events David Balcom, who has been helping manage the sites since '95. "When we started, there wasn't a lot of tennis information on the web, and not a lot of people used the Internet. Now there's a fair amount and people really expect us to perform at every slam. We can't sit on our laurels because we have to be better every time out if we want to satisfy our audience."

Last year, it appeared that IBM and the tennis association's work paid off. By bringing in dozens of technicians and employing full-time writers and photographers at the slams, they were able to present clean yet dramatic electronic sites, chock full of up-to-the-second scores from every court, constant news, hundreds of photos, live chats with players and unique features (such as a use-it-yourself webcam) that couldn't be found in any traditional medium, including television. "We are very pleased," said Beglane. "USOpen.org web site traffic in '99 increased by 24 percent, to more than 501 million hits over three weeks. Our first web site in 1995 generated seven million hits. Growth in the last three years has been steady, as the web has become more mainstream.

Tennis.com debuted with coverage of Roland Garros in '96 and yielded a mere 100,000 hits during the fortnight. Last year, the spiffy, chatty site recorded more than 25 million hits during Wimbledon and some 19.5 million hits during the US Open. in July of '99, the site—which tries to offer something new on a weekly basis, even when the words "Centre Court" aren't on everyone's lips—counted more than 38 million hits.

Like the worldwide web itself, the online slams get most of their visitors from the United States. What exactly do fans want?

Apparently a little bit of everything. "Far and away, live scoring on the US Open web site generates the most traffic," Beglane said. "News and photos ranked No.2 in popularity. We also had an editorial team monitoring results throughout the day, producing a news and photos section that was more like live TV than reading a newspaper. Whatever was most important at a given moment, we highlighted that on our home and news pages. The IBM SlamCam, which lets fans control courtside cameras on our three main courts, was also very popular." For IBM, which is designing the official web site for the 2000 Olympics, the slams are big business. "People come back to our sites because there is a certain continuity to them, "Balcom said. "This is an opportunity for IBM to showcase its technology, promote e-business and e-commerce and show what a good services delivery can really do".

It is difficult form small web sites to compete week in and week out with Big Blue, but fortunately for the small-to-medium-sized guys, IBM only bring its "A" Team into tennis eight weeks a year. Aside from that, the net landscape is pretty open. "Our site is evolving all the time," Tennis.com's Horan said. "It's a new experience every day. We try to offer something to every player or fan-pro tennis news, equipment reviews and instruction. We see tennis as a lifestyle, not just a sport. Someone who might come on to our site, see that we have travel reviews and go check out a resort. If the visitor can find everything she wants, there's no reason to go any place else."

The ATP Tour is big on branding. So in 2000, the ATP will pull out all stops to become the source of men's professional tennis news. While ATPTOUR.com brims with biographical information, it currently falls short in entertaining its readers. But tour officials realize that tennis fanatics will go to great lengths to follow their favorite players. With 70 tournaments being played internationally over 11 months, the ATP can't expect the traditional media to follow it everywhere. Gobel noted that the ATP gets between 1.4 and 1.5 million page hits, and up to 3 million during its star-studded Tennis Masters Series tournaments (formerly the Super 9). "Fans want more from us, and we plan on providing them with better profiles, bios, more chats, news, and statistics. We will be more fun and entertaining."

A number of smaller tennis sites without significant and corporate support that can torch a return of serve or two. One such site is TennisONE.com, which is backed by a ball basketful of teaching pros. TennisONE has grown from 5,000 hits per month from its grass roots start in March '96 to more than 1 million hits in the summer of '99. "we are using the unique media capabilities of the Internet to provide new levels of instructional resources for players," said teaching pro and CEO John Yandell, one of the writers on the site, which also features Allen Fox, Robert Lansdorp, Paul Roetert, and Joel Drucker. "We are using streaming video and animation to present teaching theory from some of the most innovative coaches and writers in tennis, plus incredible footage of all-time greats. It's the only place I know where you can go and actually see Don Budge or Ken Rosewall's backhand, or John McEnroe's serve."

The major tennis Internet players are promising that the technology will only get better. The ATP soon will begin attaching microphones to chair umpires so they can be both seen and heard on the net. And while IBM won't give any trade secrets away, Balcom did say that more Slam-Cams on outer courts will be coming to your portal in the near future. McGee, Kournikova's agent, sees the future of the Internet in today's youth. "Younger people are mostly all net users. There is a crying need for official sites like Anna's. Everyone wins-sponsors, fans, and the players. There is a synergy to web sites that you can't get anywhere else."