



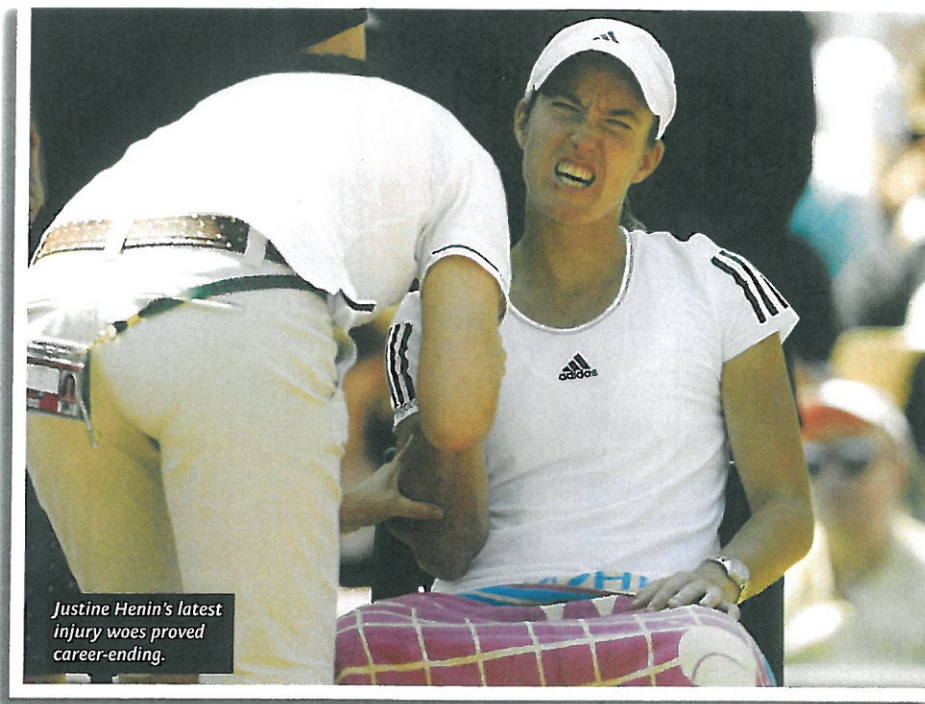
THE LONG ROAD BACK

Being sidelined with a long-term injury or illness is a highly distressing experience for tennis professionals. **MATT TROLLOPE** reports on the physical and mental factors that can determine whether or not a player enjoys a successful return to the game.

During the many interviews they conduct throughout their careers players are often asked about their on-court goals. While many will have targets such as winning a major or reaching No. 1, their answer will invariably include a reference to "staying healthy".

Players depend on their bodies functioning well for their livelihood, to achieve dreams held since they were children, and to maintain match fitness, a crucial element for success at the top level. Although niggling aches, strains, inflammation and fatigue are part of everyday life for touring professionals, injuries or illnesses that prevent them from competing for months at a time, or even longer, can be both physically and mentally devastating.

Players will react differently when told they will be sidelined for a lengthy period. Australian Institute of Sport senior sports



Justine Henin's latest injury woes proved career-ending.

psychologist Ruth Anderson said their response was highly dependent on the severity of the injury or illness.

"However, because of the significant loss, the initial reaction is generally shock, low mood (and) levels of anxiety in terms of the uncertainty that they're faced with. When an athlete is presented with a potential long-term injury or illness there's often not a defined timeline in terms of how long they'll be off the court for or what the potential implications are for them (in the) long term," she said.

Serena Williams revealed in an interview with *USA Today* that she had endured similar emotions following her latest spate of health concerns. The multiple major winner is currently sidelined following two bouts of foot surgery, and was recently hospitalised having suffered a haematoma and blood clots on her lungs.

She has not played since winning Wimbledon in 2010. "I definitely have not been happy ... Especially when I had that second surgery (on my foot), I was definitely depressed. I cried all the time. I was miserable to be around," she admitted.

Long-term injury and illness is unfortunately common in tennis, with several players rendered inactive for prolonged periods and their careers placed in jeopardy. Thankfully, it hasn't prevented some from achieving success when coming back.

Justine Henin succumbed to the energy-sapping cytomegalovirus in 2004 and also suffered a knee injury, missing the

best part of 10 months of competition. She won the 2005 French Open shortly after her return before going on to dominate the game in 2006 and 2007. Kim Clijsters developed a left-wrist injury in 2004 that restricted her to just one tournament in nine months, yet returned in 2005 to win nine titles – including her first Grand Slam at the US Open – and rose from outside the top 100 to reach No. 1 in January 2006. Jo-Wilfried Tsonga overcame a herniated disc plus shoulder and abdominal injuries during 2005 and 2006 to reach the Australian Open final in 2008 and crack the top 10 that same year. In 2010, Rafael Nadal recorded one of the finest seasons in history with Grand Slam titles in Paris, London and New York after being plagued by severe knee tendonitis.

Anderson said it was much easier for players to stay involved and engaged during their layoff if they could maintain aspects of their training. "Athletes can stay highly motivated through a long period of time if they're able to appropriately plan out different activities they can work on and have a collaborative support team around them to help them achieve their goals," she said.

"If athletes are able to have a clear focus and are still able to work on potential fitness areas, strength areas, aspects of their game (and) psychological areas, then it's easier for them to maintain motivation and adhere to appropriate rehabilitation programs."

This may explain why Clijsters enjoyed

immediate success on her return. Despite not being able to practice her two-handed backhand due to torn tendons and a cyst in her left wrist that required surgery, she reportedly continued practising one-handed strokes including serves, forehands, volleys and smashes.

Yet for every successful comeback there are just as many players who are negatively affected by a lengthy break.

Chronic hip injuries have made Lleyton Hewitt a shadow of the player who



It will take all of Serena Williams' renowned spirit to recover from her latest setbacks.

captured two major titles and held the No. 1 ranking throughout 2001 and 2002. Juan Carlos Ferrero won the French Open and reached No. 1 in 2003, but then contracted chicken pox and injured his wrist and ribs in a practice accident, and never re-entered the top 10. Amelie Mauresmo snared two majors and the No. 1 ranking in 2006, but couldn't scale those heights again after an appendectomy and right adductor strain marred her 2007 season. Maria Sharapova has struggled for almost two years to rediscover the major-winning form she enjoyed prior to a shoulder injury that sidelined her for nine months from August 2008.

Long-term illnesses severely impacted on the careers of Australians Alicia Molik and Sam Stosur. Molik was enjoying the form of her life from late 2004 to early 2005, winning four WTA titles, an Olympic bronze medal, reaching her first Grand Slam quarter-final at Melbourne Park and cracking the top 10 shortly after. Her progress was cruelly stalled by vestibular neuronitis – a serious inner ear infection – and despite two attempted comebacks she has never

again reached the top 50. Two years later, Stosur was struck down with Lyme disease and viral meningitis and missed chunks of 2007 and 2008. Conversely, she rebounded to reach her first Grand Slam final at Roland Garros last year and achieved a career-high world ranking of No. 4 in February 2011.

David Taylor currently coaches Stosur, having previously worked with Molik for several years. He said the nature of their illnesses possibly explained their opposing career trajectories. "Alicia couldn't even run without overbalancing to one side and injuring her ankles. To walk in a line heel-to-toe wasn't possible. I went once with her to therapy at a neurology clinic that enables people to reintegrate back into life after misfortunes such as serious car accidents. She couldn't even track the ball flight from an opponent's racquet," he said.

"I think publicly she was very strong and positive ... But there is no doubt this was an extremely challenging period in her life filled with several unknowns.

"Sam's condition was also extremely rare and frightening ... I think (she) was able to cope mentally a little easier knowing it wouldn't have a permanent

effect on her performance abilities after the recovery period."

Taylor said that Stosur's attitude throughout her rehabilitation was one of the main reasons she enjoyed immediate success upon her return. "Sam said to me after coming back that she never doubted returning to tennis. I was amazed how positive she remained throughout this long period," he said.

Anderson said she had worked with tennis players who had returned strongly from long-term injury, and said these athletes were generally very assertive in managing their rehabilitation.

"They approach this process like they would their normal training program. Although it's different activities, they find ways to keep building their skills and maintain the areas they can – both physically and psychologically – while they're off the court. If they transfer the skills they've got in that normal training and competition environment into their rehabilitation process, they generally give themselves the greatest likelihood of a successful outcome," she said.

Anderson believed another crucial element was a player's ability to manage their own and others' expectations of their performances and results. "They actually (need to) allow time to be back on court and to develop and integrate their skills again," she said.

"Athletes who are able to focus on the improvement and consolidation of their skills, and resist the urgency of having to get performance results immediately, are the ones who tend to adapt and adjust more effectively over time." ■

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ON THE COMEBACK TRAIL ...

DINARA SAFINA:

Is finally stringing some wins together after losing form and confidence when a serious back injury kept her off court for much of 2010. The former No. 1 is said to have successfully followed the advice of big brother Marat in adapting her service motion to protect her injury.



FERNANDO GONZALEZ: After undergoing hip surgery last September, the former Australian Open finalist resumed practice last month and is planning on returning in time for the French Open, with Belgrade his first scheduled event.

The Chilean also has a new coach on board in Horacio Matta.

AGNIESZKA RADWANSKA:

Ended her 2010 season early to

undergo foot surgery and was looking doubtful for the Australian Open until the very last minute. It's since been a spectacular comeback for the Polish player, who returned to the top 10 after quarter-finals in Melbourne and Dubai.

TOMMY HAAS:

The injury-plagued German, who underwent hip and shoulder surgery in 2010, looked set to return when he practiced with Roger Federer prior to Indian Wells. That didn't quite eventuate, but the 33-year-old is clearly planning his comeback.

