

Henin to return to tennis in 2010

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Former world number one Justine Henin has announced she will return to competitive tennis in 2010, having retired just 16 months ago.

The 27-year-old Belgian, who won 41 singles titles including seven Grand Slams, sparked rumours of a comeback when she began training again recently. Henin retired on 14 May, 2008, saying she had lost her passion for tennis. Her return follows the fairytale comeback of compatriot Kim Clijsters, who won the US Open earlier this month. "I'm really happy and deeply moved to be able to announce tonight that I'm coming back to competitive tennis," Henin said as she made the announcement live on Belgian television. "These past 15 months have been enriching but there is a flame that has been re-lit. I thought it had been put out forever."

Henin plans to play two exhibition tournaments this year, in Charleroi, Belgium, and Dubai, before returning to competition at the Australian Open in January. And her coach, Carlos Rodriguez, said her ambition to win a first Wimbledon title after twice finishing runner-up was a driving force. "I swear I was extremely surprised," he said. "I'm happy because at the end of the day it's what she loves. She has entrusted me (to be her coach) once again and I will try to never let her down. I'm very happy to be helping her to restart her new life. It's a super challenge for her. The desire to win Wimbledon is one of the main reasons she's come back and I'll do everything to help her do it."

Clijsters returned to the sport after two-and-a-half years away, during which time she gave birth to a daughter, Jada. After barely a month back on the tour, the 26-year-old former world number one beat both Venus and Serena Williams on her way to success at Flushing Meadows. However, Henin said that Clijsters had not been the main motivation behind her own decision to return. "Subconsciously, it might have had an impact," said Henin. "But it certainly was not the most important reason." Henin had played down speculation of a comeback in May, saying that the sport had left her with so many physical ailments a return was unthinkable. But since the revelation that she was back in training, she had refused to speculate on a possible return to the WTA Tour.

Following her retirement, Henin, who was ranked number one in the world when she quit, had been working as a goodwill ambassador for Unicef and opened her own tennis academy. She won the French Open four times, the US Open twice, the Australian Open once and an Olympic gold in 2004. Henin's relatively small stature - she is only 5ft 5ins tall - and elegant one-handed backhand made her stand out among her rivals. Her last competitive match was a three-set defeat by current world number one Dinara Safina at the German Open on 8 May, 2008.