

SPORT TENNIS: US OPEN

Mother’s pride keeps Whiley on track to serve for gold in Tokyo

REBECCA MYERS



British tennis star targets Paralympics glory after giving birth

The problem for Jordanne Whiley is that nobody else has done this before. She would like to talk to other wheelchair tennis players who have come back after having a baby, or get advice on how to juggle travelling to tournaments and being a mother, but there aren’t any. “I don’t know anybody else who’s done it, so I just sort of wing it,” she says. This approach has been surprisingly successful for the 10-time Grand Slam winner, who returned to competition earlier this year and is ranked ninth in the world. In 2017, she won the Wimbledon doubles while 11 weeks pregnant and plagued with morning sickness; last month, she reached the semi-finals. This week, she will compete at the Birmingham

Canadian Wheelchair Tennis Classic. It matters not only for qualification for other competitions, including the Australian Open, but for the Tokyo Paralympics, now less than a year away. It will be Whiley’s fourth Games and, she suspects, her last. She should qualify easily - the top 20 receive automatic qualification - but the top four enjoy favourable seeding. “The top four are at a different level,” she says. “That’s where I was before and where I feel I should be.” Although Canada is a crucial tournament for Whiley, it would not have been her first choice: she might have expected to be competing at the US Open next week but missed out because places go to the top seven in the rankings plus an American. The ITF recently published new classification rules after the International Paralympic Committee mandated that tennis move from “self-assessment” to a formal

system of testing athletes’ disabilities, as is already the case in sports such as swimming and athletics. Whiley, who has osteogenesis imperfecta (brittle bone disease), is now classified and eligible to compete, but some players, including world No 4 and former Paralympic gold medalist Marjolein Buis, are no longer eligible. For Buis, her disability, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, which affects the connective tissues, is not recognised under the new regulation; she will be forced into early retirement and has spoken of her disappointment. However, she will still be able to compete at the US Open and the Paralympics under an ITF clause that allows for a transition period. If athletes have trained towards Tokyo, they will be allowed to compete and will be ruled ineligible and stopped from competing in the sport after January 1, 2021. For Whiley, 27, it will make watching the US Open

particularly hard. “It’s someone who shouldn’t even be eligible to play in the sport, playing instead of me,” she says. “In any other Paralympic sport, if you’re classified out, you’re out. “I questioned [the ITF] and they said it’s because it’s not fair on the people who are classified in, who have to play against people who aren’t even eligible. She could go to the Paralympics, win a double gold medal and the next day be like, ‘I’m not actually eligible, see you later’. She’s nicked two gold medals. If you bring in a rule like that, it should be simple: you are out, you are in.” She is sympathetic, too, to the athletes who have been disqualified by the new rule, raising concerns about their mental health playing under the pressure of knowing many don’t believe they should be allowed on court. “It’s hard but I can’t do



Mummy’s boy: Jordanne Whiley with her son, Jackson

anything about it. I have to get on with it and do as well as I can in my other tournaments.” That means stepping up her training, which is less frequent but higher intensity as she fits it in around childcare. She was lucky to have a smooth delivery – with her genetic condition, she could have broken her pelvis during birth – and an 18-month-old son, Jackson. Her partner,

Marc McCarroll, is also Whiley’s coach. Tokyo could complete Whiley’s trophy cabinet, which lacks only a singles Paralympic medal, after bronze medals in the doubles at London and Rio. Although her priorities may have shifted since giving birth, she says she feels more ambitious than ever. “Before I had Jackson, I knew I wasn’t at my full potential because I was lazy,” she says. “I could have been world No 1 if I’d applied myself a bit more. I need to do that because I don’t want to retire knowing I could have been No 1 or I could have been Wimbledon singles champion, or I could have had a gold medal. I’m trying my hardest to do everything right so when I look back at my career I can say I gave everything.” ● Jordanne Whiley is a member of the charity Path to Success’s Path to Tokyo 2020 campaign which supports and empowers disabled female athletes

Johanna Konta saves best for the big occasion again and faces Karolina Pliskova for place in last eight today

Nick Pitt

In contrast with the other British singles players, who have all already fallen by the wayside at the US Open, Johanna Konta has developed the priceless habit of reserving her best game for the big occasions. Her performance in easily dispatching China’s Zhang Shuai on Friday may well have been the best of her career and the best by any woman thus far in these championships. To progress to the quarter-finals by beating the third seed, Karolina Pliskova, who has been something of a nemesis for her, Konta will need to maintain that level. And she may well do so, for New York clearly agrees with her. It was at Flushing Meadows four years ago that Konta intruded into the top level for the first time in her career, reaching the fourth round as a qualifier. She has now reached her competitive maturity, leading Britain to a critical victory in the Fed Cup, reaching two finals during the clay-court season and having her best run in Grand Slams, with a semi-final appearance in the French Open and making the quarter-finals at Wimbledon. Strangely enough, it was the 28-year-old’s performance in her press conference at Wimbledon after defeat to Barbora Strycova – rather than her tennis or her national allegiance – that has brought her wider recognition and public appreciation. When a persistent reporter needled her by saying: “I’m just asking you as somebody who presumably wants to go on from here, learn from this, win a Grand Slam one day . . .”, Konta hit back by saying: “Please don’t patronise me.” “I’m not patronising you,” the reporter replied. “No, no, you are. In the way you’re asking your question, you’re being quite disrespectful and you’re patronising me. I’m a professional competitor who did her best today, and that’s all there is to that.” The exchange has been widely shared and celebrated, and Konta found herself being stopped in the street, and even hailed from a balcony, with people saying: “Good on you.” It was revealing for it unveiled Konta as a sportsperson of unusual spirit and intelligence, as well as one committed to improvement. The hurtful inference behind the reporter’s questions was that Konta tends to fail, freeze or fumble on important occasions. Memorably, she had set points to win the first set in her semi-final at the French Open but messed up, especially when missing a high drive volley off a slow, hanging ball with the court at her mercy. She missed horribly but at least she went for the shot with positive intent. As she said herself, it was a shot she would make nine times out of 10. It seemed unfair to use it to firm up a suspicion that



Silver service: Johanna Konta has produced sparkling tennis at Flushing Meadows

US OPEN LATEST COVERAGE

For reports of last night’s matches at Flushing Meadow, see our iPhone edition or THE SUNDAY TIMES.CO.UK/SPORT

SMASH AND GRAB

Konta has now become a smart, tactical player as well. And one for the occasion. The New York heat and cement suit her as she gets extra reward for her flat, power hitting

she lacks a winner’s instinct. Konta is a clever and complex woman. Her notable improvement in the past nine months has coincided with the employment of her latest coach, Dimitri Zavialoff. His principal contribution has been to help Konta to be more self-reliant on court and to focus her intelligence rather than allow it to wander. Zavialoff has also encouraged Konta to add subtlety to her game, to enjoy some creativity. All year, she has been developing the drop-shot, which these

days has become a necessity rather than an oddity or sign of desperation, and has much improved her sliced backhand. There is more variety in her serve as well. She has just about perfected the slice serve to the corner, which opens up the court for her next shot. She can serve hard and flat when looking for aces and might use the top-spin kick serve more, for she executes it well. Her base strength, however, remains her groundstrokes. Konta’s winners against Zhang were mostly shots fired straight

down the line, from either wing, with unerring accuracy. In the past, as Martina Navratilova put it, Konta was just a “big banger”. She has now become a smart, tactical player as well. And one for the occasion. Since Wimbledon, Konta seemed to dip, losing two consecutive first-round matches on American hard courts, but she has found her form once more, right on cue. The New York heat and cement suit Konta, especially when playing under the sun rather than lights, as she gets extra

reward for her flat, power hitting. Pliskova will, of course, be more resistant and possesses formidable weapons herself. Her service is second only to Serena Williams’s in the women’s game. Pliskova beat Konta with some ease in this year’s Italian Open final and leads her four-one in all meetings, most of which have been tight three-setters. They first met in 2011 in a minor event in the Czech Republic. “She’s maybe my age or maybe a little bit older,” Pliskova said – 10 months older, in fact. “I remember when she was still, like, from Australia. Now she’s Great Britain. I know her a lot, also her journey, also her tennis. There is nothing that can surprise me.” Maybe. But if Konta brings her best to bear in the manner she did on Friday, she may give Pliskova more than a surprise: a shock.

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