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U.S. Open Notebook

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Journalists' Secret Weapon

Friday, Sept. 2 -- Sometimes, journalism is a little too easy in this age of modern technology. The secret weapon of the media horde covering the U.S. Open: a free service that transcribes every major player press conference.

Lindsay Davenport chatted with reporters yesterday about her second-round victory; minutes later, a man was walking through the media work area with a printed transcript, complete with correct spellings of Vitas Gerulaitis and the unfamiliar female tour last names of Vaidisova (Nicole), Karatantcheva (Sesil) and Kutuzova (Viktorina). If you read five reports from Flushing and notice the same Serena Williams quote about her latest gaudy bauble, it's because the reporters are relying on the transcripts, even if they attended the press conference and asked the question.

The transcripts are the handiwork of a New York company called ASAP Sports, founded by former court reporter Peter Paul Balestrieri in 1989. The company now covers press conferences at nearly 150 events annually, including tennis, golf, the Super Bowl and the Final Four.

Jaime Morrocco, a 45-year-old former legal stenographer from Portland, Ore., has been a fixture at the Open press conferences this year. It's his 10th year working with the company. Mr. Morrocco says he's licensed at 260 words per minute on his state-of-the-art phonetic keyboard, but can exceed 300 words per minute for the tour's fastest talkers. (By Mr. Morrocco's reckoning, that list includes Kim Clijsters, Lleyton Hewitt, James Blake and Greg Rusedski, -- the bane of typing hands everywhere.) Perhaps it was a scheduler with a sense of humor who pitted Messrs. Blake and Rusedski against each other in the first round; after the press conference with the victorious Mr. Blake, "my back was just in spasms," Mr. Morrocco says.

The stenographer keyboard connects via Bluetooth to a nearby laptop, where an assistant checks for mistakes. After a typical interview, the transcript is emailed to on-site reporters who have opted in and sent to a printer, all within 90 seconds. Event

organizers pay for the service -- Mr. Morrocco declined to say how much -- as a perk for reporters and to enhance coverage.

To reach 300 word per minute and minimize the mental fatigue, Mr. Morrocco has programmed some shortcuts: Sop is U.S. Open; Wib is Wimbledon; Kuz is Kuznetsova, as in defending champion Svetlana Kuznetsova, who's been mentioned less frequently than expected since her first-round loss. I spewed a gibberish sentence about the tournament, and Mr. Morrocco demonstrated his craft by typing it onto his screen instantly. The process is fallible, of course; several of Mr. Hewitt's mentions of "blokes" were rendered as "blocks." (Mr. Morrocco says more than 99% of the words come out correct.)

The U.S. Tennis Association doesn't want to make it too easy to cover its flagship event, so reporters who aren't covering the Open are barred from the email list. "Otherwise, newspapers wouldn't pay to have people come," Mr. Morrocco says.

The USTA does publish [select interviews](#)¹¹ on its Web site; ASAP Sports maintains [a free archive](#)¹² of all its interviews, from all sports. (Click on the sport's name and then on the desired year.) So you can, for instance, reminisce about Serena Williams's [bizarre exchange](#)¹³ with reporters on the origin of the word "ghetto" at the 1998 U.S. Open.

The job has perks and burdens. Because they have day and night sessions, the U.S. Open and Australian Open are the toughest slams. A typical work day starts at 11:30 and lasts until midnight; back when the grinder Michael Chang was playing, one of his late-night five-setters could lead to a closing time of 3:30 a.m. Mr. Morrocco spent 19 weeks on the road last year, including stops in Palm Springs, London and Paris. At some events he gets to attend matches; at others he finds himself in subterranean interview rooms as the games go on. The work is tougher than court reporting, because Mr. Morrocco can't interrupt Andre Agassi in mid-sentence to ask him to repeat a tough word. ASAP Sports addresses that by time-syncing audio with the transcription, so a post-match click on the troublesome word will call up a recording of the relevant sentence.

There are, of course, non-cash perks. Even as he's typing furiously, Mr. Morrocco can identify the money quotes that will be repeated in dozens of media outlets. His traditional morning regimen during tournaments include buying a stack of newspapers and looking for the quotes he's typed and dispatched to reporters. "I get a little pride out of it," he says. "I'm sure they wouldn't have gotten it on deadline, that quickly, without us."

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