

March 27, 2009

Sony Ericsson Open

J. BLAKE/J. Benneteau

6-4, 6-4

An interview with:

JAMES BLAKE

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. How's it feel out there?

JAMES BLAKE: It was all right. It's a little windy, a little humid, but the kind of conditions you expect here in Miami. It was good to get a win, both of them -- in both sets breaking at 4-5. Julien might have gotten a little tight. I put enough pressure on him to come through at the end. It's a good feeling.

Q. What's it take to win out here for you? What do you think it's going to take for you to keep this going, to keep winning out here?

JAMES BLAKE: I think I'm going to have to serve a little better. I definitely don't think that was ideal today. I did only get broken once, but it had more to do with how I was playing from the back than getting free points on my serve and really dictating with my serve.

So I'm going to need to do that against probably the rest of the players I play. So that's something I'll definitely work on tomorrow.

I returned okay. I think I could have done a little better job, but otherwise I felt like I was hitting the ball pretty darn well from the back of the court, moving forward when I needed to, volleying well when I needed to.

It was just a matter of making sure to get a few more free points on my first serve, hopefully. Could have had something to do with the wind today, too. But I don't think I need to really drastically change anything. I've beaten a lot of these guys before. It's just a matter of kind of putting it together and doing it here.

Q. Where do you place this tournament worldwide? Let's say after the majors in terms of the fanfare of events.

JAMES BLAKE: This is right up there. If it's not No. 1 -- No.1, 2 or 3. It's, for me, probably the biggest outside of the Slams. That's if you're not counting Davis Cup. I put that right up there, and then the special events like the Olympics.

You know, our Masters 1000s, as they're called now, I think, they're all huge because you got the top players. I think they might be just as tough or almost as tough as a Slam to win because you're playing so many great players so quickly. You don't have any time to ease into. Benneteau is a great player. I'm going to have to play possibly Berdych or Youzhny next.

You don't get a break from playing a top player every match at these tournaments. It's pretty difficult, and this one and Indian Wells are probably the two biggest because they're the 96 draws.

They say it's the fifth Slam, and it's that for a reason.

Q. Can you think of another tournament where you get to promote your game as much as you get to promote here at the Sony Ericsson, doing whatever it can be, going to the sea aquarium, whatever?

JAMES BLAKE: Yeah, I don't think there are any that do promote it quite the same. This player party has kind of the biggest guest list you'd see of any of the tournament's player parties, just in terms of the players turning up and being a part of the scene and letting everyone know how much they like this tournament. They promote it.

I think having the men and women together always helps, because you get fans of women's tennis coming to watch the men's, and fans of men's tennis coming out to watch women's. You get a few more personalities you wouldn't see when it's just one of the genders, so that's great.

I think Miami just attracts, you know, a lot of great people and a lot of great times. People want to have fun here, and the fans come out and hopefully have a good time, too.

Q. Do you have a preference between

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Grandstand and Stadium Court? Obviously normally you're on stadium.

JAMES BLAKE: It's always exciting to play on Stadium Court and get all the fans involved. I think I've got a pretty good record out on Grandstand. I remember one of my first kind of big wins on tour ever was out there on Grandstand against Guillermo C anas. Probably too many years for me to remember back.

But it brings back good memories there, and hopefully it will continue to. Luckily a win is a win no matter which court you're on Court 8, it still counts. You're still into the next round.

Sometimes then maybe it feels like you've earned your way on to Stadium. If you got a few wins before you get out there, you feel like you deserve to be out there.

Q. Is there a different feeling in the men's game today as opposed to a year ago when everybody was chasing Federer, and now he comes off of five losses to Murray, he's not beating Nadal?

JAMES BLAKE: I think it's a very liquid environment always. It's always changing. Even the years when Federer was dominating, none of us were out here just admitting, you know, defeat. We're not saying we're done and he's just too good. We were all trying to find ways to improve and catch up to him, and now we're doing the same trying to catch up to Nadal.

It just changes so quickly. You know, one or two months of low confidence or, you know, changing something in your game can really change so much. The game is always improving, you know. If you look at tapes of guys 10 years ago, it wasn't as fast. The game was not as quick. It wasn't as powerful. The guys weren't as fit.

It just keeps getting better and better. Every year the game is improving, whether it's 2%, 5%, 10%. It's just getting better. You look at guys like Lleyton Hewitt who was No. 1 in the world, and I don't see any way he's gotten worse over the last four or five years. But he's not ranked No. 1 in the world or near it even because the game just keeps improving.

It's something that we all have to be aware of and keep trying to push forward, no matter if we feel content with our ranking. You got to get better if you're going to just keep it the same.

Q. Do you sense or do the players kind of talk about even the sense of a different persona about Roger now at all?

JAMES BLAKE: You know, I've always felt Roger is a very laid-back guy, about as nice as can be in the locker room. I don't think it's changed.

You know, it's really a refreshing thing to see the top guys in our sport being such nice guys. Roger, you see Rafa in the rocker room, you see Andy, both Andys, Andy Murray and Andy Roddick.

I really don't know if there was ever a time -- obviously I've never been involved in any other era of the sport -- but I don't know of any sport or any era where you've got those kind of personalities, those kind of, you know, talents being that great of guys.

I think we're lucky in that regard. But I don't think Roger has changed at all.

Q. Do you sense he doesn't have the confidence he used to at all, or not?

JAMES BLAKE: I don't feel that. You know, I haven't played him in the last six months or so, but he definitely still seems -- like he never, I don't know, had that No. 1 mentality or whatever when he came into the locker room. I didn't feel like before he was looking down on people, where he's better than anyone else or he's above picking up his own trash or tossing out his dirty towels or anything.

He's always been just a very down-to-earth guy, and I don't think that's changed now that he's 2 in the world. I don't think it will change no matter what the circumstances are on the court.

I like the fact that I think that's just the way he was raised, is to be a , you know, polite, respectful guy. I credit him with that, because a lot of people in his position could have lost that along the way.

Q. You do have in the next round Tomas Berdych or Mikhail Youzhny. With whom will you feel more comfortable against?

JAMES BLAKE: They're both great players. Whoever wins obviously would have had to play a good match against another top player. I know it won't be easy no matter who. I have a very emotional win over Youzhny in the Davis Cup final, so I have good memories if I get a chance to play him.

Berdych, we've had some very close matches. I've got a couple wins to draw on that

memory, so I'm not really gonna root for one over the other. I just know I'll have to play slightly different games against both of them. But whichever one comes out, I know it will be tough.

Q. Do you wonder sometimes about the need for changing, like you just said, the Masters 1000, then the Masters Series. People are calling it the Super 9. Do you wonder what's the point and whether you're confusing the public on that?

JAMES BLAKE: I wonder that sometimes, but I know their goal is to make it simpler for the public. Now with the Slams being 2000, these Masters being a 1000, then a 500, then a 250, it's supposed to be a simple formula or simple situation for the fans to follow. I hope that's true.

It's tough for me, because I'm so involved in it that I know exactly what's going on. I know how to follow it pretty easily, but I know my friends at home sometimes call tennis the rocket science of sports because it's just tough to figure out, you know, the Davis Cup, when that is, you know, which tournaments matter, how your ranking can drop when you just made the finals when you had won it last year.

Just things like that make it difficult. But I hope enough fans are out there that just want to see good tennis, and they figure the rankings will figure themselves out, they'll work themselves out. Right now Nadal has played the best tennis for the last year and he's No. 1 in the world, so the ranking system for right now seems to be working.

I hope it does become simpler, I hope the fans can follow it, and it also makes it fair for the players. I just -- I really hope it never becomes something that just to please the fans we're going to make it unfair to some of the players.

Q. When you talk about Roger Federer, the fact he's No. 2 and that some people are saying, Oh, his game has been off and what have you, is that dangerous to do with a guy that's been this good for this long, to start talking about the holes in his...

JAMES BLAKE: Yeah, it's very dangerous. The guy is going to go down as possibly the greatest player of all time. And to start saying he's not as good as he used to be, it's the same thing people did with Tiger Woods, saying he's not as good, he is in a slump. But it's based on the bar being set so high.

But such a great athlete in an individual sport that it's so overly scrutinized. It's at times

unfair, but I assume a lot of people aren't going to shed too many tears over the plight of Roger Federer. He's obviously one of the greatest of all time and has had so much success.

I think you saw it when people counted Pete Sampras out before his last Grand Slam win at the US Open. I just don't think anyone with that kind of experience and that kind of talent can ever be counted out of any tournament. I see him as one of the favorites no matter how old he is, no matter what -- just based on that experience that he's had and how many Grand Slams and how many Super 9s or Masters Series or Masters 1000s that he's won. He just has that knack for winning.

Q. Do the players at all talk about the impact, possible impact, of the financial crisis on sponsors? Because I'm just picturing the Open, the billboard at the Open with all the sponsors, all the New York banks, Lehman Brothers and the like. I don't know what's going to happen this year.

JAMES BLAKE: Yeah, I don't know what's going to happen either. I think we do consider it, we think about it, but it's one of those things that's out of our control.

We can go out and play good tennis and hope the fans are there and hope the sponsors are there to support the tennis. All we can do is go out and play our best tennis and maybe be a little safer in the marketplace and maybe not invest quite as much.

But we're going to do our best to make sure we're putting out our best product, and that's, I think, part of the Masters 1000 series, is making sure our best are out there all the time. Once we do that, you know, the rest of it is out of our control. So we can't worry too much about it.

Q. Andy and Mardy are going to play Dwyane Wade in Horse on Sunday. I just wonder how you would handicap that matchup.

JAMES BLAKE: If they're both together and they get about five extra letters, they might -- no, they still don't have a chance. I think that will be funny, though. He'll have a good time with them. Mardy's actually got a pretty good shot, though. Andy -- Mardy's got a pretty good shot. So that might be interesting. (Laughter.)

But it will be pretty funny. Dwyane is a really nice guy, a class act, and I don't think they

have much chance against an MVP candidate. It will be fun, and hopefully the cameras will be rolling and you can watch Andy throw up a few bricks.

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