

July 14, 2009



An interview with:

PETE SAMPRAS

PETE HOLTERMANN: I'd like to welcome everyone. I'm Pete Holtermann, media director for the L.A. Open Presented by Farmers Insurance Group. We're on the line with Pete Sampras, because he's going to be our opening night match, playing Marat Safin in a rematch of the 2000 US Open final.

To introduce our honored guest is tournament director Bob Kramer.

BOB KRAMER: Good afternoon. This is a special occasion for all of us, and for me personally. I want to welcome you all to this conference call, which is kicking off the L.A. Tennis Open, Presented by Farmers Insurance Group. We have our 83rd annual event coming up. Exciting stories to tell, nothing more prestigious than having Pete Sampras with us not only this morning but as our tournament honoree. This is a special kickoff to our event, which is also our silver anniversary here at UCLA. Pete has a slight connection with the campus. It's a very special moment to welcome the player that I think is the greatest player of all time. We can debate that forever.

But Pete has won our event twice. Certainly one of the greatest Southern California champions of all time naturally, someone who is coming back to play a reprise of his 2000 final with Marat Safin.

Pete, welcome aboard. Thanks again for tennis for making the trip to London.

PETE SAMPRAS: No problem. Thanks again for having me. It was great being over at Wimbledon seeing Roger break my record. A little bittersweet, but it was nice to be there, up with all the champions, Laver, Borg, Santana.

But I'm excited to play in L.A. I haven't played in this area in quite a while. I've always enjoyed the court at UCLA. I've won there twice,

like you said. Playing Marat, who is a friend, who is on his way out, I believe he's retiring the end of this year, it's an exciting time, and hopefully I can play well and the fans enjoy it.

PETE HOLTERMANN: We'll go ahead and open it up to questions.

Q. Are there days that you might think you retired too early?

PETE SAMPRAS: No. No. The last couple years of my career were pretty exhausting, not winning any titles. I think once I was at the bottom of the mountain there, losing Wimbledon, being as low as I could possibly be, losing on Court 2, then coming back and winning the Open, you know, I had nothing left in the tank. I had nothing left emotionally. Physically I could have kept going. Probably would have done okay. But emotionally I was cooked. It was time for me to go.

I gave myself eight months to a year to really see if I would want to play again. Once Wimbledon came and went again the next year, I knew it was time for me to move on. It wasn't an easy decision, but it was the right decision.

Q. How competitively are you taking the match with Marat? It's a great way for you to sort of relive the old days when you played that great final. Are you going out there looking to take a scalp or have some fun?

PETE SAMPRAS: I think a little bit of both. We want to have some fun, a lighthearted match. At the same time he's competitive, I'm competitive. He's not going to want to lose to someone that's close to 40. All these matches against the current guys, I want to play well. I don't want to embarrass myself. If I can pull off a set, I'm ecstatic. If I can win the match, that's even better.

For me, as I can tell you now, having hit three or four days, I'm not nearly as good as I used to be. I don't move as well. To play one match every four months, it's a little unsettling. I'm not building off anything. I hopefully can find my game kind of through the first set and see where it goes



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from there.

It's competitive, but we're having fun. When the point starts, I'm going to want to win the point.

Q. Pete, can you talk a little bit about the relationship you've had with Marat over the years. You mentioned that you consider him a friend. I wonder who you may be still in touch with on the tour and what your relationship is with him.

PETE SAMPRAS: Well, Marat and I have always gotten along very well when we were playing. He's a really nice guy, great player, showed what he could do especially at the US Open the one year, he tuned me up pretty good. He's an expressive guy on the court, shows emotion. Off the court, he's a happy-go-lucky guy. I was pretty reserved when I was playing, to myself. For whatever reason, he and I seemed to get on really well. We practiced quite a bit together.

You know, he's a champion. He got to No. 1. He won a major, I think two majors. It's sad to see him go because I think he brought a lot to the sport. Haven't sort of kept in contact with him. But certainly when I see him, we'll talk about some of our matches. He's always asking me, when Paul was coaching Henman, he would ask Paul, How is Pete doing? He was always just a personable guy, really nice guy, and someone that I've always gotten along really well with.

Q. Who else on the tour now, anybody you stay in touch with?

PETE SAMPRAS: Well, you know, with this text messaging, it's easy to stay in touch without talking. Roger and I have gotten to be pretty good friends over the past couple years. I text a little bit with James Blake. I sent Andy a little email after his loss. There's some older guys. Courier I still stay in touch with, Andre every now and again. This whole technology of BlackBerry and text messaging has made it easier to stay in touch with everybody. Alex O'Brien, who lives in L.A., Justin Gimelstob, quite a few guys that I used to compete against that I stay in touch with.

Q. I listened to your comments after the Wimbledon final. I don't know if you were asked this, how much Federer's record against Nadal affects your opinion? You were widely called the greatest ever by so many different

people, had a positive record against your main rival, Andre.

PETE SAMPRAS: Very good question and tough question to answer. I do understand the argument as far as being the best ever. You have to be the man of your generation. He has come up short against Nadal. I can see the point.

It's hard to answer that. I don't know how to answer it. You know, it's not done yet. Roger's career isn't done yet. He's going to play Nadal a number of times over the next number of years, and he has to beat him. He has to beat him in the finals of majors. To be considered the greatest ever, he certainly in my book is. But he has to figure this kid out. He has to beat him. He's lost to him a number of times. You know, you got to be the man of your generation. He certainly is the man of his generation; he just has to figure out Nadal.

Q. Personalize it a little bit. When you retired, if you had that type of record against Andre, had a negative record against him in the majors, would you have been satisfied, been able say I'm going away from this, I have my 14, Andre got the better of me in a lot of my great matches, but no big deal because I won the most titles anyway?

PETE SAMPRAS: Well, God, you're giving it some thought, huh (laughter)?

Q. Yes.

PETE SAMPRAS: It would have bothered me if I had a losing record against Andre in majors. It wouldn't have sat well with me. Did it mean I was the greatest or not the greatest? I don't know. It's the debate of greatest of all time. We so badly want to pin it on someone. With the numbers you have to give it to Roger. His record against Nadal, okay, you might not give it to him.

I mean, if I was 7-15 against Andre and I was done, it's hard to say I was the player of my generation just because he got the best of me. Like I said, the story's not over yet. We have another probably three, four years of these two guys competing against each other. If anything, I think Nadal is going to be hungrier now seeing Roger getting back to No. 1.

It's hard to give you a definitive answer when it's not done yet. I think Roger knows he's got to figure out this kid. It's a tough, tough matchup. Nadal is one of the few guys that

believes in himself that he's better than Roger.

Q. Do you ever have the urge to take a wild card? You played Roger in the exhibitions. Do you ever have the urge to try to play in a tournament if they gave you a wild card?

PETE SAMPRAS: No, no. What I'm doing now is fine for me. It keeps me in shape. I still enjoy playing every now and again. To really lay it on the line against the guys today is not in me. I've been asked occasionally, but the answer is no.

Q. How about setting up an exhibition with Andre?

PETE SAMPRAS: We set up to play one in Macau later in the year. I hear he's gonna play a little bit. I'd love to play against Andre. It's a great ticket to come watch us both play, and hopefully we can do some more next year. I'm open to it. We'll see if Andre is into it.

We're doing one this year. We'll see how it goes. We'll go from there.

Q. A question about the US Open Series. It didn't exist when you were playing. Your XO is taking place during the calendar. What do you make of that format?

PETE SAMPRAS: You know, to be quite honest with you, I'm so out of touch with those sort of things, that I don't -- I'm not really sure what it is. I can't really comment on it. Is it a number of tournaments you get points and you get more prize money at the end or something?

Q. Correct.

PETE SAMPRAS: I mean, I don't know. I don't stay in touch with those sort of things. I'll watch the Open. Other than that, I can't really comment on the series, if it's good or bad for the sport.

Q. On the No. 1 ranking, obviously Roger has a chance to finish the year No. 1. It's been pretty rare for someone to lose the year-end No. 1 ranking and regain it.

PETE SAMPRAS: It happens all the time.

Q. The year-end No. 1. Finishing the year No. 1. Only one person has finished the year No. 1, lost it the following year, then regained it. That was Ivan Lendl in the '80s. I'm talking about finishing the year No. 1.

PETE SAMPRAS: Got you.

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Q. You did it six years in a row, you lost it, didn't regain it. I think your priorities shifted. Why do you think that's been such a rare occurrence?

PETE SAMPRAS: Well, I think being No. 1 and staying No. 1 takes a lot of work. I think once you lose it, it is hard to get it back, especially if you've been up for a number of years. For me, I was cooked. I had other priorities. Whereas Roger, you know, he's not playing Davis Cup. He's got more time and energy to play more tournaments to get more points.

It's a testament of his resolve to get back there, the champion that he is, to get it back. He probably will finish No. 1. Why doesn't it happen more? I just think it's hard to get it back when you lose it, especially as you get older, like I did.

Q. Do you think the hard court season in the U.S. is in decline? Do you think that's a good thing or a bad thing for the game?

PETE SAMPRAS: The tournaments are in decline in which way?

Q. Used to be a long season, hard court season, everybody played. A couple of Masters. Indianapolis a while ago was somewhat demoted. Some of the European players express reservations about playing in the US Open Series.

PETE SAMPRAS: You know, it's a good point. If you look who's dominating the game, Roger, Nadal, Djokovic, Murray, the Europeans, it's hard for these guys to come over early. You go through the Open, they're here for two months. It's not easy.

In Roger's situation, he plays a few events that work well for him to prepare for the Open, and he calls it a day. The tournaments like L.A., the earlier events, get hurt. Certainly someone like Roddick or Blake, being in the U.S., will support those events. Still it loses the top guys.

It's unfortunate. It's a tough demand for these guys to come over for two months. It's like me going from Monte-Carlo through Wimbledon or something. It's a long time. You want to get home. So it takes a hit. It's hard for these guys to come over early.

The US Open Series I think won't be as successful because you're not getting the guys over here early enough. There are too many

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events.

Q. Would you like to comment on how special it was for you watching Roger winning his 15th Grand Slam.

PETE SAMPRAS: It was an historic moment. I was happy I was there. It was quite a trip, but it was well worth it, sitting there watching these two guys battle in an epic match, being up there with Laver, Borg, Santana. As much as we were happy for Roger, I think we were -- we felt bad for Andy because he played well enough to win. He's going to feel this loss for quite a while.

It was a great ending. To be down there with Roger, Laver and Borg, taking pictures with the trophy, doesn't happen very often in sports. To be part of that was pretty cool.

Q. What did you, Borg and Laver talk about after the match?

PETE SAMPRAS: You know, not much. Sitting with Santana, had a few comments. We were down there talking about -- I was asking Laver how many majors he could have won, Borg, how many he could have won if he kept on going. You know, just curiosity. We were just talking. Roger and I talked a little bit about the match, how he was having a hard time picking up his serve, how well Andy played. That was pretty much it. It was just a quick little time.

Q. How would you rate your chances against Safin in the match coming up?

PETE SAMPRAS: Not great to actually win the match. He's playing a lot. He's playing every day. I'm so sporadic with my tennis, it's a tough deal. Play every four months, it's not easy to find your confidence, to find your rhythm. It's one of those things where I just have to find it as we go, and that's not always easy, even when I was back in my prime.

I want to play well and do some things I used to be able to do, but obviously I'm not quite as sharp as I used to be.

Q. Have you been training at all?

PETE SAMPRAS: Yeah, I've been hitting some balls, stepping it up here over the next couple weeks, go out there and do it.

Q. Any chances of you joining the Senior Tour?

PETE SAMPRAS: I already have. I played a couple here and there. Courier has a couple senior events I played. I've done a couple.

Q. What projects are you involved in post retirement?

PETE SAMPRAS: Not a lot. Just playing occasionally here and there, working on the golf game. I have two boys I'm hanging around with. That's pretty much it.

Q. Did you see any signs of want to coach in the future?

PETE SAMPRAS: Only from home and on my BlackBerry (laughter). I don't see myself going on the road and traveling. You know, never say never. I'm sure Connors never thought he would. As you turn 50, you never know what will come. I'm willing to be home and help out some young kids in the future, but not traveling.

Q. Have you coached your kids thus far?

PETE SAMPRAS: It's more getting them to listen more than coaching. They play every now and again. I'm just trying to keep them in line and behaving. Nothing more than that. But if they're into it as they get older, I'm cool with that.

Q. I'm going to put you on a spot. Rod Laver in his press conference at Wimbledon was asked Federer or Sampras. He picked you, based on your ability to bring heat, big serve, volley. Can you comment on that, whether you think there's not really a weakness in Roger's game or whether Roger would be vulnerable to the level of power you could bring to the court on grass?

PETE SAMPRAS: Well, I think one thing Roger doesn't see on grass the last number of years is really a true serve and volleyer, someone that's willing to come in and put the pressure on and make him pass, make him return. With these big serves, I don't think anyone really scares him. I think my game would make Roger a little bit more uncomfortable. I would obviously come in on both serves and put the pressure on his backhand, sort of go from there.

If I would beat him? If I felt my best on grass, I did feel unbeatable, especially in the mid '90s. I was a tough guy to break, played well from the back court to have chances, and I moved well

enough.

It's a flattering comment. Do I think I could have beaten Roger in my prime? Sure. I don't think anyone could beat me in my prime on grass. As Roger now, he feels unbeatable.

My game would make him uncomfortable. It would make him like he's not having to stay back and work his way at the point. I would sort of dictate the play. But, you know, he'd be a tough guy to break, especially when he's hitting 50 aces like he did. It would have been a great matchup.

Q. Can you respond to some local criticism here that maybe you haven't given back to the sport, to the city you grew up in, as much as some of the locals would like, you haven't come to the tournament at UCLA, that kind of stuff.

PETE SAMPRAS: Well, I'm coming this year. You have to understand when you retire from your sport, you need a few years to sort of decompress and get away from it. I have the last couple years played and been around. You know, I've done what I could do when I was playing. I've done what I could do since I retired. I like being home. I've had the chance to play in L.A. here. I played a little exhibition in Anaheim a few years back.

I'm all for helping some of these kids. I've talked to the USTA about doing some things. Nothing seems to have come out of that. But I've done what I could. Maybe as I get a little bit older, I'll do a little bit more.

Q. Do you understand some people saying just stopping by, waving to the crowd? You understand how the locals might feel, right?

PETE SAMPRAS: Waving to who?

Q. To the fans out at UCLA, those kinds things, ceremonial kind of deal.

PETE SAMPRAS: You know, I'm not into ceremonies. That's not for me, it never has been. I live a pretty private life. I like to play. I'll play in front of people. But to go and do a wave, it's just not for me. I'm a pretty shy guy. I don't like to really do too many things.

But I'll be there this year. They're going to honor me, so I'll be there.

Q. How about the match coming up at UCLA, that should be fun?

PETE SAMPRAS: I'm looking forward to it. Safin is a great player. He's retiring this year. We've had some pretty good battles. He got me pretty good there in the Open. I got him the next year. Hits the ball hard and well. He's a good athlete. I got my hands full here. Hopefully I'll prepare and play well.

Q. Seems like you're keeping yourself in great shape.

PETE SAMPRAS: Trying to. Working out, eating well. As you get older, it's a little tougher to stay lean. I've been keeping myself in good shape. If I'm gonna play, I don't want to embarrass myself. I want to play well, hold my own. Realistically it's hard for me to win some of these matches against the current guys. But I just want to play well. If I can pull off a few things here and there, I'd be happy.

Q. Can you talk about Roddick's improvements over the last five months. Looked like he was 20 or 30% a better player.

PETE SAMPRAS: Watching him play, he's moving a ton better. I think he's lost some weight and is moving better. Roger obviously moves a little bit better. When they got into those exchanges, Roger is gonna win 'em. He's doing that better. His backhand sort of drive is better up the line. He's slicing a little better. His transition game has gotten better. As you saw on that set point, 6-5, he's still a little uncomfortable, but he's getting better at it.

I was sitting up there watching, just serve and volley one time on your second serve because all Roger does is chip it. Put something in his head.

He's improved a great deal, is serving big, moving better. I think he realized he had to start moving better to compete with Nadal and Roger. Those guys move great. So he's on the right track. I just hope mentally this didn't take a lot out of him. It might for a little bit. This is a great opportunity to beat Roger on that court in his prime, to get his first Wimbledon, he's still feeling it. All he can take away is that he had it, he's improving, and hopefully one day he'll get his name on that trophy.

Q. Do you think he'll be able to turn it around by US Open time?

PETE SAMPRAS: I think by the Open he will. I think it might be a slow start, the first event

or two he'll play this summer. The Open, he'll be ready. If anything, he gained a lot more support from the people. He's going to feel that there, feel the energy, feel like he can compete with anybody.

At the same time, I think it's going to take a few weeks of tennis to get it out of his system. He'll just move ahead and hopefully not look back too much. I'm sure he's replaying some of those points in his head. Sports is a cruel game. Unfortunately, he's feeling it now. But by the Open he should be fine.

PETE HOLTERMANN: I want to thank everyone for their time, especially you, Pete, for joining us. We'll let you go.

BOB KRAMER: It's a privilege to have you back again to relive some of the great memories here at the event. Thanks for your commitment to tennis. You've given back plenty and we're grateful for that.

PETE SAMPRAS: Thank you.

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