



Return Game

Maria Sharapova is ready to emerge from her 15-month ban and reclaim her place atop the tour. But is tennis ready to welcome her back?

BY SHAUN ASSAEL

THE
ORIGIN
STORY

1989 AGE 2
Sharapova's family moves from Nyagan, Russia, to Sochi for an optimal climate in which to raise the budding star.

1993 AGE 6
Sharapova is taken to Moscow for a tennis clinic run by Martina Navratilova.

1994 AGE 7
Sharapova begins to train at the Bollشتери Academy/IMG in Florida.

2001 AGE 14
Sharapova plays her first pro tournament.

2004 AGE 17
Sharapova beats Serena Williams to win Wimbledon.

Maria Sharapova arrived at the NBA's executive headquarters in New York City last August to see what it takes to run the kind of big league business she might want to oversee one day. She'd asked the commissioner, Adam Silver, if she could watch him work, and she began her tour seated next to him at a morning staff meeting, listening to him tick down a list of items that included a cracking down on teams that taunt officials via Twitter and growing the NBA's international academies. Silver agreed to let her trail him because he's a tennis fan and, frankly, because he was



Sharapova was No. 7 when her ban began. She'll return unranked on April 26.

intrigued by why a five-time grand slam winner would want to spend a summer week inside a midtown skyscraper.

Over three days, according to Silver, Sharapova was poised and inquisitive, unafraid to volunteer her life experiences to make a point. She talked about how she uses her social media accounts to control her image and how important it was, as a young Russian, to train at a Florida academy to help her measure her talent. As the week wore on, she watched the league's public relations and marketing

managers in action and seemed especially interested in the WNBA, furiously scribbling and peppered its execs with questions. When the week ended, Silver joked, "Call me when you retire. I think we have a job for you here."

The reason Sharapova had time for an internship with the NBA, of course, is that she was in the middle of serving a 15-month suspension from tennis. Last June the International Tennis Federation barred her from the tour after determining that she'd been taking meldonium, a Latvian heart drug

not approved for sale in the U.S., which had recently been added to its banned substances list. But with the suspension set to end on April 26, the 30-year-old veteran, now unranked on the WTA tour, has planned her return at the Porsche Tennis Grand Prix in Stuttgart, Germany. And the welcome isn't shaping up to be as warm as Silver's.

"I didn't miss her on the tour at all," Slovakia's Dominika Cibulkova, currently ranked No. 4, said last April. "She's a totally unlikeable person. Arrogant, conceited and cold. When I sit beside her in the locker room, she won't even say hello."

"I didn't speak with her before; there's no reason to speak now," Romania's Simona Halep commented when Sharapova announced her suspension last March.

While Sharapova has received support from players like Venus Williams and Elena Vesnina, she's known for being aloof among colleagues in the WTA—something she conceded when she recently told *The Times of London*, "When I get to the locker room, I'm not sitting there sipping tea and eating macaroons." But the intensity of the recent backlash against her goes deeper than that.

There's no tennis equivalent of a hard foul or sliding with your spikes up, but Sharapova has come close. Often cited is an incident from 2006, during her match against France's Tatiana Golovin at the Miami Open. After squandering four match points in the second set, Sharapova took a conveniently timed bathroom break up 5-3. And later, when play resumed and Golovin rolled her ankle and started cramping in pain, Sharapova turned her back. The result was a jarring image of an 18-year-old calmly bouncing a ball while seeming to ignore the screams of another human being who'd crumpled to the court just feet away.

What's driving her detractors now is how Sharapova will be returning to the tour in Stuttgart. For players who don't have the points or ranking to automatically qualify for an event, tournament organizers dole out a limited number of wild-card passes to their main draws, usually for hometown favorites who need the ranking points that come with winning matches at premier events. Without that wild card, players have to fight through exhausting qualifying-round matches. But Sharapova—the richest female athlete in the world, worth an estimated \$285 million before her suspension, according to *Forbes*—is invoking a WTA rule allowing grand slam winners to get wild cards, and in the process muscling aside other players, some of whom have battled for years to get a shot at qualifying for premier events like the one in Stuttgart.

It's a power move that isn't sitting well with

colleagues such as Caroline Wozniacki, the former No. 1 who argues that Sharapova should make her way through the qualifiers. "When a player is banned for drugs, I think that someone should start from the bottom and fight their way back," Wozniacki told reporters at Indian Wells in March.

That Sharapova is not taking that path only adds to her reputation as the kind of player who will do anything to gain an advantage, and it helps explain why the current *l'affaire* Sharapova has grown into something larger, and nastier, than it ever should have been.

THE CONFERENCE In late March is billed as Inspiring Women in Sports. And for more than an hour at the Mission Hills Country Club in Rancho Mirage, California, Billie Jean King is just that—inspiring. The 73-year-old talks about her decadeslong fight for equal pay, breaking glass ceilings, and the women's rights movement. When Sharapova takes the stage later in the afternoon, she tells the story about how, when she was 7 years old, she came to Florida from Russia with her father and \$700 in their pockets to play tennis. She skips the fact that his screaming became a common spectacle at her matches and instead becomes sentimental, saying, "I was surrounded by palm trees every day. I was happy."

You can hear the book she's due to publish this fall coming to life. "Although I'm at a stage and an age in my career where I'm closer to the end than the beginning, you always want to end your career, or a chapter in your life, in your voice, on your terms," she says. "That's why I fought so hard for the truth to be out."

The truth, according to Sharapova, has nothing to do with whether she took meldonium; she admitted in a news conference that she did. It has to do with the motives and actions of the ITF, which she casts as the real villain in all of this. (Sharapova declined ESPN's interview request for this story.)

Meldonium was designed to help Soviet soldiers deal with stress during the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, and it was later used by sports doctors in Russia to help athletes fight exhaustion by increasing the amount of oxygen in the blood that flows to the heart. It's sold so commonly there that a supply of 40 pills can be bought for less than \$10. Max Holt, a U.S. Olympic volleyball player, told American authorities that he got a supply when he played for Dynamo Moscow, and several Russian stars, like swimmer Yulia Efimova, have admitted to taking it regularly.

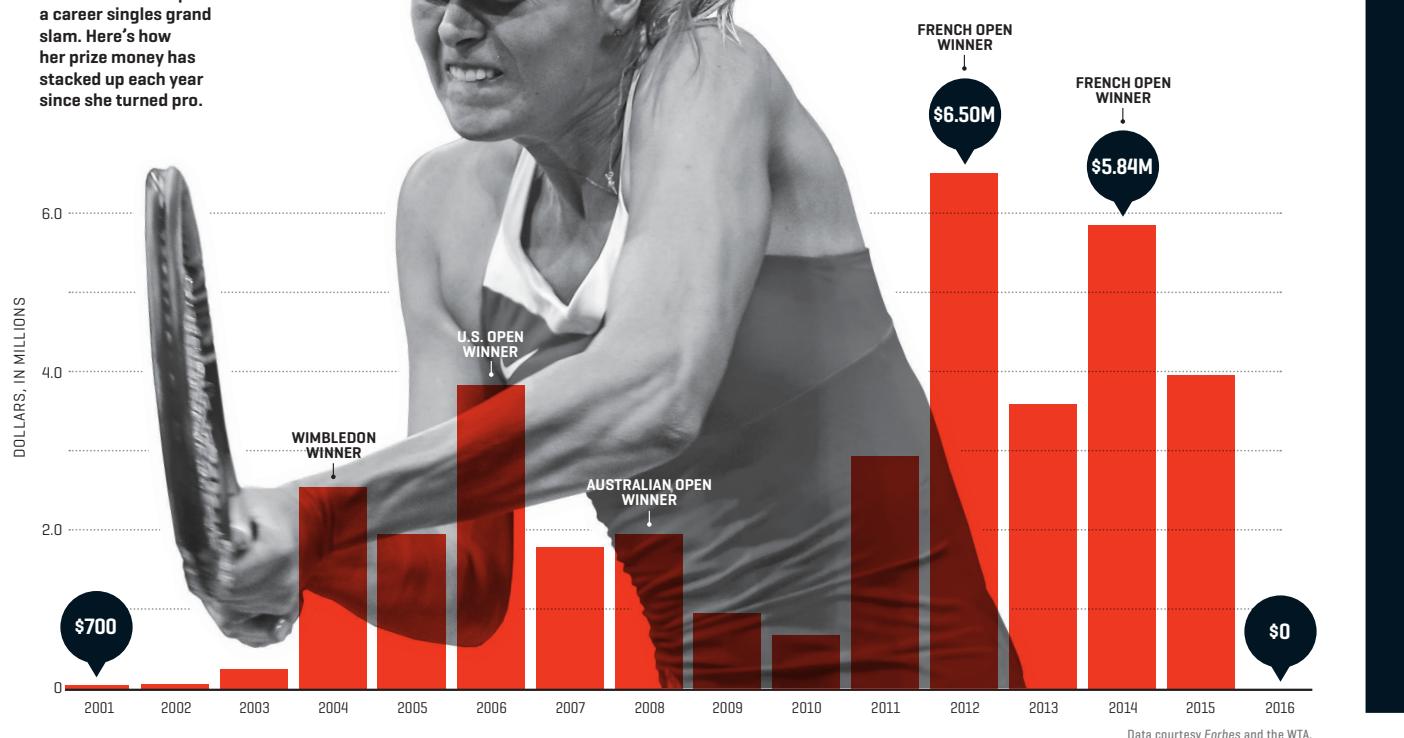
But when Russia was mired in a doping scandal that threatened its participation in the 2016 Olympics, anti-doping experts began to look at meldonium more closely. Late in 2015, the World Anti-Doping

"WE NEEDED TO GET THE PERCEPTION ABOUT HER CHANGED."

HOWARD JACOBS,
ATTORNEY WHO WORKED ON
SHARPOVA'S DEFENSE

BANK ON IT

Sharapova is one of 10 women to complete a career singles grand slam. Here's how her prize money has stacked up each year since she turned pro.



Data courtesy Forbes and the WTA.

Agency, which had previously included the drug on its watch list, decided its effects were performance-enhancing and banned it effective Jan. 1, 2016.

Most leagues reach out to their athletes to warn them whenever new drugs are added to the banned list. But the ITF sent its players an email with a link to WADA's updated list without specifying that meldonium was now on it. In legal filings, Sharapova said she'd been using the drug for a decade for low magnesium and to ward off a family history of diabetes on the advice of a Russian physician. She says her agent, Max Eisenbud, was in charge of monitoring the WADA list, and he took responsibility for not noticing the addition of meldonium. He was, she said, distracted by a divorce.

That defense was met with skepticism from her colleagues. "It's amazing that can be an excuse," says 2011 U.S. Open winner Sam Stosur. Andy Roddick also had trouble with the optics. "She's too smart to do something [illegal] on purpose," he told ESPN's Peter Bodo. "But the conversation inevitably leads to, 'Was she bending the rules using something that long?'"

It didn't help that Sharapova had a hard time answering a central question posed by the ITF at her hearing last June: If she was taking the drug because her Russian doctor suggested it, why didn't she tell

any of the American physicians she saw, or her coaches, none of whom had any record or knowledge of it? Only her father, her agent and the doctor on her Russian Fed Cup team seemed to know. The judges found that telling. In an unexpectedly harsh decision, they hit Sharapova—ranked No. 7 at the time—with a two-year ban. They also labeled her "the author of her own misfortune."

An attorney who worked on Sharapova's defense, Howard Jacobs, says Sharapova was taken aback by the "hypercritical" tone of the opinion. As he recalls, "We realized we didn't need to just address the sentence. We needed to get the perception about her changed."

The issue came up again when Sharapova went before the Court for Arbitration in Sport in New York last September seeking a reduction of her ban. Once again, the judges wanted to know why she didn't list meldonium on her own doctors' forms. "Maybe you fill out forms," she said, according to Jacobs, "but I don't sit in waiting rooms doing things like that. That's one of the benefits of being me."

The judges agreed with her that the ITF had bungled the way it notified its athletes about meldonium and reduced her sentence to 15 months. (Since then, the ITF has announced modest changes to its policy, including giving athletes two separate notifications

about new prohibited drugs and displaying changes more prominently on its website.) But they didn't find Sharapova completely innocent. The judges decided she didn't have "significant fault" but that she did have "greater than the minimum degree of fault."

Sharapova immediately began framing the ruling as a vindication. "I knew the truth of my story and that being upfront and honest from the beginning would get me through this," she told PBS's Charlie Rose shortly after her appeal was decided. "And it did."

In the same interview, she unloaded on the ITF, accusing the federation of targeting her, even though its officials have maintained they were following rules that apply to everyone. The ITF keeps a list of arbitrators that it uses in drug cases, and before the hearing, Sharapova's lawyers had a chance to replace the three chosen by the federation with any others on its list. But in her interview with Rose, she cast the process as rigged. "I'm in a hearing, knowing the [arbitrators] I'm speaking to were chosen by the people I'm actually in a fight with," she said. "They call that neutral? That's not neutral." Asked by Rose whether she thought the ITF was after her, she nodded solemnly, then replied, "I'm starting to think that, yes."

In the WTA, many top players are taking



Sharapova's actions just as personally as she took the federation's. "The biggest issue is that in the 10 years Maria was using meldonium, she was playing tough three-set matches," commentator and former pro Mary Carillo says. "A lot of players say, 'That stuff helped her beat me.' It's what they resent more than anything. You can't take your eye off that ball."

IN WHAT LOOKED like a cruel twist of fate for Sharapova, the Porsche Grand Prix in Stuttgart begins on April 24, two days before her ban ends. But the car company—for which Sharapova serves as a brand ambassador—helped engineer a hairpin solution: She's getting one of four wild cards and the chance to play her first-round match on the first Wednesday of the tournament, when second-round matches will be well underway.

Markus Gunthardt, the tournament's director, dismissed the idea that he's done Sharapova any favors, noting that five first-round matches started on the same Wednesday last year. "We haven't bent any rules," he says. More important, he adds, Sharapova deserves it because she's already served "a severe punishment for her mistake" and "I have to think first about the Porsche Tennis Grand Prix."

"She played four times and won three times," he continues. "But it's the way she played. She really heated the stadium up. She helped to develop the tournament to what it is today. So I believe it was the right decision for us."

Her rivals see it differently. Says Stosur, who has a 2-15 record against Sharapova: "I don't have a problem with a tournament giving a wild card to anyone it wants. I have a problem with one being given to a player who's banned for the first day of the tournament."

Meanwhile, Germany's lesser-known players feel they're being played by a multimillionaire. "I'm

COURT OF APPEAL

Sharapova was the highest-paid female athlete for 11 years straight—until 2016, when her suspension began. (She fell to No. 2, behind Serena Williams.)

285

Dollars, in millions, she's amassed in prize money, appearances and endorsements since turning pro in 2001



Percentage of Sharapova's \$285M that's been earned on the court (\$36.5M); endorsements and sponsorships total \$248.5M

88

Rank on *Forbes'* 2016 list of highest-grossing athletes

Data courtesy *Forbes* and the WTA.

Sharapova, here at February's *Vanity Fair* party, kept a high profile during her suspension.

concerned for myself and the others," says 37th-ranked Laura Siegemund, who plays on her country's Fed Cup team. "It's hard for the German girls who are working so hard and also in need of the wild card. We don't have a lot of tournaments in our country."

Tournaments in Madrid and Rome later this spring are also giving Sharapova free passes. But the real tension among players surrounds the upcoming decision about the French Open, beginning May 28. The head of the French Tennis Federation, Bernard Giudicelli, traveled to LA in March to hear Sharapova's pitch for a French Open wild card despite the opposition of France's highest-ranked player, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, who told reporters, "Honestly, offering [her] an invitation right now will be like giving a candy to a child who has misbehaved."

The WTA's chief executive, Steve Simon, turned down a request from ESPN to talk about the issue, though he has publicly said that he is open to revisiting the rules about wild cards.

As one veteran promoter puts it, "Tournament directors are thrilled because Maria attracts and entertains... Let's face it, Maria hasn't done a sliver of what Serena [Williams] has done on the game side. But her matches are packed."

But now that Williams, who has an 18-match winning streak against Sharapova that dates to 2005, has announced she's temporarily going off the tour while pregnant, it's entirely possible that Sharapova can reclaim the No. 1 spot. "There's not really a player today capable of taking the lead besides Serena," says Carlos Rodriguez, who has coached Sharapova rivals Justine Henin and Li Na. "No one will be consistent enough to put Maria in real trouble."

What does it take to beat her? Says Rodriguez: "I used to tell Li Na to play Maria with a straight ball instead of crosscourt because she's big and rangy, and you want to limit her mobility. As soon as you give her an angle and she gets the chance to step in the court, you're dead."

It's a lesson the ITF discovered too late. Sharapova was supposed to give the federation a way to prove it was getting tough on drugs. Instead, Sharapova did her best to make it look opportunistic and sloppy. The league gave her the angle, and she stepped in and crushed it.

Now Sharapova has to come back onto the court and play the angles where they really count. ■