

TENNIS

Oudin Injects Optimism Into U.S. Women's Game

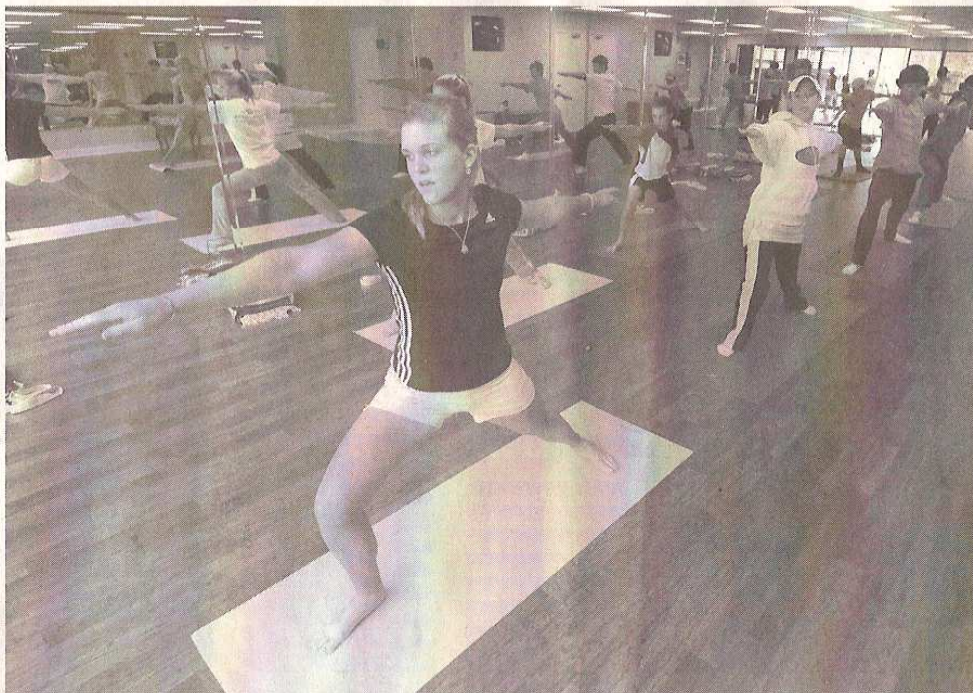
By MIKE TIERNEY

The United States Fed Cup captain, Mary Joe Fernandez, was watching a match at the Australian Open in January when her 7-year-old daughter said of one competitor, "Mommy, she is so positive."

"You're right," replied Fernandez, who returned home and promptly sent an e-mail message to the obscure player, Melanie Oudin, to join the American team for its quarterfinal series against Argentina in February.

"I couldn't believe it," said Oudin, 17, who had turned professional a year earlier.

Oudin's Fed Cup story got better when she was surprisingly selected to play singles. In her first match, she pushed Argentina's top player, Gisela Dulko, before losing by 6-2, 7-5. In her second match, she charged from a set down against Argentina's No. 2 Betina Jozami in a 2-6, 6-1, 6-2 victory that tied the best-of-five competition at 2-2. The American team went on to win, 3-2, and advanced to the semifinals against the Czech Republic on April 25-26.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIN S. LESER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Positive could be the word-association test answer to Oudin, who will step back on the court this week after she was granted a wild-card invitation to the BNP Paribas Open in Indian Wells, Calif.

"You can't tell if she's winning or losing" by her facial expression or body language, Fernandez said. "Even when she's down, she looks like she is up."

At 5 feet 5 inches and forever looking up at her peers, Oudin (pronounced ooo-DAN) says she wishes she were taller "every single day." She says she tries to fashion her game after that of the similarly diminutive Justine Henin.

"I can't expect to get aces like those 6-foot Russians do all the time," said Oudin, whose prematch ritual includes visualizing points that she never loses. "But I'm quick, so it kind of evens out."

She was quick, too, in deciding on a career path. While watching a Wimbledon broadcast at age 9, Oudin turned to her mother and said, "I'm going to be on those courts by the time I'm 16." And, she was, participating in the junior tournaments at Wimbledon and at the United States Open last year.

Oudin's game took a quantum leap in seventh grade, when she began home-schooling. The flexible schedule allowed her to double her practice time to four hours on weekdays. But it also has deprived her of attending homecomings and school dances, something she said she envied about her fraternal twin, Katherine. Then she reminded herself



Melanie Oudin, 17, on the yoga mat. She turned professional last year. She has helped the United States advance to the Fed Cup semifinals against the Czech Republic.

Except in the Oudin household in Atlanta, where her two sisters regularly beat her in matches — in the virtual world of Nintendo Wii tennis — critics of Melanie's game are difficult to find.

"Her attitude on the court is fantastic, as good as I've seen," said Ola Malmqvist, the director of women's tennis development for the United States Tennis Association. "She never stops fighting. The way she goes about it, she will get the best out of her ability."

Fernandez said she was struck by Oudin's demeanor after her Fed Cup loss to Dulko.

"She was really upset," Fernandez said. "Sometimes, you don't see that with young players. She wasn't content with losing."

Oudin is not assured a place on the Fed Cup team against the Czech Republic; her inclusion will hinge on whether Venus and Serena Williams, who declined an invitation to the quarterfinals because of scheduling conflicts, participate. If they opt in, Oudin will be out.

Oudin said she was O.K. with that. There will be more Fed Cups, more tournaments, more drop-to-the-knees victory poses.

About that, she is positive.

that, "a lot of people would like to be in my shoes."

Oudin was barely out of children's sizes when, against the grain, she became a professional. Since the WTA implemented age eligibility rules that cap the number of tournaments teenagers can enter each year, the average age of WTA rookies has risen.

"It's been her goal since she was 9," said her mother, Leslie Oudin.

After Melanie conquered the junior circuit, her mother agreed to let her turn pro if she promised to eventually attend college.

"It's my job now," Oudin said of tennis. "This is a business."

As the boss, she makes the tough decisions, like replacing her lifelong

coach last month.

"I'm not good with hurting people's feelings," she said. "I just didn't think the old coach could bring me to the next level. I need someone who's been there."

Grant Stafford, a former touring pro from South Africa, coaches Oudin six days a week, blending light banter and encouragement with rigorous training. A little more than an hour into one session, Oudin said with a gasp, "I feel like I've been on the court forever."

When Oudin frowned at some gentle criticism, Stafford told her: "Remember, when I say something needs work, that doesn't mean it is bad. You can be very critical of yourself."