

SportsFriday

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And Still A Long Way To Go

MONICA SELES is whomping that big first serve, driving poor Julie Halard from sideline to sideline, making her crazy with those quirky angles, leaving her dumbfounded with clothesline passing shots. It's a one-woman show, for Seles fans. If only my eyes didn't keep getting caught on all those Virginia Slims signs around the Madison Square Garden court.

SPORTSWRITER'S WARNING: TENNIS MAY BE DANGEROUS TO YOUR HEALTH.

"C'mon, Bob," said Pam Shriver, president of the Women's Tennis Association, giving me one of those Get-off-it looks. "I played for years before I even knew Virginia Slims was a cigarette. We are offering a healthy image here. No one in the company has ever asked us to smoke or endorse cigarettes."

We are standing with Gerard Smith, executive director of the W.T.A., in the concrete corridor that encircles the main arena where Seles, old No. 1, is chugging through her first round. Smith's first-round match offers more suspense: He has recently floated the possibility, like a smoke ring, of the W.T.A.'s breaking away from the cigarette company that has become so identified with women's tennis that its marketing slogan, "You've come a long way, baby," is routinely associated with the game.

Monica wins the first set, 6-1, losing a game only because her concentration briefly wavers. What else does she have to think about? She is not quite 18 years old. Maybe she is concerned about younger players. Her archrival for fan interest and commercial endorsements is Jennifer Capriati, who is 15 years old. 18 and 15. You mean to say that they are not indirectly selling cigarettes to girls?



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"Our demographics show," said Smith, "that tennis fans tend to be affluent and middle-aged."

"And they have a right to smoke or not," said Shriver. "It's a matter of choice."

It's my turn to flash the Get-off-it look. This has been the line since 1971, when cigarette advertising was driven off radio and television. It was the same year that Virginia Slims provided the financial foundation for wom-

en's tennis. At the time, Billie Jean King, who claimed to be opposed to smoking, decided to champion the right of a legal product to advertise in a free society.

Since then, according to what Health and Human Services Secretary Louis W. Sullivan has called "the disgraceful trade-off in America between profits and good health," the rate of smoking by teen-age girls has risen, as has the rate of lung cancer deaths among women.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, 51,000 women will die of lung cancer this year. It has become the leading cancer killer of women, passing breast cancer. Critics of the tobacco industry's involvement in sponsoring women's political and business conferences and organizations, as well as sports, contend that cigarette companies have been successful in the women's market because they play on fears of getting fat and the desire for independence.

Virginia Slims. You've come a long way, baby. Sullivan has called upon the owners of arenas and parks to stop allowing their facilities to be used for sporting events sponsored by tobacco companies and for sports promoters to stop accepting tobacco companies as sponsors. "Are you guys thinking of dumping Virginia Slims for moral and health reasons?" I asked Gerard Smith.

"When I said that 'Virginia Slims can't take women's tennis to the next level,'" he said carefully, "I meant that we are global, and they are national. Their limitations, in such matters as television advertising, limits our growth."

"So it's not as if you're finally doing the right thing?"

"They have always conducted themselves in a first-class manner," said Smith, showing no exasperation, as steady and directed as Monica on the court, chugging along. By this time, Shriver had slipped away and Monica had won her match. "Of course, we have all been aware that there are other people who have a problem."

Other people include the former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop. When I recently asked him what he thought about cigarettes' hooking up with youth and health, the famous head went back, the eyes rolled, he began to thunder. It was, to put it gently, evil.

"Not evil," said Smith. "But there have been protests at certain arenas, even bomb threats, and we are aware of that. It's not good business."

By now, Monica has changed into a frilly black outfit and is lounging against a nearby wall. She is chattering with friends, as if they were all at a suburban mall. If you can imagine her not No. 1, it's easy to see just another Valley girl, who might even be smoking to be liberated and thin.