

‘I can still compete with the best – that is the main thing’

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Vicki Hodges



Caroline Wozniacki is hopeful of staying at top after coming to terms with arthritis diagnosis

It was as the lights were dimming on the 2018 season in Singapore that Caroline Wozniacki finally revealed the secret which had plagued her campaign. Not wanting to give her opponents an edge or show weakness, the world No3 had refused to disclose that she had been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis until her final match of the year at the WTA Finals last October.

She briefly opened up on her disorder, an autoimmune condition which affects the lining of joints and causes a painful swelling that can lead to bone erosion, and then enjoyed a much-needed off-season break, going to the United States with her fiancé and former basketball player David Lee.

Wozniacki needed time to process. Even by the standards of her fellow professionals, the Dane is a fitness fanatic – she recorded a time of 3hr 26min in her first marathon in New York in 2014 – so the diagnosis was potentially crushing. Her holiday provided her with the rest and recuperation required not



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only to come to terms with her new reality, but the chance to tailor her physical programme accordingly.

Now fully briefed on the condition – which can flare up at any time – Wozniacki has fresh motivation for the new season. Does she hope to inspire others who have rheumatoid arthritis, which affects 25 million people around the world?

“Yes definitely,” she tells *The Daily Telegraph*, in her first United Kingdom newspaper interview since her diagnosis. “When I was first diagnosed, a lot of people around me didn’t know how it could affect me. Every time you get a diagnosis like that, or are told that your body isn’t functioning in the way it used to, there’s a process you have to go through.

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Determined: Caroline Wozniacki is refreshed for the new season; (below) winning last year’s Australian Open

technical things – so I’ve had to adjust a little bit.”

Wozniacki is not alone on the women’s tour in having to battle an autoimmune condition: Venus Williams suffers from Sjogren’s syndrome, which affects the tear ducts and saliva glands and often accompanies rheumatoid arthritis.

But Wozniacki, as one might expect from the former world No1, is determined to plot her own course.

“Everyone’s different,” the Dane says. “You have to find your own way and do what feels right for you and your body because what works for me might not work for someone else. I’m very happy that I can still compete with the best in the world and that’s the main thing. I’m only 28. It’s about taking care of your body, resting up but then working hard.”

In hindsight, Wozniacki admits there were telltale signs hinting at the condition. She suffered with frequent aching limbs after Wimbledon last summer, but attributed it to a bout of flu. Then she skipped the Citi Open in Washington in August with a thigh injury. It was only when she woke one morning in a Montreal hotel later that month unable to lift her arms above her head that she went for further testing and was diagnosed after the US Open. Now the Dane believes she had been struggling with the condition for several months.

“You start looking back at times and think ‘Well that wasn’t normal!’ she says. “Or you start thinking of matches and tournaments when your body was hurting and you weren’t feeling great. I’m happy that I now know what’s going on and can look forward.”

Not that she has been focused solely on tennis since her last appearance on court: Wozniacki found time to schedule a trip to Anfield in mid-November, where

women of childbearing age. It usually presents with inflammation of small joints of the hands, wrists and feet, although knees, ankles and elbows can also be affected. The immune system starts to attack its own host body and the lining of the joints.

One major hallmark of the condition is early-morning stiffness, which lasts an hour or more. This should be a “red flag” to

raise your suspicion that you have an inflammatory arthritis, rather than degenerative arthritis, due to “wear and tear”.

Inflammatory arthritis (rheumatoid arthritis is part of this disease family), is characterised by swollen inflamed joints which are tender to touch and limited in movement. The whole aim of treating rheumatoid disease is to get the joint inflammation under

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control, as quickly as possible, before joint damage and deformity occurs. If this can be achieved, the pain and swelling will go away, and the patient goes into a “drug induced” remission.

To achieve this, rheumatology specialists use drugs to modify and control the faulty immune response. The first three months are key to controlling inflammation within joints. If you can treat and

reverse during that stage, then you are on your way to getting back to a person who can function normally and joint damage will be avoided.

Specialists can start treating initially with corticosteroids. These may be injected into a muscle, or into the joint directly, to make the swelling go down, within 48 hours.

Oral medication to keep the inflammatory condition under

control is then commenced. If rheumatoid arthritis only partially responds to standard drugs, biological agents are used.

Since their introduction nearly 20 years ago, the rates of joint replacement have dwindled to being a rare occurrence.

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What we are aiming for is to put



GETTY IMAGES



Liverpool fan: Wozniacki enjoys the win at home to Fulham in November

she watched her beloved Liverpool defeat Fulham. Having ended her own wait for a grand slam at the Australian Open last year, she is now hoping Jurgen Klopp might draw some inspiration to end her club’s own title drought.

“I hope they can sustain it,” says Wozniacki, who stepped out on court at the Qatar Open in 2011 wearing a “Gerrard No8” shirt. “They’ve been playing so well, it would be amazing to see them win the whole thing. It’s such a good feeling there at the moment.”

Wozniacki, too, is radiating positivity as she plots how to add to her 30 WTA titles over the past decade, starting in Melbourne, where she is preparing to defend her Australian Open title.

Wozniacki ended her grand-slam drought with victory at the 43rd attempt last January, silencing the constant questioning of when she would win one of the sport’s four biggest titles.

As a result, she briefly climbed back to the world No1 spot six years to the day after she last held the top ranking.

Now, Wozniacki returns to the city free from scrutiny. She may not have the power game of Serena Williams or Madison Keys, but her athleticism and battling qualities make her a consistent performer, and a threat – regardless of her arthritis.

“I feel like time has gone crazy fast since I won here,” she says. “To be honest, I think very short-term, I think about this tournament I’m about to play and then take one tournament at a time.”

Will she change her approach to her career, post-diagnosis? “I don’t think there’s anyone who can tell you how you should live your life,” she says, emphatically. “You find your own path, make your own way. I create my own story.”

people back to where they were before developing the disease and this can be achieved in many cases.

In the case of Caroline Wozniacki – and anyone with rheumatoid arthritis – if you are treated early and respond to the drugs, you stand a good chance of getting back to where you were.

Dr Barrett is a consultant physician and rheumatologist in London.

Federer pays emotional tribute to former coach

Roger Federer, who is preparing to defend his Australian Open title next week, broke down in tears during an interview in which he talked about the loss of his former coach, Peter Carter.

Carter died in a car accident aged 37 in 2002 while honeymooning in South Africa and Federer has frequently paid tribute to the coach’s influence on his career.

Asked what the Australian would think about his record men’s haul of 20 Grand Slam successes, Federer was overcome by emotion.

“Sorry. Oh, man, I still miss him so much. I hope he would be proud,” Federer said in an interview with CNN Sport recorded last month. He later added: “Geez, never broke down like this.”

Federer added: “Peter was a really important person in my life because I think if I can say thank you for my technique today, it’s to Peter.”



Tears: Roger Federer breaks down during the CNN interview

Johanna Konta, the British No1, has withdrawn from the Sydney International for the second time, just a week before the start of the Australian Open.

Konta, 27, initially retired from her second-round qualifying match against Russia’s Ekaterina Alexandrova with a neck injury on Sunday.

She was handed a reprieve as a lucky loser and was due to play Kiki Bertens in the first round proper yesterday but the WTA confirmed she had withdrawn from the tournament. Bertens instead played another lucky loser, Bernarda Pera, who she beat 7-5, 6-4.

Konta, who climbed as high as fourth in the world following her run to the Wimbledon semi-finals in 2017, is currently ranked 38.

Britain’s Cameron Norrie secured his spot in the second round of the ASB Classic in Auckland with a straight-sets victory over Frenchman Benoit Paire.

Norrie, 23, saved all four break points he faced as he raced to a 6-3, 6-2 win in just under an hour.

Winning 79 per cent of his first-serve points, Norrie broke his opponent once in the opening set and twice in the second for his first victory of 2019. He faces Portugal’s Joao Sousa in the next round.

Qualifier Heather Watson made a swift exit from the Hobart International after suffering a first-round defeat by Romania’s Irina-Camelia Begu.

Watson, who fought her way past Australian Isabelle Wallace to claim a place in the main draw, went down 6-1, 6-4.

The Briton lost six games on the trot as the first set slipped away and although she made a better fist of the second, she was unable to drag herself back into the match.