



Let's Do It AGAIN

The United States launches its defense of the Fed Cup championship.

BY ANDREW LAWRENCE

Before hitting her first match ball in 2018, CoCo Vandeweghe roughed out some goals for herself. The thing that ranks highest? No, not cracking the top five in the world rankings or claiming her first major championship—you know, the milestones that usually figure foremost on every rising player's short list. Instead, Vandeweghe's priority is helping the United States to a repeat victory in Fed Cup, a journey that begins at the U.S. Cellular Center with this first-round tie against the Netherlands.

A successful defense of the Fed Cup championship is a big swing, sure, but that's typical of Vandeweghe—a posture-perfect purveyor of one of the world's most wicked first serves. A year ago, however, such an achievement would've been quite the reach for her and her compatriots.

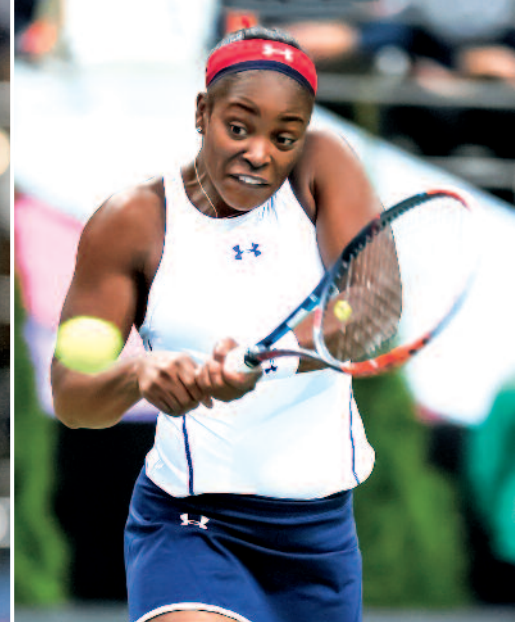
First of all, Team USA hadn't won Fed Cup since 2000. The United States, despite a record 17 titles, hardly looked the part of the most successful nation in Fed Cup history. The Czech Republic was dominant, claiming five championships in six years, 2011-2016. The U.S. looked more like the shell of a juggernaut, like a team that hadn't been a significant player on the world stage since Lindsay Davenport

stopped prowling the baseline for the Stars and Stripes.

When Davenport, a three-time Fed Cup champion who holds the U.S. record for most years played, called time on her Hall of Fame career in 2008, it was assumed that Serena Williams would carry the States through another decade of dominance. But Fed Cup is not a one-woman show. Williams, who played alongside Davenport on the 1999 title team, built a 13-1 record in seven Fed Cup appearances thereafter, yet she hasn't made it to a Fed Cup Final since her '99 season debut.

Venus Williams has played a few more times than Serena, compiling a 23-4 overall record, but she, too, has only the 1999 Final and championship on her ledger. This, despite the best efforts of former U.S. Fed Cup Captain Mary Joe Fernandez, herself a former champion. Apart from Fernandez's 2012 and '15 squads, which included *both* Williams sisters, she mostly filled her rosters with America's greenest, most promising talents—young women such as Vandeweghe, Alison Riske and Sloane Stephens. Young women who could really benefit from the experience.

Clearly, Fernandez was playing the long game. A pair of Finals appearances, in 2009 and '10, seemed a harbinger of the promise just



over the horizon. In the end, however, Fernandez ran out of time. In October 2016, she stepped down as captain after eight years at the helm. On her way out, she called the development of those young women “one of the most rewarding experiences of my career.”

It was also a huge gain for Kathy Rinaldi.

Tapped as Fernandez’s replacement in December 2016, Rinaldi was the spearhead of a larger USTA strategy to make American players feel more supported by their home team. In addition to her experience as a touring professional who once scrapped her way up to No. 7 on the singles charts, Rinaldi also brought to bear her considerable experience in the USTA as a development coach. In fact, she had led America’s Junior Fed Cup team to titles in 2012 and ’14. In other words, she knew the job of Fed Cup captain—how to navigate scheduling conflicts, how to manage injuries, how to guide a player without undoing their chosen coach’s work.

Most importantly, Rinaldi knew the deep pool of talent she had to work with. “I’ve known these girls since they were young,” says Rinaldi. “I’ve seen them grow. We have so many great players that I believe in, that I can put together a team I can win with.”

Certainly, none of her players can rightly be called underdogs anymore. Riske, the elder stateswoman in the group at age 27, showed her grit and determination last year while registering a first-round upset of Germany’s Andrea Petkovic in Maui, where Riske scored first blood in a frantic, 12-10, opening-set tiebreaker. Lauren Davis, a late call-up a few months after claiming her first WTA singles crown, showed fight in a losing singles effort against the Czech Republic in the Fed Cup semifinals. When America’s hopes in doubles seemed dashed after then-No. 1 Bethanie Mattek-Sands went down with a gruesome knee injury at Wimbledon, Shelby Rogers came off the bench to help the United States clinch victory against Belarus in the title match in Minsk.

Of course, this was after Stephens, fresh off winning the US Open, nearly sealed the deal herself, while pushing Belarus’s Aryna Sabalenka and Aliaksandra Sasnovich to three sets apiece. “She didn’t win her matches,” Rinaldi says, “but she put her heart and soul on the line out on that court. You can’t ask for more than that. And I guarantee you she will clinch a title for the U.S. It will come down to one of her matches.”

But the real American hero was Vandeweghe, winner of all eight of her 2017 Fed Cup matches. She’s the first player to do that since the

(Left to right) Captain Kathy Rinaldi, CoCo Vandeweghe, Sloane Stephens, Shelby Rogers and Alison Riske brought home the 2017 Fed Cup title. Rogers was overjoyed upon clinching the crown. Vandeweghe set a Fed Cup record with her play throughout the year. Stephens was the first reigning US Open champion since 2004 to compete on a Fed Cup title team in the same year.

current format was introduced in 2005. Those wins include the doubles clincher she played with Rodgers, a partner she had lost twice with in tour events earlier in the year. “I really relished that moment of having the crowd against me,” an exhausted Vandeweghe said after the Final. “[I] was really enjoying the moment of firing myself up and believing myself and knowing that my teammates believed in me to get the wins when it mattered most.”

With all that experience, the Americans should not be lacking for confidence against a Netherlands team that’s expected to be shorthanded. Kiki Bertens, a Top 30 singles player who opened this season by claiming a doubles title in Brisbane, is skipping. That leaves the Dutch with a probable lineup of leftie Aranxta Rus, upstart Lesley Kerkhove, the diminutive but dangerous Richèl Hogenkamp (she notched an outsized victory in a marathon match against Russia’s Svetlana Kuznetsova in 2016) and doubles specialist Demi Schuurs, Bertens’ co-conspirator for the Brisbane title. “You can’t underestimate anybody,” Rinaldi says.

Without the experience of Bertens, who’s an impressive 24-4 in Fed Cup play, the Dutch side will really have to band together—and this is already a pretty tight group. The captain, Paul Haarhuis, a good-humored former doubles ace (and Florida State graduate), keeps the mood light with his friendly card games and practice court challenges.

Chemistry is important to Rinaldi as well. As for how it might be affected by the addition of a Williams sister or two? Well, Rinaldi thinks they would not only enhance last year’s mix, but also provide the sizzle for another Fed Cup campaign to remember. “Once you’ve played for your country, you understand there’s no other feeling,” Rinaldi says. “Tennis is such an individual sport. When you come together as a team with one common goal, it’s just a really special bond. It’s a special week. I hope that the players who play under me as captain will look back and say those are the most special weeks of their careers, that they really stand out.” ●

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