

Clare Balding



Clare Balding has been a major part of BBC Radio Five Live's Wimbledon team for a while now and can't wait to get back down to SW19 to see all the action. Here, she reveals her tennis heroes and why she thinks the Williams sisters are a force to be reckoned with.

What are you doing for Radio Five Live this year?

"I'm co-presenting with Simon Mayo on Five Live every day. I'll see most things on Centre Court and I think I'll actually be moving about a bit more this year, getting out and about on the outside courts."

What's your favourite Wimbledon memory?

"Probably Goran Ivanisevic beating Pat Rafter. I grew up in the Becker years and I really

enjoyed watching him play. Actually, to this day, Boris Becker is the most impressive person I have ever interviewed. He's physically impressive and very intense in the way he looks at you and considers your questions and gives you a well-thought out answer. He's pretty daunting, he has a real presence."

Who are your tennis idols?

"I wasn't really a McEnroe or Connors person – I liked Bjorn Borg and Becker. And in the women's game, Martina Navratilova. I'd still put her at the top of the list of female athletes, for longevity and fitness and dedication. Steffi Graf is a beautiful player too. And actually, thinking about Steffi makes me think about Andre Agassi, who I've really enjoyed watching."

Who do you think is in with a shout in the men's game? Do you think Roger Federer can defend his title?

"I think Federer is the most beautiful player. He plays shots that you just wouldn't think anyone would be capable of playing. And he moves so well – he moves like a race horse. Federer on grass can do things with a tennis ball that other players cannot do and that, without a shadow of a doubt, gives him the edge over people like Lleyton Hewitt and Andy Roddick, who can bash the ball but don't have that same all-rounder's game. I really hope Federer can come back and play to that level again because it's just such a dream to watch. I find Andy Roddick a bit more of a bludgeoner of the ball, there isn't the same finesse. Actually the only one with natural finesse is Tim Henman."

And what about the women's title? Can Serena Williams defend her title?

“When Serena Williams is at her best, she blasts them off the court and players like Kim Clijsters and Justine Henin-Hardenne just haven’t got the weapons to deal with her, which is a shame, because I’d really like to see her tested. I’d like to know more about what she’s got in her game and Venus didn’t really play the sort of match that was going to test Serena last year.

“The problem with watching Serena is that her margin for error is so narrow. You can see her winning a match, making an awful lot of errors and it’s a bit frustrating. But she can certainly move. Venus has the wider reach, she can move sideways across the court very well, but Serena can move up and down a court. She’s a great player, I’d just like to see somebody else come through, other than Venus, who can really push her and make her worry. Jennifer Capriati can on her best days.”

The age-old question ... what do you think of Tim Henman’s chances?

“I think Henman is one of only about four or five people who can win. I think he can get to the semis – it depends on the draw – but he can get to the semis and then it depends on who he’s up against.”

Do you think the home crowd adds to the pressure for him?

“I think he plays better at Wimbledon than anywhere else. It’s just whether he can play well over two weeks. you know who he can beat, because he won the Paris Masters final – you know he can beat Hewitt, he can beat Federer, he can beat Roddick, he can actually beat anybody, but whether he can do it for two weeks over seven matches is something that he has never proved so, until he does it, there’s always that question mark. He can certainly do it in the best of three sets over four or five matches, but the best of five sets over seven, we’ll have to see.”

Who has been your favourite Wimbledon interview?

“I think for niceness of personality, Pat Rafter wins every time. He’s just the nicest guy. In Sydney he was doing something for a tennis club for kids and I went along and did a piece and met his mother and sister. He was just so gentle, kind and nice. I think he’s on the comeback trail – I think he’s been playing doubles recently.”

What player would you most like to interview?

“I’d love to get something different out of the Williams sisters. I think they’re really interesting and I think their story is extraordinary. I interviewed Venus the first time she won Wimbledon, and she was very charming. She didn’t know that the bowl was called the Venus Rosewater and she was quite sweet about it.”

Do you play tennis?

“I do – I’m very erratic though!”

If you were in the Wimbledon final, who would you like to have as your opponent?

“Me ... so I’d have a chance of winning!”