

McNeil settles down to survive Slims opener

By **CHARLES CARDER**
Houston Chronicle

Lori McNeil fought off four break points to avoid a repeat of her 1988 first-round loss in the Virginia Slims of Houston with a 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 win over Elly Hakami on Monday night at the Westside Tennis Club.

It was a year ago that McNeil suffered the loss to Melissa Gurney in her initial appearance in the Houston event. And she appeared on her way to a repeat when she lost a sluggish first set to the Tiburon, Calif., player

ranked 87th in the world.

But McNeil, ranked No. 14 in the world, realized all was not lost.

"When you are not playing your best you can get very frustrated," McNeil said. "But, because you are not playing well doesn't mean you can't win. If you get really frustrated and upset with yourself, there is no way you can win."

McNeil faced adversity throughout the match and even in the third set she had to fight off four break points that could have made a winner of Hakami.

The Houston resident, who is

the fourth seed, struggled throughout the match and was never comfortable until Hakami ripped a backhand into the net on set point in the 10th game.

Second-seeded Zina Garrison, also of Houston, is scheduled for her first action at 7 tonight and top-seeded Chris Evert will begin defense of her title Wednesday.

"When I was down 1-5 in the first set, I hadn't come to the net one time and I was making a lot of mistakes," McNeil said.

"She hit some good shots, but I felt I wasn't playing well within myself. I settled down and I felt

if I could control myself I could find a way to win. I'm not playing my best, but hopefully when I will be playing my best will be at the French Open four weeks from now.

"Every first-round match I'm a little nervous. I think everybody is. I felt that if I could play within myself, I could find a way to win. By not playing well and getting upset, you don't have a chance.

"I had to be patient with myself and try to cut down on my mistakes. Every day you are not

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