Local tennis player grabs wild card spot at U.S. Open

Contributed by APRIL SIMPSON Special to South Florida Times
Thursday, 22 August 2013
Last Updated Thursday, 22 August 2013

MIRAMAR — When Sachia Vickery competes in the U.S. Open next week, it will be the pinnacle of a goal that she's been working toward since age 5.

"It's been my dream since I started playing tennis," said the soft-spoken and poised 18-year-old Miramar native. "It's all I used to watch on TV. That's where I saw Serena [Williams] and [sister] Venus [Williams], so playing main draw is unbelievable."

Earlier this month, top-seeded Vickery beat second-seeded Alexandra Kiick of Plantation to win the USTA Girls' 18s National Championship in San Diego. In doing so, she earned a wild card spot in the women's singles main draw at the U.S. Open between Aug. 26 and Sept. 9 in Flushing, N.Y.

"I'm probably the youngest person in the tournament," Vickery said. "Nobody's really expecting that much from me, so I'll just go and play my game and give my 100 percent best."

Vickery was 5½ years old when she told her mother, Paula Liverpool, that she was going to be the next Serena Williams. And when little Sachia made a habit of hitting a ball through her grandmother's bedroom window, Liverpool knew she needed to enroll her somewhere fast.

Since then, Vickery has excelled. She is 230th in the World Tennis Organization rankings, and says she intends to play tennis for as long as she can. Although she has struggled with knee and back injuries, she says her body feels good and she's more excited than nervous about the upcoming big event.

"But I'm sure once I get there before my match, I'll be a little nervous," she added.

Vickery trains for four hours a day, Mondays through Saturdays, at the USTA in Boca Raton and joins her mother at their two-story Miramar home on weekends. She belongs to an athletic family. Her mother ran track in high school in her native Guyana, where her father Rawle Vickery was a professional soccer player. Her elder brother, Dominique Mitchell, is a defensive back in the South

Carolina State University football program

Vickery wants people to know that, with hard work, they can reach their tennis dreams too.

“I started out in a regular park,” she said. “I didn’t go to big academies and I didn’t have high-level coaches but, even coming from that, I think I’m doing pretty well."

Last week, Miramar Vice Mayor Alexandra P. Davis issued a proclamation naming Aug. 14, 2013, “Sachia Vickery Day.”

“We wish her the best and we’re certainly rooting for her,” Davis said in a phone interview. “We expect her to do well.”

But Vickery’s ascendance in such an expensive sport hasn’t been easy for her or her single mother.

For pros like Vickery, the sport can cost between $6,000 and $10,000 a month, said Dean Hall, founder of American Tennis Academy, a local nonprofit that provides low-cost training and support to young tennis players. Costly training academies, travel to domestic and international tournaments, rackets, clothing, shoes and specialized coaches all add up.

“That squeezes out African Americans from being exposed to that level of coaching and developing,” Hall said. Of Liverpool, he said, “I know she’s doing whatever she can.”

Liverpool has worked as a paralegal and a flight attendant to support her daughter but says she’s currently devoted to being there for her when she travels.

At age 14, Vickery signed with two French companies, Lacoste and LaGardère-Unlimited, which, she says, give her $50,000 each per year that she uses to pay for tournaments and travel.

She travels, on average, once a week, and counts Italy and Croatia among the more interesting countries she’s visited. Since 2011, she’s won $33,328 in prize money.

“People look at you as being kind of brazen to even try to enter into something like this. I had to find ways and means to improvise, work, and do whatever it took to get what she needed,” Liverpool said.

The Atlanta Black Star, an online publication, reported on Aug. 15 that former drug kingpin Rick Ross, through his nonprofit Freeway Literacy Foundation, paid for Vickery’s hotel stay in San Diego and that Ross claimed she earned her U.S. Open spot with his help.

Liverpool told the South Florida Times that report was “false.” She said Ross knows Vickery’s father and his nonprofit donated $200 to help with food costs in San Diego. She added that she is working to repay that money and has reached out to Ross, his lawyer and the Atlanta Black Star to “correct” the story.

Curtis Bunn, who wrote the Atlanta Black Star story and is a deputy editor for the publication, is standing by his report. In an email exchange, Bunn said, “I reported EXACTLY what Rick Ross indicated he and his partner contributed, which was Sachia’s ‘board’ when she played on a US Open qualifying tournament in San Diego. That is not disputable because he sent that to me in an e-mail.”

In an email exchange, Ross initially confirmed the Atlanta Black Star story, then backed off, saying his nonprofit provided a “small donation” to cover Vickery’s “food expenses” in San Diego. He said he may assist with her room and board at the U.S. Open if she needs help.

Liverpool said the family’s finances are tight but she is not seeking donations – or planning to host a fundraiser. “I’ve gotten this far on my own, so she’ll get there,” she said.