

Flavia and Roberta. Women, Rivals, Friends

Letizia Airos (January 07, 2016)



We sat down with Flavia Pennetta and Roberta Vinci the two Italian tennis stars who made history with their US OPEN final match—not only an unforgettable victory for tennis but for the values associated with sport.

“Canadian doubles.” Three women sit down for an interview. Two of the women made history for Italian sports last September at the US OPEN. As the year comes to a close, we wanted to celebrate sports, especially women in sports. Women, in our opinion, make all the difference. Flavia Pennetta and Roberta Vinci’s style of competing was truly a sight to see.

They battled one another like women, with elegance, and sent a positive message: that rivals can be friends. Remember their prolonged embrace at the end of the match at Arthur Ashe Stadium?

That was spontaneous. No one was posing for the cameras. Indeed, they appeared to be two friends hugging it out. Look at the photos again. Can you tell which won and which lost? It may have been a “tricolor derby”—“a historic day,” as Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, who flew down to watch the game, put it— but most of all it was a celebration of female sportsmanship.



A Historic Match

That the tournament was shaping up to be an unprecedented match between two Italians only dawned on champion Flavia Pennetta gradually. "It's happened at other WTA tournaments; I'd see fellow Italians moving up in the draw alongside me, and I'd played against Roberta several times when I was younger.

This time, however, as I was moving ahead in the tournament, any coincidences and situations eluded my attention, so that I arrived at the final match having hardly realized what we were both accomplishing." One curious, little-known piece of information: not only did two Italians meet in the final, but two women from Puglia, the "heel of the boot."

Flavia and Roberta hail from Taranto and Brindisi, respectively, two cities, it goes without saying, whose citizens celebrated till sunup. Flavia happily recalls how she has carried her roots and sense of community with her wherever she has been in the world, and how special it was to cast a spotlight on Puglia in the final match. An equally proud Roberta adds, "I was really glad two people from Puglia made it so far."

Roberta: Taking Down the Myth

For Roberta, the first thrilling moment came before the final. Her victory over Serena Williams, another unforgettable moment, stunned everyone. Beating the great American player appeared impossible. But Roberta managed to give us—Italians, certainly—a moment to remember.

"I experienced the greatest thrill after winning the last point Roberta Vinci defeated America's champion Serena Williams but lost the final to Flavia Pennetta against Serena Williams," she says. "I will never forget that moment. It was enormously satisfying and the fact that I am Italian made it all the more special. It was a moment that made the whole Italian tennis world proud."

Flavia: Winning the US Open

But back to Flavia. As soon as victory was hers, all the toil and tension vanished from her radiant face. She was pure happiness. But what was going through her mind as she played? How did she feeling during the match?

Her answer comes as a surprise. "It sounds farfetched," she says, "but when I'm on the court I know exactly what's happening in the stands. I know where my team and family are sitting, and if they get up and move around. That way I can share with them the anger of defeat and the joy of victory."

And how do you feel about it now that a few months have passed, we ask, avoiding the subject of her shocking announcement to retire from tennis (superstitiously, perhaps, holding out a sliver of hope...). "For the first few days what I had done didn't really register, then slowly, as the adrenaline wore off, a positive feeling came over me.

I became aware of having brought to completion a lifelong goal, and giving a sense of satisfaction to everyone who has helped me along the way, including my family!" Boyfriend and colleague Fabio Fognini was in attendance that day, and a lot of cameras zoomed in on him none too discreetly. So, we ask with a smile, who's going to teach their kids tennis?

The Importance of Family

La famiglia. How important is family to success? "My family has always supported me, and being away from them has never caused problems or divisions," says Flavia, adding, "it's a big, rowdy, joyful family, with a serious sense of morality and great feeling. Like all women, I have reached the point of dreaming about having a family of my own, and I couldn't have asked for a better example." Roberta feels the same way. "If my family hadn't encouraged and counseled me, if they hadn't shared in my disappointments, I would never have achieved what I have."



The Secret to Success?

But what does playing sports mean for Flavia and Roberta? What is the secret to their success? “For me,” says Flavia, “tennis has always been a source of fun as well as a passion. Like all sports, it takes a lot of sacrifice and determination, especially when you’re down on your luck. But the values of sports have always impacted my life, and there’s nothing else to attribute my success to.” “Sports,” says Roberta, “have played a fundamental role in my life and I’m happy about that choice. There’s no secret to my success. To achieve it, you have to make a lot of sacrifices.”

Women in Sports

Do women sacrifice more than men? Is it still difficult for a woman to reach Flavia and Roberta’s level in a country like Italy? And if so, why? Flavia is a little more optimistic. “There have been a lot of breakthroughs in women’s sports in the last few years,” she says. “It’s no longer so easy to say that gaining access to particular levels is difficult.

Unlike a lot of other normal social environments, regulating agencies, organizers and international sports institutions have worked together to create more balance between the two categories (men’s and women’s).” Roberta’s experience, however, felt more fraught. “Practicing competitive sports is very hard if you don’t have the complete support of your family.

Sometimes, as in my case, you’re forced to leave your hometown in order to look for adequate frameworks elsewhere. So you can only reach top levels if you’re aware of the many costs involved. It takes a ton of determination.”

Sports and Friendship

Flavia and Roberta have played together since they were 9 years old. What is it like to play against an old friend in a final this important? How do you balance competition and friendship? “Friendship is the basis of all human relationships,” says Roberta, “and that includes those who play sports.

Flavia and I have been through a lot together; a large part of my tennis-playing life involves meeting Flavia in the underage tournaments. Of course, competition requires the drive and desire to win, but that can’t cancel out friendship. Even if it involves an adversary.”

Flavia jumps in. “Fortunately, we’re back to talking about values! Healthy values. Friendship and virtues—we tend to talk about them superficially, not realizing how much more difficult it is to practice them rather than ignore them. If you make a habit of holding them in high esteem and investing in them, you can convey them naturally and spontaneously in very different kinds of situations, even while competing.”

Role Models

It’s clear that their “mission impossible” has led many young people to regard them as role models. How aware of that are they? “I hope I am,” says Flavia. “I would like to dedicate more time to young people and the less fortunate. I must admit that I never had much time to explore such issues and I consider myself a very fortunate person.

It would be nice to convey to young people on the outskirts of society just how much will power, determination and passion can positively affect your life choices.” “I have one bit of advice for young people,” says Roberta. “Think of tennis—and sports in general—first and foremost as a source of fun. Don’t be so obsessed with winning. If you take it seriously, you’ll see the results.”

Long Live New York

And New York? What is your relationship to the city and the people who crowned you? It turns out New York is one of Flavia’s favorite cities. “I always feel at home here. New York has always had an influence on my performance in the tournament. I’d be remiss not to thank the city and its people.



They have always supported and appreciated me.” Roberta also considers the spectators in America “marvelous.” “They had a lot of fun. They applauded me even after I beat their goddess! That shows a lot of sportsmanship. I’d like to say to them, ‘Thanks, there will always be a special place for you in my best memories. In my heart.’”

Plans for the new year?

We’re coming to the end of our conversation. As well as to the end of a special year to raise a glass to. What will our two stars think of the year looking back at it on December 31st? What will they wish for the coming year? Roberta would like “a year without injuries, so she can experience moments as thrilling as her recent experience in New York.”

Flavia agrees, adding that she would like to help others. “I’ll try to take into consideration everything that’s going on around me, the major humanitarian crises and the dramatic effects they have on children. I adore children. I would like to give them a hand.”

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