



TOP SPINNING

IS VICTORIA AZARENKA THE NEW STAR THAT WOMEN'S TENNIS CRAVES, OR IS SHE JUST THE TOP-RANKED PLAYER?

BY SHAUN ASSAEL





Azarenka flirted with retirement in early 2011, a year before emerging on top at the Australian Open.



“No? Well, thank you all very much for coming.”

THE WILLOWY BLONDE is sitting at a juice bar in the players lounge at La Caja Magica, a glass-box stadium where the clay courts are painted ocean blue. She is a few minutes removed from that small moment of torture and eight days away from meeting Serena Williams in the final of this mandatory WTA warmup for the French Open. She chews on a celery stick and talks about having been on her own almost since she can remember—or actually, she doesn’t talk about it.

Her mother, who helped manage a tennis center in Minsk, and father, a driving instructor, used all they had to send their daughter to America to train while her older brother stayed home. “But I don’t want to tell Cinderella stories,” she says. “I went through so many tough times, but there are many people who go through these times. I grew up to be more independent because I’ve been basically alone since I was 14.”

Venus Williams, who knows a thing or two about pressure at an early age, stops by for a smoothie and graces Azarenka with a warm smile. The two have played each other only twice: the first time in the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the last time in Dubai in early 2010. Venus won both matches. After Venus gets her drink and waves goodbye, Azarenka follows her across the lounge with her wide blue-green eyes. “Venus is so just easygoing and relaxed,” she marvels.

Venus hasn’t topped the WTA rankings since 2002, but she’s still a head-turning global brand, which is something that Vika, as Azarenka prefers to be called, is not. Not yet. The 22-year-old, with a 26-match win streak to open the year, turned in the best start of any woman since Martina Hingis ran off 37 straight wins in 1997. She boasts an all-court game, a powerful six-foot frame and a top-hand-heavy whiplike backhand. But outside the world of diehard tennis fans, few are tuning in to notice.

And who can blame them? For the past two years, as Serena Williams struggled with injuries and apparent apathy, Wozniacki, the gentlest, least aggressive top-ranked woman the game has ever known, failed to win a single

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he Madrid Open media center is nearly empty when Victoria Azarenka walks in for her pre-tournament appearance. The pack of reporters

who mobbed Maria Sharapova has left. The others who encircled Caroline Wozniacki are gone. Just one lone local reporter remains to hear from the world’s top-ranked women’s tennis player.

Azarenka looks out over the empty seats as if they’re all filled. It’s a trick she acquired on the court to ward off unproductive thoughts. Visualize things as you want them to be, not necessarily as they are. Dressed in a gray hoodie and bright pink tee with matching sneakers, the Belarus native taps her black-polished fingernails, ignoring the absurdity.

Back in January at the Australian Open, Azarenka won her first grand slam title, in the process making Sharapova appear lost between the lines. She landed in rainy Madrid on a gaudy 29–2 roll. But there’s a difference between being the world’s top-ranked player and being the world’s Number One. The former

is a statistic; the latter is a state of mind. When the moderator asks for questions, a prolonged silence ensues. The local newspaper reporter stares at Azarenka, who stares back, drumming her fingers until they sound like clacks from inside a clock tower. Finally, when the void turns unbearable, the reporter blurts out, “What are your expectations for Madrid?”

Azarenka squints, smiling thinly. “Anywhere I go, I try to win the tournament,” she says. It’s a talking point of sorts, except at that moment apparently neither of the two can think of anything else to say. “Are there any more questions?” the moderator asks, mercifully stepping in.



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slam. And with the revolving door wide open, four different women won each of the major titles last year in hit-and-run fashion. Kim Clijsters (Australian Open) got hurt, while Li Na (French Open), Petra Kvitová (Wimbledon) and Sam Stosur (U.S. Open) either stalled or slid back. The passing of the baton in the women's game had been more like a dropping. And suddenly—by dint of the fact that she has achieved the world's top ranking and won her first major—Azarenka is expected to anchor the race. Winning multiple majors, or perhaps Olympic gold in London, certainly would legitimize her top ranking, but if being Number One is her priority, she not only needs to dominate her peers, she needs to renovate her image.

She is volcanic. Until this year's Australian Open—where she came back from a second-set drubbing in the semifinals to defeat Clijsters 6-4, 1-6, 6-3—Azarenka was the one who often cracked first. Smashed rackets, on-court tirades, cursing like a Minsk taxi driver. "My mind is never quiet," she says. "It is constantly thinking."

She is fragile. In Rome last year, she was seen muttering "f— bitch" as she pulled out of a quarterfinal match with Sharapova—possibly, but only possibly, referring to the elbow injury that caused her to retire. In February, she ticked off one opponent, Aga Radwanska, when she went overboard grimacing about an ankle injury during a match in Qatar. On May 17, she withdrew from the Italian Open, citing a shoulder injury, leaving her appearance in the French Open in doubt—and drawing criticism from Sharapova, who said that Azarenka was "probably injured more than any other player" but that "after two days' retirement you would see her practicing."

She is sensitive. Azarenka finished last year as the third-ranked woman on the WTA (a seven-spot upgrade from the year before), but she still got bounced early from several tournaments. In February 2011, after losing her opening-round match in Qatar, she raced back to her family in Minsk, exhausted and, she says, prepared to quit tennis. What saved her was some Soviet-style tough love from her grandmother, who sat her down, described the way things were when Stalin ran the USSR,



Whether unleashing her infamous shriek, arguing a call or celebrating a hard-won point, Azarenka is a volatile force on the court.

and said, loosely translated, "Really, Vika? I mean, really?"

She is loud. Her ball-striking grunt, less grunt than screech, stretches from the time she strikes the ball to nearly when it lands on her opponent's racket. It's been measured at 1.5 seconds long. After sitting through it at Wimbledon last year, Ian Ritchie, the head of the All England Lawn Tennis Club, met with the WTA and ATP about quieting the grunting at the grand slam. Azarenka's nickname on tour, "Vika the Shrieka," is not exactly Madison Avenue material.

"It's difficult for me to show people who I am as a person on the court because I have to be like a warrior," she says in the players' lounge, checking her latest tweets. "I cannot be nice. But I am in the process of changing how I want to be seen."

She's certainly trying. Later in the week, she tweets about boyfriend Sergei Bubka, a player on the ATP tour, "I'm a fool in looooooovvvvvveeeeeee."

ON HER MORNING jogs through Monte Carlo, where she lives in a roomy apartment and keeps a Porsche and a Mercedes, Azarenka often passes fellow resident Novak Djokovic walking his pet poodle, Pierre, and waves. The parallel is almost impossibly tidy: the world's two top-ranked players meeting cute on the street. But much to the disappointment of the WTA, that is where the comparisons between the two end.

Djokovic's rise has come through years of savage combat against the game's reigning greats. He flapped the previously unflappable

Rafael Nadal. He broke Roger Federer's spirit at last year's U.S. Open. He has quite possibly shortened the tennis life of Andy Murray. In this, the fifth season of the Novak, Roger, Rafa and Andy Show, the storylines are perfectly formed. The women's game, by contrast, feels locked in a perpetual prologue.

"I think we're on the way up again," says two-time Olympic gold medalist Mary Joe Fernandez, solidly in league with the WTA optimists. "And I think Azarenka belongs at the top. She doesn't overplay. She doesn't make errors. She has power when she needs it. Her game has become all-around. The problem is that when Serena is playing healthy, she's in a category by herself."

Ah, yes, Serena. The woman who, going into Madrid, had beaten Azarenka in six of the seven matches they had played. The woman capable of shrugging off a loss to Wozniacki in Miami by deadpanning, "Everyone I play always plays the match of the year." The woman who has flirted with retirement for years yet still manages to rule the tour when healthy—and engaged. The woman who, in other words, might not be the top-ranked player in the world but who defiantly remains Number One.

Indeed, in the Madrid final, Serena again stakes her claim to the title. Over little more than an hour, she exposes Vika's second serve as weak and renders her challenger's footwork leaden while converting four of five break points. In constant attack mode, she takes returns early, withering Azarenka's defense with her impatient offense. At the worst of it, Old Vika makes a cameo, smashing her racket, kicking up chunks of blue clay. The final tally: 6-1, 6-3.

The post-tournament news conference is packed with reporters on hand to discern how the world's top-ranked player has fallen so hard to the Number One. Vika peers out from under the brim of her hat, hands clasped, her voice a postmatch runner-up monotone. "I'll take the best and most positive out of this week," she says.

And between the lines, the message is clear: Even when you're the top-ranked player in the world, sometimes you have to visualize things as you want them to be and not necessarily as they are. ■