

Nice return! Courier's a top seed in the booth

By MICHAEL GILTZ

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GREAT tennis stars don't always make great commentators.

Chris Evert, Jimmy Connors and Martina Navratilova all took a shot at it with middling-to-poor results.

But Jim Courier, who just retired from his 13-year career on the courts last month, could be the most promising addition to the broadcast booth since bad-boy John McEnroe stunned TV audiences with his warmth and astute insight into the game.

Courier made his debut as a commentator this week at Wimbledon and has already started to make friends.



Jim Courier: His dry wit works.

Usually paired with sportscaster Marv Albert during TNT's noon-to-6 p.m. broadcasts, Courier's famous dry humor is already scoring points.

In his first days in the booth, the 29-year-old has referred to players hitting the ball "with authority!" — a teasing reference to one of Albert's signature NBA calls — and had fun with the fan frenzy surrounding up-and-coming American Jan-Michael Gambill, a handsome athlete who creates a stir just by changing his shirt.

Comparisons to McEnroe are hardly far fetched.

In 1992, Courier was the first American to reach No. 1 since McEnroe held the spot seven years earlier.

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Courier ultimately garnered four Grand Slams and won himself a noble spot in Davis Cup history, with one of the all-time great matches last summer versus Britain's Greg Rusedski.

But a seemingly endless string of injuries and unsatisfying results once he got back into form are probably good reasons he's decided to change careers.

"I'd thought about it for years as something I'd like to do if I had the opportunity," says Courier. Then fate stepped in.

"It was eerie, actually. I talked to my agents about [doing TV commentary] and they talked to me about what it would involve and what tournaments I might be interested in doing.

"The very next day, TNT called them about Wimbledon," he says.

Raised in Dade City, Fla. Courier was part of the generation that produced Pete Sampras, Andre Agassi, and Michael Chang. A city courts, rough-and-tumble gamer, Courier fought for every point *a la* Connors:

But unlike other players, he had a well-rounded life.

Courier taught himself French on tour and always made a point of exploring the cities he was playing in. A fan of golf and baseball (especially the Cincinnati Reds), Courier also has a passion for music and plays the guitar and drums.

So when the tennis ended, Courier was not at a loss for what to do next.

Still, being part of the media poses some interesting ironies.

Just as McEnroe terrorized umpires on the court, Courier was known for his sharp tongue off the court which he used on reporters who were either ill-informed or mean-spirited.

"That was earlier in my career that I would get discouraged by that stuff," says Courier, who never really had a bad image. In fact, his sarcastic replies to dumb questions were hilarious — so reporters still loved speaking with him.

From his own experience and watching analysts in other sports, Courier knows what he doesn't like.

"I don't like it when people take shots at players who don't warrant it. I didn't like it when they took shots at *me* if I was trying."

And Courier knows what he likes.

"I want to tell things from a player's perspective," he says, "things people don't know in general.

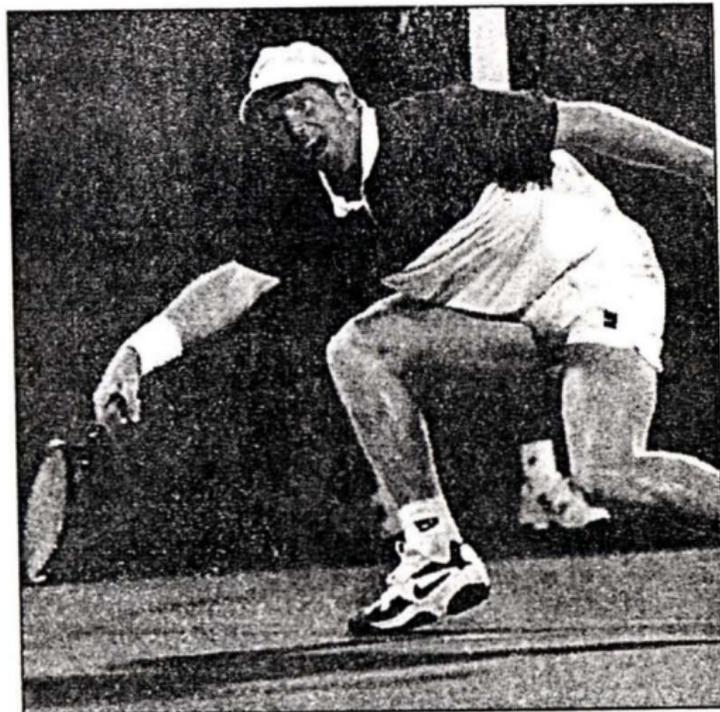
"I want to talk about the way the grass courts change over the course of a tournament; the way the balls have gotten heavier and heavier here at Wimbledon in the last six years and how it's amazing Pete keeps winning when they change the variables.

"Not everybody knows that.

"And if I'm watching some other sport I'm not so well schooled in, I like to know that. I like to know Tiger has switched golf balls and won his first two tournaments with it."

Nike probably wants you to know that, too.

"They find that very interesting," laughs Courier. "I don't think Titleist does, though."



Courier — playing the baseline in his playing heyday — has teamed up with Marv Albert for his commentating debut at Wimbledon.