



ACE OF *hearts*

While courting fame as the glamazon of Grand Slam, Maria Sharapova has scored a net worth of millions. Now she's back for another slice of the Aussie action

STORY JOANNE HAWKINS

This time last year, things were not looking bright for Maria Sharapova. Unable to defend her Australian Open title due to a shoulder injury that kept her out of the game for months, the former world No 1 could only watch as Serena Williams claimed the championship.

As her ranking tumbled to 126, commentators questioned whether the sport's glamour girl – and three-time Grand Slam winner – could ever regain her form. Even Sharapova admits it would have been easy to hang up her racquet for good. It's not as if she needed the money; after all, *Forbes* named her the world's highest-earning female athlete of 2008, with US \$26 million. And most of that wasn't from tennis, but lucrative links with such brands as TAG Heuer, Nike, Sony Ericsson and Tiffany & Co.

But that would be to dismiss how much the Russian loves the game. "It was tough," she says of the nine months she was out of action, her US twang betraying only a hint of her native accent. "It felt as if something had been taken from me.

"There were many times when I could have given up and said, 'OK, I've achieved beyond what I thought I would. I could stop and have enough money for me and my family.' But there's something about this sport – every day that I was away from it, I couldn't wait to get back."

Sharapova made a comeback at the Warsaw Open last May, finishing the year ranked 14. It was a remarkable return to form. But perhaps those who had underestimated her ability to do it also underrated the determination that saw the 22-year-old overcome a tough start in life to become more successful and richer than she could have ever imagined.

Maria Yuryevna Sharapova was born in Siberia, her parents Yuri and Yelena having moved from Belarus after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986 affected the area. "My mum was pregnant with me, so they fled to Siberia," she explains. "But [the effects] were also in that area, so we moved to Sochi in the south [of Russia] when I was about two."

It was there, in a local park, that four-year-old Sharapova first picked up a battered wooden racquet. "It lit a spark in me," she says matter-of-factly. "I started taking lessons a couple of times a week, then things became a bit more serious."

So serious that when she played in Moscow at the age of six, she caught the eye of Martina Navratilova. The tennis great urged Yuri to take his daughter to the US "because conditions in Russia weren't good enough to become a tennis player in those days", Sharapova recalls.

The family scraped together the airfares, and seven-year-old Sharapova and her father boarded a plane to Miami. Visa restrictions delayed Yelena's arrival for another two years.

The tennis prodigy admits it was tough being separated. "It wasn't an easy move; we were going to a new country and I didn't see my mum for the first two years," she says quietly. "Thank God there wasn't as much direct communication with phones and email in those days. I'd write to her, but not being able to speak to her all the time helped, in a strange way. Now, when I'm away, I speak to her every day, and I almost miss her more."

The young Russian didn't speak any English on arrival in Florida but, in an early display of determination, she became fluent in five months. "I was surrounded by kids and they never shut up," she says, with a rare laugh. "So I learnt fast."

At age nine, she was accepted into the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy, alma mater of Pete Sampras, Andre Agassi and the Williams sisters, to name a few. And she landed sponsorship, which helped ease the financial burden. "The academy would bring in people to look at you, almost like animals at the zoo. But I was fortunate that [sports management company] IMG helped me out financially at the beginning of my career. Tennis isn't a cheap sport."

Sharapova turned professional on her 14th birthday. (The story goes that her father wanted it to be sooner, until it was explained that was against the rules.) Despite this, she's adamant she hasn't suffered through concentrating on tennis from an early age. "It's hard to say if I missed out on anything, because I don't know any different, but my life has brought me so many tremendous things," she explains. "I certainly don't regret anything, because the Grand Slams I've won and the things that come with that have been a real pleasure in my life." >

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Sharapova hopes to follow her creative interests when the time comes for her to retire; (inset) winning Wimbledon in 2004, at the age of 17.



In 2004, Sharapova became a household name when, aged just 17, she beat favourite Serena Williams to become the second youngest woman in the Open era to win Wimbledon. It's still her favourite Grand Slam victory (she also picked up the US Open trophy in 2006). "Nobody expected me to win," she explains.

Success brought recognition: "A lot of people wanted to know about me and my family, which was strange at the beginning." Then attention focused on her famous grunt, which reached a record 101 decibels at Wimbledon in 2005. Last year, she copped a serve from Chris Evert, who lambasted the Russian for "distracting" her opponents with her grunting. But Sharapova laughs off such criticism. "It's impossible to take it to heart, because it's so far from the truth. I don't have control over people's opinion. I appreciate that not everyone can think fondly of you, or like the way you dress or talk or walk, or whatever."

But being a blonde, long-legged beauty who's handy with a racquet has turned her into a sponsor's dream. TAG Heuer signed her as an ambassador in 2005, alongside Lewis Hamilton, Leonardo DiCaprio and Tiger Woods. Having recently co-designed a range of sunglasses, she says she appreciates that the brand values her input rather than "just putting her name on a product". And her association with Nike ensures that, à la Roger Federer, she has a succession of fresh outfits every time she plays.

Sharapova isn't planning on retiring any time soon ("I love this sport too much") but, when the time comes, she plans to pursue her creative interests. Her website lists people she'd like to work with, such as Karl Lagerfeld and Anna Wintour. "I love fashion and being involved with creative people," she says. "I enjoy the shoots for my sponsors – you get to play a character and dress up and have fun in front of the camera."

Off the court, she's been linked to LA Lakers basketballer Sasha Vujacic, with whom she was recently photographed holding hands in LA. She has hopes for a family one day, but is adamant she won't do a Kim Clijsters and mix parenting with tennis.

Time is money when you're a famous tennis player who makes millions a year, and my half hour with Sharapova is nearly up. There's just time to ask if she's looking forward to returning Down Under for the Open.

"I love coming there," she beams. "It's summer and everyone's happy."

Yes, the future is looking brighter for Sharapova. So bright, she has to wear shades. TAG Heuer, of course. **SM**

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