

Brian Viner interviews Svetlana Kuznetsova: 'In Britain the first girl who hits two balls in - they give her everything'

The Sony Ericsson WTA Tour rankings do not lie: there are five Russians in the top ten, two Serbs and a Slovakian, with no western Europeans, no Australians, and only Venus and Serena Williams, placed sixth and seventh, flying the Stars and Stripes.

The old order is not changing in women's tennis, it has changed. And unless one of the Williams sisters prevails again at Wimbledon, the odds are that the champion's name will end in a vowel, or an -ic. Ana Ivanovic and Jelena Jankovic, currently ranked first and second in the world, might have raised the curtain on a new Serb-dominated era - the seven-year -ic, if you like - but those five Russians will not easily yield their places at the top table, nor will those behind them in the rankings rest until they get there, and Svetlana Kuznetsova, the world number four and 2004 US Open champion, tells me why.

"We look at other countries and they have it so easy," she says. "In Britain, the first girl who hits two balls in, they give her everything. In Russia, to be a star you have to be in the top ten. Nobody knows you if you are not, so your goals must always be very high. I was talking to Maria Kirilenko (ranked 19th in the world) about this. She used to take the train and then the metro for three hours to practice. Then she'd hit for two hours and travel three hours home. My family didn't have much money either, maybe \$300 a month. In the winter in Russia I played inside a balloon but it was zero degrees, and we couldn't afford to heat it. There was no money, no budget, only your family were helping you. It is still the same. If you go to a junior tournament in Russia, the Russian girls are so focused. In England it is completely different. It's like a holiday for them."

We meet on the players' terrace at the Qatar Telecom German Open, where she is destined to exit in the third round. At Roland Garros a few weeks later, she cruised through to the semi-final, but was well-beaten by her compatriot Dinara Safina. This week, top-seeded on grass in the Eastbourne International Women's Open, she was surprisingly knocked out in the second round, by the rising star from Denmark, Caroline Wozniacki. None of this augurs well for Wimbledon, where Kuznetsova, this year's fourth seed, has never got past the quarter-finals. But she is a Russian, and Russians, as we know, are made of unperishable stuff. Moreover, she comes from unusually driven stock. Her father, Alexandr Kuznetsov, is one of the world's top cycling coaches, and among his star pupils was her mother, Galina Tsareva, six times world champion and holder of 20 world track records. Her older brother Nikolai was a silver medallist in the team pursuit at the 1996 Olympic Games. She was born to compete.

But on a bike, not on a tennis court. "My dad was very strict coach," she says, by way of explanation. "He doesn't want his guys to get involved in any relationships when they cycle, so he chose to train men only. When I started to grow up he had to decide whether to open his women's group again for me, but he said no, do something else. He made a joke. He said tennis earns more money. It was a joke because money never mattered to him, only results."

A waiter comes over. "Water please, no gas," she says. I ask for the same. "Better to use that glass then, this is for champagne," she instructs me, then smiles. "But maybe you would prefer champagne? If you want champagne, I will get you champagne."

Kuznetsova is still only 22 - she turns 23 a week today - but she has the demeanour and confidence of a much older woman. Maybe that is what wealth and fame brings, though they can also bring arrogance, and of that there is no sign. Indeed, it is hard to find

anyone in the tennis world with anything negative to say about her, and the American press corps have voted her the female tennis player they most enjoy interviewing; she has a warm and generous spirit.

She was seven years old, living in St Petersburg, when she first swung a tennis racket. It was already too late for her to develop into a top player, her parents were told, but her father had no truck with that. At 13, she moved to Spain, where he ran a cycling camp, and trained at the Sanchez-Casal Academy in Barcelona, also the sporting alma mater of Andy Murray. "In Spain I improved so quick that I decided to stay there," she says. "I became number one junior (in the world) when I was 16, and started to combine juniors and women's tours."

And what are her recollections of the adolescent Murray? "I knew him first as a person, not as a player, which is the best way. He's a nice guy, quiet, likes to stay at home. Now I know him as a player too, and he is very good, but he can improve a lot. I don't want to be his judge, but he needs to work hard." Is he, as we have convinced ourselves in Britain, a Grand Slam winner waiting to happen? "I would not be surprised," she says. "But not now. Maybe later."

It was men's tennis, not the women's game, which provided the heroes during her own adolescence. "I had posters in my room of Malivai Washington, Marcelo Rios, and (Yevgeny) Kafelnikov. It's very weird but this is who I liked. Later I was a big fan of (Marat) Safin. I was like (she affects a breathy, girly voice) 'ohhh, Marat!' For me he was so cute."

Speaking of cute Russians, let's talk about Maria Sharapova, not that everyone on the tour considers her all that cute, or, for that matter, all that Russian. Why, I ask Kuznetsova, do her compatriots think of her as being as Russian as blinis, and Sharapova as being as Russian as Ben and Jerry's? After all, they both left Russia as girls, to be developed elsewhere.

"Yes," she says, "but I can't say nothing about her. I love to play for Russia. About her I don't know. She doesn't go there much."

"Do you like her?"

A fleeting, tell-tale pause. "I'm fine with her. I'm good with everybody. She's not the person who communicates most on tour, but I think she's a good person."

I invite her to put into words what she feels about Mother Russia. Her eyes sparkle. "When I go there I feel like I'm flying, I really do. It's unbelievable, I cannot explain this feeling. If there is a chance of Russian company, I always take it. I love to hear Russian people talk, and when I am there, to go to the market and buy Russian food. I have an apartment in Monte Carlo, and a place in Spain, but I want also to buy an apartment in Moscow. I miss my country so much, and every time I do a good job my coach says 'go to Moscow'. He knows how important it is to me. When I was younger, in Spain, I used to count the hours to get back to Moscow. Now I do not. This is my life. And I don't know if I can be 12 months of the year there. But I am, how to say it, sick about Russia."

I have an image, I say, of her sitting in Monte Carlo crying over a Dostoevsky novel. She laughs. "For school I read Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Now I read Russian magazines more. I am very interested in Russian politics. I want to know more, and maybe how I can help."

So I might be talking to the first female Russian president? I expect another laugh but instead I get a solemn look. "No, this is too much."

She takes a glug of water, no gas, while behind her on the players' terrace there is a commotion, as a posse of photographers cluster around Serena Williams. I have heard that she and Serena are good friends, I say. "Yes, we text. We go out sometimes. I have big respect for African (-American) people. I think I was black in a past life, because I feel so much for African culture. I tell Serena that I want her hair, to have corn rows like her. She laughs at me. She says we all wish for what we don't have. But she teaches me some slang, and shows me dance moves." A delighted laugh. "I can't shake my body like African people."

Her friend Serena, I add, seemed to get rather distracted from tennis by fashion, modelling, acting, all that stuff. But at least she came back to the fold, unlike Kuznetsova's compatriot Anna Kournikova. Does she disapprove of tennis players on the catwalk?

"No, not at all. I'm not about to do my collection of clothes, but those commercial things can help tennis. In Russia tennis started to grow after [Boris] Yeltsin came in, because he liked it so much and helped it a lot. Then along came Kournikova and made tennis even more popular. That was great. Also, it is hard, when you come from nothing, like all the Russian players, and then become a king or a princess..."

You can get carried away by the attention is her drift, I think, but there's not much chance of it happening to her, even should she confound the recent form book and lift the Venus Rosewater dish a fortnight tomorrow. And she thinks she might. "It's not my favourite surface but I can do it one day for sure. I feel so special on Centre Court, it's like a religious place. Maybe tradition is a better word but I feel Wimbledon is like a religion." With plenty of Russian orthodoxy in the mix.

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