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Comebacks: Mario Lemieux and Jennifer Capriati

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It is the season for comebacks. The return of Magic Johnson to the Lakers last week was certainly the biggest news since the return of Michael Jordan to the Bulls last year. Thus far Johnson has been impressive in his Laker uniform, while Michael has been leading the Bulls to one of the greatest seasons in NBA history. Both comebacks seem to be successful and both are great sports stories.

There has been another comeback that has been even more impressive, and a fourth that is about to begin.

Last season Mario Lemieux did not play hockey. In the previous season Lemieux had been diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease and it was doubtful whether he would ever play hockey again. Following radiation treatments Lemieux was left in a weakened condition and even after several months of recovery he was still too weak to execute normal everyday tasks. Not surprisingly Lemieux retired from hockey.

Now two years after his original diagnosis there are very few signs that Super Mario has been through a battle for, if not his life, certainly his career. Today Lemieux is once again the greatest player in hockey and being compared to Wayne Gretzky, who is the greatest to ever put on skates.

To see him play it's impossible to detect any difference between the Mario Lemieux of two or three years ago, and the Lemieux of today, expect today's Lemieux is better. In addition to recovering from the radiation treatments and having the Hodgkin's disease in remission, Lemieux is in better physical shape today than at any time in his life. The back problems that plagued him during his career have been overcome by physical therapy, after two surgeries had failed.

Before the season started the statistics showed that Mario Lemieux had the highest career goals per game average, and that he was second to Wayne Gretzky in assists per game and points per game. This season he has done nothing but improve on those numbers. Through his first 44 games he had 45 goals, 65 assists, 110 points, and led the league in each category.

Lemieux's return was to be tempered with days off to avoid some back-to-back games, but at mid-season he had only missed six and had seldom missed a shift on the ice. If this was happening in

any other sport Lemieux's remarkable accomplishment would be regarded as the greatest sports story of the decade. It is hard to believe that it has gotten as little attention as it has, and the hope is that Mario Lemieux's story will get both the national and international attention it deserves.

The other comeback that is about to begin in Paris is that of Jennifer Capriati. Still only nineteen years old, although turning twenty next month, Capriati's story is all too familiar to women's tennis where burnout seems almost as frequent as tennis elbow.

Capriati dropped out of the tennis tour after losing in the first round of the U.S. Open in 1993 in the midst of much comment on her weight, not exactly a confidence builder for a teenager.

Since leaving the tour in 1993 Jennifer Capriati's life has been a slide from one problem to another. She has had elbow surgery, been through two drug rehabilitation programs, dropped out of high school, ran away from home, been arrested for shoplifting in Tampa, and been arrested for possession of marijuana in a drug raid.

Her career before the crash was storybook. At age thirteen she reached the finals in her first pro tournament. At age fourteen she was the youngest player ever to reach a Grand Slam semi-final and followed that up by being the youngest player to win a match at Wimbledon, and at age fifteen was the youngest player to reach a Wimbledon semi-final. In 1992 she won a Olympic Gold Medal.

It was estimated that Capriati was earning about \$5M a year from tennis endorsements, and nearly a million in competition. But all was not well. Pressures from family and from the public led her early on to talk about burnout. Many times before it actually happened, she talked of leaving the tour. And finally it all came apart.

Now at the old age of nearly twenty Jennifer Capriati begins her comeback. Perhaps she can turn to Michael, Magic or Mario for inspiration. Perhaps she will make it and if she does it will offer some hope.

Unfortunately the tennis courts, gymnastic mats, and ice rinks of America are littered with the wreckage of little girls, and comebacks from this social disease have been rare.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to a good sport to be a bad loser.

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