

The secret of Sam Stosur's fitness

Sam Stosur's good form is due to her fitness, Adrian Proszenko writes.

JUST how fit is Sam Stosur?

After grinding the triple threat of Justine Henin, Serena Williams and Jelena Jankovic into the red clay of Roland Garros, we put the question to the woman who oversees the fitness regimen of Australia's top-ranked player.

"I'd put her in the class of Martina," said Sydney fitness guru Giselle Martin.

She is speaking of Martina Navratilova, one of the fittest, strongest and most determined athletes to pick up a racquet.

Martin knows a fair bit about super-fit athletes, having trained the likes of grand slam winners Navratilova, Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario and Jennifer Capriati.

The latest product to roll of the Martin production line, Stosur is physically impressive — all ripped frame, dark sunglasses and new-found composure.

But if you think Stosur's chis-

elled physique is the product of hours in the gym, you are only half-right.

"I haven't ever done a biceps curl with her," Martin said.

"Looking at her, everyone thinks that she's bench-pressing 200 kilograms. But very rarely do we do bench press, and when

we do it's more with dumbbells. It's about making it functional [for tennis]."

It's why Stosur has trained on just about every Christmas Day since she first linked with Martin six years ago. But rather than just countless hours at the gym, pre-season workouts consist of a multitude of cross-training exercises.

Sprint coaches are employed to oversee Stosur's work at the athletics track at ES Marks Field in Centennial Parklands.

Boxing, kickboxing, swimming, bike riding and even surf-ski training all complement the work she does on the court or in the gym.

While there were fears of an emotional letdown after defeating No. 1 seed Williams, Stosur went up a notch against the erratic Jankovic. The 26-year-old Queenslander got better as the match progressed. Martin was not surprised.

"I'd love it if they made it [best of] five sets [for

SAM'S SECRET TRAINING REGIME FOR MAKING IT TO A GRAND SLAM FINAL ON RED CLAY...



women)," she said.

"I'd have to say she's up there with the strongest and the fittest girls on the tour."

This was not always the case. By her own admission, Stosur was a "terrible" trainer before linking with Martin. But there is little doubt that hard work she has put in is starting to reap rewards.

"When she first started she wasn't very consistent with her training, it would be on and off," Martin said.

"She's lucky that she is blessed with that natural fitness. I think now it's more that she's consistent with it.

Qualities to draw young girls to the game

MICHAEL BACHELARD

SAMANTHA Stosur's remarkable success at Roland Garros in the past week is as much due to her almost laconic approach to life as it is to her extraordinary physical abilities.

"She's like the female Pat Rafter," says Craig Morris, her former coach and now head of female tennis at Tennis Australia.

"She's got a real inner self-belief, but she's your girl next door and she's humble. And this is where she's great for Australian tennis."

It is these qualities, as well as her victories, that former coaches and tennis watchers believe will attract a new set of girls to play the game that Australian women once dominated on the world stage.

Stosur's slow development contrasts with the recent barrage of Russian teenagers, who soar up the rankings from 200 to 30 in a year. But at 26,

having worked the hard way to get to where she is, they believe she's also unlikely to flame out.

Once it was said of Stosur that she did not really have the will to win. But after a struggle with a debilitating bacterial disease in 2007, she discovered her mojo, and, in the past two years of playing, an increasing number of victories has convinced her she can take her game to the very top.

Victories this week against top-ranked Serena Williams and Justine Henin have sealed that: now she has the self-belief of a winner, with enough of her old laid-back attitude to allow her to stay calm under the pressure of finals tennis.

"She's a relaxed person off the court," says Morris. "She's never got bogged down in too much detail, or worrying about it. It's a characteristic that's really shown in the past two weeks."

Morris also believes that, despite Serena Williams' imposing physical presence, "Sam is the strongest and most powerful player on the circuit."

"Serena is the only one who's close, but her strength on the court is what got her through to the final."

Now the challenge is to channel the huge level of public interest in Stosur into the women's game in general. Morris has no doubt she can

help do it.

"Sam is so inclusive, so 'gettable'. She's open to help out and talk to younger athletes, get on the court with them... she's a great individual, and putting back."

She already mentors many of the younger Australian women playing the circuit, but broadening the base of the game, attracting new girls to play, is the big challenge.

Tennis Australia is considering start-

ing an advertising campaign with Stosur at its centre, to encourage girls to take up tennis.

"There's no better marketing campaign to have Sam splashed all over the front and back covers of the newspapers," he said.

With work in the past few years on developing a child-friendly game, Hot-shots, and also on the structure of coaching, Tennis Australia was ready to spring into action to take advantage of a hoped-for influx of children.

Margaret Court, Australia's last French Open winner in 1973, agreed that Stosur would bring a lot of young girls to the game. But she said they needed to be coached in good stroke-play from the start.

"Sam's got excellent strokes and I think they've got to look at this aspect... and not try and teach everybody to look like a robot."

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No glory this time, but the future is bright

NATALIE CRAIG

THE top dogs of tennis proclaimed a win for the women's game in Australia despite Sam Stosur's loss in the French Open last night.

Margaret Court, the last Australian woman to win the French Open, in 1973, said Stosur had returned women's tennis to the fore, and her chances at Wimbledon were strong.

"It will help women's tennis a lot and give all of our girls more confidence," Court said. "If she can learn to use the court a bit better and volley more, she'll be a good chance at Wimbledon."

Davis Cup great John Alexander agreed the odds were narrowing for a Wimbledon win next month.

Alexander was ridiculed by tennis pundits in 2005 for proclaiming that Stosur would one day triumph at Wimbledon, despite bookies rating her a \$150 chance that year.

She's now rated a \$12 chance to win at the All England Club, according to online bookies last night, and Alexander is willing to bet she'll go all the way.

"I drew a lot of criticism for saying Sam would win [Wimbledon]... a lot of people laughed at me," Alexander said. "I've been well and truly vindicated."

"Sam's ability has been far



Sam Stosur feels the pressure during the game.

greater than her belief in herself, but now her confidence has caught up. She'll go into Wimbledon a favourite, and if she doesn't win next month, she will eventually."

He said while the 26-year-old was no prodigy, her steadiness, lack of injury and determination would contribute to a successful career spanning the next four to eight years.

The Wimbledon grass is considered a tougher surface for Stosur, and she lost last year in the third round.

Fellow Queenslander Wendy Turnbull, who in 1979 was the last Australian woman to reach the final of the French Open, said from Burgundy, south-east of Paris, that Schiavone played the better game.

"It is not easy in the grand slam final... but Sam was not aggressive enough."



Francesca Schiavone kisses the clay after winning the French Open at Roland Garros last night.

PICTURE: REUTERS

Sam Stosur is one of the fittest women on the tour.

PICTURE: GETTY IMAGES