

# THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING HERE!

by Kim Goss

Maria Sharapova of Russia serves during the ladies final match against Serena Williams of USA at the Wimbledon Lawn Tennis Championship.

(Photo by Phil Cole/Getty Images)

*A new generation of women Russian tennis players is showing that training hard—and smart—leads to athletic greatness*



**A**lthough she was once ranked seventh in the world, Anna Kournikova will most likely be remembered more for her beauty than her brawn. Forced to take extended lay-offs due to injuries, Kournikova has made the most of her time off the court by earning millions of dollars as a celebrity model and spokesperson. Never a Grand Slam champion, Kournikova may not have fulfilled her potential, but her many successes did help to spark a new dynasty in women's tennis. Evidence of Kournikova's inspiration was readily apparent this year when Russian athletes took home the top prizes in two of the four Grand Slam events.

The first major sign that the Russians were to be taken seriously this year occurred in May when Anastasia Myskina won the French Open Championships over her countrywoman Elena Dementieva. This was the first-ever Grand Slam victory by a Russian. But the true revolution happened four weeks later, when a lineup of young Russian women made their assault on the most prestigious title in tennis, Wimbledon.

There were many surprises at Wimbledon, the first being produced by Croatian Karolina Sprem, who defeated Venus Williams. But the most stunning achievement was 17-year-old Maria Sharapova's 6-1, 6-4, victory over Serena Williams, a three-time Wimbledon champion who had allowed Jennifer Capriati to win only two games in their semifinal match. Sharapova's impressive performance on the court matched William's power and demonstrated a mental focus and confidence usually reserved for much older athletes.

"Sharapova's success, along with that of the many other Russian players making their presence felt now, has generated a strong interest in strength training for tennis," says Mario Greco, a respected speed and strength coach in Canada who has trained many young Russian tennis players. "Although the Williams sisters have genetics that would undoubtedly make them a force on the court even if they had never touched a weight, it's obvious that Sharapova and her teammates have put in their reps and sets in the gym." Just ask Sharapova.

Three years ago when she was interviewed by CNN.com, a 110-pound Sharapova was asked what her focus was in her training. She replied, "I need to get stronger and build muscle. I've been growing



JAVIER SORIANO/AFP/Getty Images

**One of the highest-paid women athletes of all time, Anna Kournikova's popularity inspired many young Russian girls to play tennis. Here she returns a ball against Arantxa Sanchez Vicario of Spain.**



"I don't think there is any question now as to the value of weight training for tennis players, not only to make them more

**In May, Russia's Anastasia Myskina won the French Open against countrywoman Elena Dementieva. In this photo Myskina is shown competing in the 2004 Olympics.**

a lot recently because I'm getting taller and I'm very thin right now. That's a disadvantage against bigger girls at the moment but I'm trying to build myself up and get stronger. . . ."To this end Sharapova followed a training regimen that included a daily hour-long workout in the gym after her four hours of tennis practice!

In addition to helping her develop 120-MPH serves and lightning-fast groundstrokes, the workouts have helped Sharapova stay injury free. Until recently, the tennis world had shared a belief that young women should not follow the same training regimens as the more physically mature players. This belief was reinforced by the misfortune of Tracy Austin, who at 17 was

**Vladimir Kamelzon, chief of the Russian Tennis Federation's Trainers' Council and director of a private tennis school in Moscow, coaches 12-year-old prodigy Elen Chelidze.**



powerful players but also to help prevent injuries," says Greco. "The Russian tennis players I trained, and their coaches, took their weight training sessions as

seriously as their on-court practices. These athletes wanted to lift, and they trained with an intensity and focus that belied their age. They were a joy to coach!"

Talent and determination aside, much of the credit for Russia's success has to go to former president Boris N. Yeltsin, a tennis player himself, who helped create interest in the game. By the

mid-1990s there was a rush to build tennis courts and an increasing demand for tennis tournaments. Last year there were 350 children's tennis clubs, many of them indoor so that athletes could play year-round; and more than 1,000 children's tournaments were held. What the country lacks most now is sufficient good coaches. And as such, many of the country's most talented athletes, such as Sharapova, find sponsors and move to the US to find the caliber of coaching they need.

It's true that Anna Kournikova should receive some credit for inspiring the current crop of Russian tennis superstars, but the success of

ranked number one in the world, and other young female tennis players who were forced into early retirement because of injuries. Sharapova, incidentally, picked up her first racket when she was three.

Sharapova and her teammates will ensure that Russia will continue to make its presence felt on the courts. More importantly, these women will have achieved their fame and financial success the time-honored way—by earning it on the court! 