

**Mirjana Lucic: "It was always my goal to come back."
Grand Slam winner leads \$50K Classic Qualifying**

By Daniel Lucas
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For Mirjana Lucic, playing the qualifying draw at the Gwinnett Sports Commission Women's \$50K Classic is a welcome step on the way back to big-time tennis. The only grand slam winner in the field (she won the Australian Open doubles with Martina Hingis in 1998) is fighting her way back to tennis' big leagues after being out of the game since 2000.

The 26-year-old Croatian now calls Bradenton, Florida her home. At 438th in the world, the 5'11" right-hander is working now to build ranking points. She returned to tennis in 2007, playing in four events, and is playing full time this year. Happy to be back, Lucic says, "I love it. I never went out [of tennis] all the way. It was personal reasons why I didn't play. I definitely was always into it and was practicing. I never really went far [away from tennis]. It was always my goal to come back."

As she plays her way back into form, she enjoys the luxury of drawing on experiences that the other players in the qualifying field can only dream of for now. In the summer of 1998 she proved the Australian Open win earlier that year was no fluke as she made it to the finals of the Wimbledon Mixed Doubles draw with Mahesh Bhupathi, losing the championship match to Serena Williams and Max Mirnyi. The following year she made it to the semifinals at Wimbledon in singles, falling only to Steffi Graff.

Most players in the qualifying draw are up-and-comers, hungry to make a name and career for themselves in pro tennis. Does her grand slam experience and two WTA singles titles (Croatia 1997 and 1998) give her a leg up on these young guns? "I think it is definitely an advantage," she replies with a smile.

But her focus is squarely set on rebuilding her own career. Lucic explains, "I am working my way up and this is the way I have to go right now. Of course, I'd like to right away go and play the grand slams but you have to do the smaller steps before and playing these tournaments, playing these matches, playing 'qualies,' is going to get me there. I want to end my year playing as many matches as possible. That's what I've been saying since the beginning: Get my confidence and my shots back.

"I've had already such a good career at such a young age and so many successes I definitely want to get [back playing top-level events]. I feel that I'm playing great. I feel that I have a lot more experience than when I was a little kid. And I'm willing to do all the work that it takes and I'm definitely working my way up."

When it comes to just what she must work on to succeed, she plays her cards close to her vest: "There's a lot of things. I'm not going to say what, so nobody knows!" She is similarly coy when asked if she is working with a coach, answering, "Yes. But we're going to keep that under wraps for now!" Lucic relates that getting back in form involves "... mostly just playing a lot of matches and getting that confidence, something you can't get any other way other than winning match after match after match. I did lots of work—lots of hard work. I'm healthy, I'm fit, I just need to win a lot of matches. That's my goal."

The morning of the first round of the qualifying draw was cold and blustery. Lucic's opponent, Phoebe Di Leo of Louisiana, had pulled out of the tournament with an ankle injury, giving the qualifying draw's top seed an unexpectedly easy morning and a chance to reflect. As she watched the action on court number one between two unranked players she mused, "When you're playing and you're on the court you focus on what you're doing. I'd much rather be playing grand slams right now but you cannot skip a step. This is a very important step for my career and I have to go through it. I'm doing what I love. I cannot complain. I love it. I'm playing tennis—that is all that matters."