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Breaking Down the U.S. Open

by *KELLY LAFFEY*

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The 137th U.S. Open kicked off on August 28 at the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center in Flushing, running through September 10. Long a social highlight of Labor Day Weekend, this year's play is marked by a number of storylines—the number of injuries on the men's side, Maria Sharapova coming back after being suspended for 15 months after testing positive for taking a banned substance, Serena Williams recently giving birth to her first child, and Roger Federer's chance at his sixth Open title.

Sports Radio personality Ann Liguori has covered the U.S. Open since 1982, calling the Grand Slam event for WFAN Radio for 30 years. Here, she breaks down the Open, the players to watch, and how the event has changed over the past three decades.

There are a lot of storylines in this U.S. Open. Which one is most intriguing to you?

met in the US Open [is a very big deal]. It's too bad that they're both in the top half of the draw. There's a lot of tennis to be played before they could meet in the semis.

And then, [on the female side], there's of course the return of Maria Sharapova. Her first round women's match was the best I've ever seen, and I've been here awhile. She is just a fascinating rags to riches story. To me, she is one of the most mentally tough competitors out there. At this stage in her career, with five Grand Slam titles, she shouldn't have anything more to prove. But, because of her suspension, [she does]. It's tough for a player to be out that long. Particularly because, before the suspension, she had hinted at retirement.

Do you think the USTA made the right call in granting Sharapova a wild card entry?

I do. [Sharapova has had] an amazing career with five Grand Slam titles. Overall, she's a big draw, and the USTA is obviously well aware of that. She's always been a fan favorite. It's good for business. She claims that she didn't know that the drug she had been taking for 10 years was [recently] put on the banned substances list. Her team wasn't on top of it. I believe she made a mistake. She paid the price [with a 15 month suspension], and she moved on.



Ann Liguori

What has been the most exciting match you've called in the past 35 years? Was it Sharapova's first-round on Monday, August 28?

Monday's match was obviously right up there, based on the circumstances. Everyone was clueless about what to expect. She was injured over the summer and hasn't played a Grand Slam since 2016.

My all-time favorite athlete is Roger Federer; so covering his winning five straight U.S. Open titles from 2004-2008 has been a highlight of my coverage of the U.S. Open...I was very impressed with how polite he was and how introspective his answers were. And the 36-year-old continues to impress. It would be amazing if he could win yet another U.S. Open title, nine years after winning his last one.

Before Federer came on the scene, I was as riveted with Jimmy Connors and his larger-than-life personality as most U.S. Open fans were...And Jimbo's run in 1991 at the age of 39 will forever be one of the greatest memories from the U.S. Open...

**How has the U.S. Open changed since you started calling it?
How has interest in the Open changed?**

experience. I remember one day, it was hailing, and the whole box felt like it was going to fall any second.

The biggest change is, the crowds are getting bigger. The entire tennis complex has been transformed via a \$550 million renovation that included the \$150 million roof they put on the Ashe Court last year, and the new Louis Armstrong court that will be finished next year. There are more restaurants, food stands, stores, places for their main sponsors to display their products. It's always evolving and growing! The prize money for the players has grown considerably. The total purse this year is \$50 million, that's a 500 times increase since the first U.S. Open in 1968.

Which players should we be watching?

There are a lot of talented young Americans – you saw Frances Tiafoe take Roger Federer to five sets on Tuesday evening, Donald Young, Bjorn Fratangelo, to name a few in the men's; Coco Vandeweghe, Alison Riske, Madison Keys, to name a few in the women's. But it's been since 2003 that an American guy won a U.S. Open title [Andy Roddick] so the pressure is on. Thank goodness for the Williams sisters. Venus has won 2 U.S. Opens and Serena has won 6 U.S. Opens!

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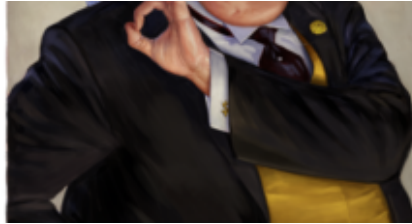


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