

## MARIA SHARAPOVA

### THIS IS YOUR LIFE

2011 Wimbledon Ladies' finalist Maria Sharapova, in 2004 and aged just 17, pulled off one of the most unexpected Wimbledon upsets, beating Serena Williams in the final.

#### YURI SHARAPOV

Maria's father Yuri is not your average tennis parent. Legendary tennis coach Nick Bollettieri once described him as the most difficult tennis parent he had ever had to deal with. However, Yuri's and his wife Yelena's dedication and commitment to help their only child Maria succeed, are probably unparalleled.

Maria was conceived in Gomel, Belarus in the shadow of the 1986 nuclear disaster of Chernobyl. Whilst still in her mother's womb, her parents decided to move from the region to prevent their unborn child being exposed to the cancers and radiation linked illnesses associated with nuclear fallout. The only option available to them was to move to the frozen oilfields of western Siberia. There, in the bleak industrial town of Nyagan 19 April 1987 Maria was born.

Yuri worked in the nearby Tyumen oil fields, in the most brutal of conditions, where temperatures plummeted to minus 40 degrees Celsius and clouds of toxic smoke hung overhead. He earned extra money, as the conditions were so harsh.

Yuri seldom does interviews, preferring instead to keep the spotlight on his daughter. Maria once said, *"I'm a tough girl."* And Bollettieri commented, *"She's so tough she could bend a steel nail."*

***I wonder where she gets it from – the Tyumen oil fields  
perhaps?***

Despite guidance from Bollettieri and his coaching staff, Rick Macci, Robert Lansdorp, Michael Joyce and most recently Thomas Hogstedt, Bollettieri maintains, *“There is only one coach and that is Yuri Sharapov - make no mistake about that.”*

## **YURI YUDKIN**

After four years working in this brutal environment Yuri had managed to save enough money to escape once again, and the family moved south to the Black Sea resort of Sochi.

Yuri, a recreational tennis player, was playing one day, when Maria who was four years old at the time, become bored with having to watch him. She suddenly picked up a racquet by the side of the court and started hitting a ball around. Local veteran tennis coach, the late Yuri Yudkin (1936-2009), saw her doing this, and was so impressed by her precocity and natural hand-eye coordination that he offered to coach her.

Due to shortages in the former Soviet Union at this time, Maria learned to play with a racquet with a sawn-off handle. Eventually, Eugeny Kafelnikov, the father of world number one Yevgeny, who was a friend of Maria’s father, gave her one of his son’s racquets.

Yudkin said of *Maria*, *“I was amazed that aged four-and-a-half Maria was already intellectually mature. She absorbed everything I told or showed her, and was an exceptionally quick learner. She was a very smart girl, I never had to repeat instructions twice to her and she could do a spin serve age seven. In the three years I worked with her she never once told me she was tired.”*

By age six Maria was showing signs of extraordinary talent and was seen by Yudkin as a champion in the making. She went with her father and coach to take part in an exhibition in Moscow, which involved Martina Navratilova. Martina spotted Maria hitting with older stronger girls, and told Yuri that his daughter was very talented, and that he should take her to the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy in the United States, where she would receive the best training and coaching available.

Yuri did not have the money to take her, and was forced the next year, to borrow \$1000 from Maria’s grandparents in order to make the trip, an amount of money that would take him many years to repay.

## **GOING TO AMERICA**

Having arrived unannounced at Bollettieri’s, seven-year-old Maria and her father were told that she was too young to be offered a scholarship, and that they should come back when she was older.

Refusing to be deterred and despite speaking little English, Yuri found himself various jobs including dishwashing and working on construction sites to pay for Maria’s tennis. During these times Maria hardly saw her father, as he often

worked double shifts and would walk for over an hour to meet her at the academy at weekends. Yuri refers to this time as, *“A time of survival.”*

Due to financial and visa restrictions, it was two years before Maria was able to see her mother again, in a country far from home, and in which she could not even speak the language properly. She said of this time, *“When I arrived in America I was young, but I already knew what I wanted. I think that when you start from nothing, when you come from nothing, it makes you hungry.”*

Maria added, *“My mother and father taught me not to cry. Coming from an area devastated by a nuclear disaster, I was brought up with the word perspective drummed into me. If I ever complained to my father he would just tell me to get some perspective!”*

## **LIFE AT THE BOLLETTIERI ACADEMY**

Despite these incredibly difficult times, Maria continued to train and improve her tennis, and by the time she reached age nine, the International Management Group (IMG) who now owned the academy, (<http://www.imgacademies.com/nick-bollettieri-tennis-academy>) were so impressed with her ability and potential, that they awarded her a full-scholarship. The family were finally reunited soon afterwards.

Again, even though she was now on a scholarship, life was far from easy for Maria. She was put in a dormitory with girls much older than herself, experienced being bullied and due to language problems, struggled to make friends. She later commented, *“I never had the experience of being around other kids every day, I was never in a normal school, but it’s hard to miss something when you’ve never really had it.”*

Playing tennis against and beating these older girls though, proved no such problem. By age 10 Maria was winning 14-and-under tournaments. She said, *“I’ve been playing against older and stronger competition my whole life. It has made me a better tennis player, and I’m able to play and win against this kind of level despite their strength and experience.”*

## **THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS**

Maria struggled throughout her junior career with her forehand, and age 10, due to the lack of attention Yuri believed Bollettieri was paying her, the Sharapovas began making weekly trips to see Rick Macci. This created a clash of interests with IMG as Macci’s is an independently run academy. Macci suggested Yuri contact veteran coach Robert Lansdorp who was based in California.

Around that time Yuri had heard former world number one Tracy Austin, commenting on TV about the exceptional groundshots of Lindsay Davenport. Austin, Davenport and Pete Sampras had all been taught in Los Angeles by Lansdorp, who is known for his work ethic, and disciplined approach.

Sampras later said of him, *"If any of my kids want to learn tennis, then Robert is the man I would send them to for groundshots – without question."*

Yuri decided he wanted Lansdorp to take a look at Maria. A two-hour session was arranged and the Sharapovas flew to Los Angeles to meet him. Lansdorp recalled of Maria and their first lesson together, *"Her eyes nearly popped out of her head when she saw the number of balls I had in my basket."*

After the session Yuri asked Lansdorp what he thought of his daughter. Lansdorp replied, *"She hits the ball pretty well but her concentration sucks,"* - they stayed for two weeks!

Between ages 11 and 18 Maria split her time whilst not playing tournaments, either training with Lansdorp in California or at Bollettieri's. One of the problems Lansdorp and Yuri had with Maria and her game, was that up until age 12, they didn't know whether she should play left or right-handed, as she could play equally well with either. Lansdorp recommended she played right-handed, because he thought she had a more natural right-handed serve. Not usually known for his praise of pupils, Lansdorp said of Maria, *"She is a special player and a special person."*

Lansdorp said that unlike Bollettieri, he never had a problem with Maria's father, and that during her lessons Yuri would simply run around picking up balls.

## **AVE MARIA**

Maria first gained international recognition when in November 2000 age 13, she won the 16-and-under Eddie Herr championships in Florida. In January 2002 age 14 years and nine months, she became the youngest girl ever to reach the final of the junior Australian Open. In March 2002 age 14, she achieved her first world ranking of No.535. and later that year was runner-up at junior Wimbledon. Age 15, she ended 2002 ranked world No.183.

In 2003 she won the junior Australian Open and began playing full-time on the WTA tour. In June age 16, she entered the world's Top-100, reached the fourth round of Wimbledon and ended the year ranked No.32.

## **WIMBLEDON**

By May 2004 age 17, she had entered the world's Top-20. Then in July, 10 years after setting off from her home, leaving behind family and friends, she stunned the tennis world, when as the 13<sup>th</sup> seed she beat Serena Williams to win Wimbledon and climbed to world number four.

The final piece in Maria's tennis development had been when Bollettieri employed a special trainer to work on her physical fitness for one hour every day. This, according to Maria, resulted in the improvement she made leading up to her Wimbledon victory and gave her the ability to compete physically, with the likes of the Williams sisters.

Bollettieri an ex-paratrooper himself said of her, *"She is extremely strict, disciplined and a perfectionist. She plays tennis like she's preparing for an attack, a battle. Every shot has a purpose. She runs for every single ball, there's no monkey business, she will smile but it's a bloody damn business."*

After winning Wimbledon her rise continued and she became world number one in August 2005; a goal she had had since a young girl. She went on to win the 2006 US and 2008 Australian Opens and said, *"Why would you want to be number 20, and then when you get to number 20 it's like you don't want to be number one, you know? It's like shoot for the moon, if you miss, you'll still be amongst the stars, so why not want to become number one?"* She later added, *"If you don't want to be number one in the world then why even start?"*

Austin, who knows Maria and her father very well, said of her, *"Some kids have it easy, you have to ask where the drive is coming from. But Maria's background has definitely contributed to her determination on court. Talk about having a will and drive to win!"*

## **LIVING THE DREAM**

The result of years of nearly constant travel, and the exclusion of anything close to a normal childhood, had by the end of the 2011 season helped Maria earn on-court prize money of over \$16.5 million. However, due in large part to her stunning good looks, she is the most marketed sports woman in the world, regularly earning over \$25 million a year – an amount which she once cheekily described as, *"Not enough to live on!"*

Not only is she beautiful but she backs it up with an unquestioned desire to win and improve. *"Tennis is what has made me what I am, but what am I supposed to do?"* she said, *"it's not my fault that I'm beautiful, beauty sells and I'm not going to make myself deliberately ugly am I?"*

Maria enjoys fashion, movies, dancing and music, and once admitted to having interests in sociology and stamp collecting - well nobody's perfect!

***Although on the other hand?***

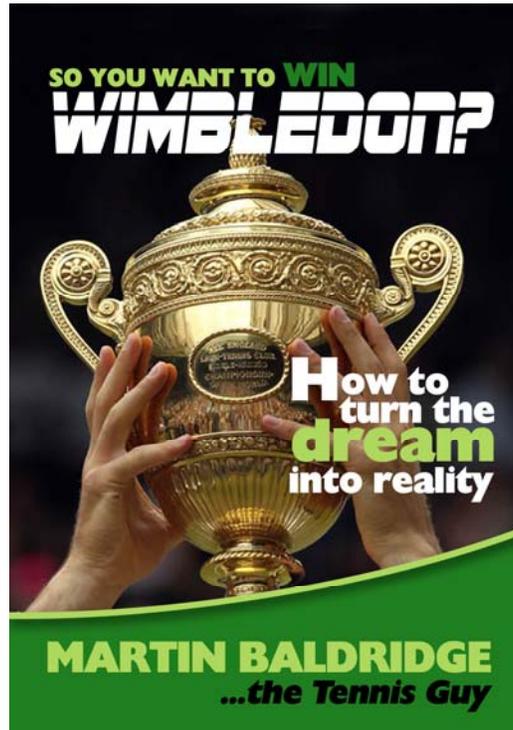
Find out more about Maria at

**<http://www.mariasharapova.com>**

From ***'So you want to win Wimbledon?'***

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