

Laureus World Sports Awards, Barcelona 2006

## WINNING RETURN PUTS MARTINA HINGIS IN LINE FOR LAUREUS WORLD COMEBACK OF THE YEAR AWARD

- US Open winner Kim Clijsters serves up a double tennis challenge
- Hardmen Lomu and Bruschi fight back after life-threatening illnesses
- Qualifying period ends after 2006 Winter Olympics in Turin
- Laureus World Sports Awards to be held in Barcelona, May 20-22

LONDON, February 7, 2006 – The remarkable return to Grand Slam tennis action after more than three years absence has made Switzerland's Martina Hingis a strong contender for nomination for the 2006 Laureus World Comeback of the Year Award. The 25-year-old celebrated her return in style by winning the Australian Open mixed doubles with Mahesh Bhupathi in Melbourne – her 15th Grand Slam title.

Hingis and India's Bhupathi, who entered the tournament as wild cards, beat sixth seeded pair Daniel Nestor and Elena Likhovtseva 6-3 6-3 in the final. She also reached the quarter-finals of the women's singles to climb 232 places in the world rankings.

Following two ankle operations in seven months, Hingis' last appearance in a Grand Slam singles event was at the US Open in September 2002. After her victory in Melbourne, she said: "If anyone asks me why I came back, this is why - the dream of being back on court, of winning major titles."

In January 1997, Hingis had become the youngest Grand Slam singles winner in the 20th century by winning the Australian Open aged 16 years and 3 months and in March that year she became the youngest-ever player to attain the World No.1 ranking. In a golden period of three years, she won the Australian Open three times and Wimbledon and the US Open once each. In 1998 Hingis won all four of the Grand Slam women's doubles titles.

Hingis could well find herself nominated for the Laureus World Comeback of the Year Award alongside Belgium's Kim Clijsters, the woman who beat her in the singles quarter-finals in Melbourne.

Clijsters, 22, won the US Open in September, her first ever Grand Slam, after missing twelve months with a career-threatening wrist injury. Her victory over Mary Pierce in the final at Flushing Meadows was the climax of a remarkable 2005 when she won eight other tournaments in Indian Wells, Miami, Eastbourne, Stanford, Los Angeles, Toronto, Luxembourg and Hasselt in Belgium.

But tennis faces a challenge from a wide variety of sports. Rugby's Jonah Lomu, once the world's most feared attacker who scored 37 tries in 63 Test matches for New Zealand, made a courageous return to the sport in December 2005 with Welsh club Cardiff after having a kidney transplant at the end of 2003 to tackle a rare disease. Lomu, 30, has

become a regular in Cardiff's team, and his presence has attracted some of the club's biggest attendances of the year.

American football hardman defender Tedy Bruschi, at 32, suffered a stroke just a week after the New England Patriot's third Super Bowl victory in four years. Bruschi was left partially blind and unable to walk. Doctors diagnosed a heart defect and after an operation Bruschi amazed the sports world by returning to action just eight months later. In his first game, Bruschi made ten crucial tackles and was named AFC Player of the Week.

Bruschi shared the NFL Comeback of the Year Award with Carolina Panthers' Steve Smith, who suffered a broken leg in 2004 putting him out of action for the entire season. However Smith rebounded from the injury in a big way during 2005 season, leading the NFL with 1,563 receiving yards and sharing the league lead in receptions and touchdowns with 103 and 12, respectively. He also averaged 15.2 yards per catch and was selected for the 2006 Pro Bowl.

US baseball's Ken Griffey Jr overcame a debilitating hamstring injury with revolutionary surgery to return to the Cincinnati Reds team and hit 35 home runs during the 2005 season, ending the year tied with Mickey Mantle, and passing Jimmie Foxx, Ted Williams, Willie McCovey, Ernie Banks, Eddie Mathews and Mel Ott. The operation, which became known as The Junior Operation, used titanium screws to reattach the hamstring. He was named National League Comeback Player of the Year.

Sweden's high jump star Kajsa Bergqvist had been devastated in July 2004 when she tore her Achilles tendon just one month before the 2004 Athens Olympics. However she recovered just in time to compete in the 2005 World Championships in Helsinki, where she won the gold medal with a leap of 2.00 metres on her third jump.

Kelly Slater, the most successful professional surfer in history, came out of retirement to win an unprecedented seventh world title at the Nova Schin Festival in Brazil in November 2005, breaking his own record of six. Slater was the youngest to claim the title at the age of 20, and now he is the oldest champion at 33. During the year he also won in Tahiti, Fiji, California and South Africa.

Golf in 2005 provided two candidates for the Laureus World Comeback of the Year Award. Britain's Colin Montgomerie, aged 42, recovered brilliantly from a slump in form which had seen him slip to 83rd in the world at the start of the year. In his peak years Montgomerie had dominated the European Tour, winning the Order of Merit in seven successive years from 1993 to 1999, but he had drawn a blank since winning the Caltex Masters in March 2004. However a second place finish behind Tiger Woods in the Open Championship at St Andrews in July 2005 followed by victory in the prestigious dunhill links championship in October sparked a golden autumn and Montgomerie celebrated his return to the summit of golf with a record eighth European Order of Merit title.

Spain's José Maria Olazabal, the former two-time US Masters champion, won his first

golf tournament in almost four years with victory in the Mallorca Open at the age of 39 in October.

One of the greatest sportsmen staged a comeback in 2005. Zinedine Zidane retired from international football after France were knocked out of the 2004 European Championship by Greece. But with France experiencing serious problems in attempting to qualify for the 2006 World Cup, Zidane announced on August 3, 2005 that he would come out of international retirement and under his captaincy, France managed to finish top of their group and qualify for the 2006 World Cup.

One of snooker's brightest young stars, 26-year-old Paul Hunter, three-times winner of The Masters and ranked fourth in the world, was diagnosed with cancer shortly before the 2005 World Championship began in April. Despite still receiving chemotherapy treatment, Hunter tenaciously returned to action in the autumn.

There is a two-part voting process to find the winners of the Laureus World Sports Awards. Firstly, a Selection Panel of the world's leading sports editors, writers and broadcasters from over 80 countries votes to create a shortlist of six nominations in five categories – Laureus World Sportsman of the Year, Laureus World Sportswoman of the Year, Laureus World Team of the Year, Laureus World Newcomer of the Year and Laureus World Comeback of the Year.

The members of the Laureus World Sports Academy then vote by secret ballot to select the Award winners. The Laureus Academy is the ultimate sports jury, made up of 42 of the greatest sportsmen and sportswomen of all time, who have made an outstanding contribution to world sport.

The Laureus Academy members also vote for the Laureus World Sportsperson of the Year with a Disability and the Laureus World Alternative Sportsperson of the Year, the nominations for which are made by specialist panels. The winners of all these seven categories, plus several special Awards, will be revealed during a televised Awards Ceremony to be staged in Barcelona on the evening of May 22, 2006.

Last year's Awards Ceremony, in the presence of His Majesty King Juan Carlos of Spain, was attended by members of the Laureus Academy and Hollywood stars Jackie Chan, Morgan Freeman, Teri Hatcher and Marcia Gay Harden. Among the award winners present were Roger Federer, Kelly Holmes and Greece football coach Otto Rehhagel.

Barcelona, the capital of Catalonia, is a city with an enormous sporting tradition which has staged the most important sports events. The immensely successful 1992 Olympic Games gave a new impulse to sport in the city. Sport is a part of everyday life in Barcelona and during the past few years the number of high-level international championships staged in the city has multiplied. Therefore it is no surprise that Barcelona was chosen to host the Laureus World Sports Awards in 2006.

Barcelona is a Mediterranean and metropolitan city with the most modern facilities. Its

unique architecture, artistic ambience and many tourist attractions have made Barcelona one of the most visited cities in the world. A business and leisure city, it is the ideal place to organise such an important moment of the sporting year - the Laureus Awards Ceremony.