

The Upsets in Women's Tennis at the Open may not Be the Big Surprise They Appear to Be

by Rick Angus
New York City

When the U.S. Open began a week ago, all the hysteria around a clearly uneven draw was building towards an early coronation of #2 seed, Maria Sharapova. Uncontested, she would breeze through the lower half to her predetermined place in the sun in another US Open final and possibly her second straight title at this event.

Not since Venus Williams in 2001 and 2000 has a woman repeated as Champion. Well, it seems the hoopla around Maria overlooked an essential ingredient in tournaments. A player must actually win the contests on the hard courts and sometimes that proves to be much more difficult to do, than the handicappers would have you believe.

Ultimately, a surprising opponent from Poland, 18 year old Agnieszka Radwanska, rose from the ranks of the unknowns to smite the overwhelming favourite Maria, who came into the match having lost only 2 games in four sets in her previous 2 rounds.

Here is when the penny truly dropped. Sharapova was only the opening act on a very odd day indeed. If the prognosticators had awarded the bottom half to Maria prematurely, they also had assumed that her opposition would come from the usual suspects. Such players as #7 seed Nadia Petrova and others regularly seeded in the top 16.

The fourth round of Slams is, by and large, normally composed of the top players readying themselves for the second week when the really suspense filled matches will invariably ensue.

This U.S. Open is now different with a capital "D". Get used to it in 2007. The upsets that occurred on Saturday may well be viewed in the future as advance notice of which players to watch, an awakening and defining moment in women's tennis draws for the next few years.

Bursting onto the scene are newcomers galore. While the top half is heavily loaded with the familiar names, the Williams sisters, Justine Henin and the two rising Serbs, Ana Ivanovic and Jelena Jankovic, the future is represented in force in the lower half.

Like many before them, youngsters and newcomers abound and are always greeted with the commonly uttered refrain, where do these girls come from? Maybe, just maybe, it was the inclusion of eastern Europe into the economies of the Western world that provided the impetus for tennis to sprout and to flourish in what was previously seen as barren earth.

Teenager Agnes Szavay, 18, of Hungary, who showed Petrova the exit, 6/4,6/4, has already made a noticeable splash this summer by reaching the Pilot Pen final against Kuznetsova in New Haven in August. Szavay is, by comparison to many women's circuit players, already defined as a hot prospect. Others from the nether regions of the bottom half who will play in week two are and will likely appear to many fans, to be unknowns. Surely, not for long.

Have you heard of Julie Vakulenko, a twenty four year old from the Ukraine, a veritable senior citizen on tour, who ushered #9 Daniela Hantuchova off centre stage in round one? Julie arrived at the gate to Flushing Meadows ranked #50 on the first day? Julie will meet Agnes in the 4th round.

Or try recalling 18 year old Victoria Azarenka of Belarus who totally annihilated the fading Martina Hingis in the third set of their match, 6 games to love, en route to her next encounter with 2004 U.S. Open Champion Svetlana Kuznetsova, the #4 seed in this year's event.

Be careful Svetlana, we know New York is your favourite city to play in, but Azarenka entered this tournament ranked #41 and will leave as a new face with a new ranking and possibly provide you much stiffer competition that you could possibly have foreseen.

Next comes the poster girl for this disruptive behaviour that is upsetting, in spades, the accustomed tranquillity of the tennis scene that the women's game has come to represent. Tamira Paszek of Austria, a yet to turn seventeen year old sensation, was ranked #260 one year ago and this week in N.Y., Tamira had reached number 43 before her new-found points are added to her resume.

Paszek displayed her vast potential in the third round, mastering the best efforts of #11 seed Patty Schnyder, winning in three sets and in the process demonstrating her cool resolve by withstanding the pressure to triumph in the final set tiebreaker, 7 points to 1.

Tamira has her work cut out for her in the next round where she will meet #6 seed Anna Chakvetadze of Russia, a country that for a decade at least has been the traditional powerhouse of development in the women's' game.

The bombshell that left a huge crater in the draw was the upset of the day when the favoured Sharapova was sent packing 6/4, 1/6, 6/2 by a Polish prodigy with the multi-syllable moniker of Agnieszka Radwanska. That is a name that just flows off the tongue with comparable ease. If you can't deal with the pronunciation the first time you try it, practice.

Not only can she play tennis, climbing the rankings from #129 to 32 prior to the Open's start, she has a tennis playing sister, Urszula, who is seeded #2 in the Junior Girls event at the U.S. Open. Barely more than a year apart in age at 18 and 16, respectively, these two sisters bear an eerie resemblance to another famous family pairing.

Radwanska will now play Shahar Peer, a former teenage star, in the fourth round. Peer showed her prodigious talents to B.C. fans in leading Israel past Canada in a Federation Cup competition staged in Kamloops this spring. How quickly she has become another twenty year old tour regular. The new generation just keeps on coming.

Having a younger sister who wields a racquet generally means nothing, but having one that is as adept at the sport as Urszula, changes the situation dramatically. Not since the arrival of the Williams sisters a decade ago, when Venus was all the rage, has there been so much enthusiasm for a sister combo like these two.

Back then, most persons knowledgeable in the sport of tennis could be quoted, "Serena will never make it, she can barely play. If it weren't for the attention being paid to Venus, she wouldn't even be included in the draw".

At the time it was true, wild cards into the Open for doubles events permitted Serena to get her feet wet at the professional level. In spite of, or maybe because of, her father Richard's insistence that she was even better than Venus the potential of Serena was heartedly scoffed at by many an observer.

As the passage of time has shown, there must definitely be something to predictions made and based on the study of genealogy, especially when applied to active tennis sisters. This year, the Williams sisters certainly represent the present, but in a couple of years, who's to say that the Radwanska duo won't be all the rage. Don't wager against such an outcome.

The bottom line comes from the bottom half of this year's Open, no one amongst the four teenage girls mentioned herein was ranked inside the top 100 a year ago.

In order of significant rankings ascent, the most spectacular climb is by Agnes Szavay, who was paused at #302 last summer and arrived here this week at #31. Next, is Tamira Paszek, an Austrian teenager unknown at this time last year, who a year ago was ranked #260. Tamira now possesses a formidable #43 ranking. A number that will change for the better following the 2007 Open and will likely soon move into the top 20's

Almost overlooked in these rapid jumps into the top 50 are the other youngsters who this week have created much greater interest in their budding careers by displaying steady advancement reflected very positively in the giant killer roles that they played to perfection at the Open.

Victoria Azarenka might have made Hingis feel a bit over the hill when Martina looks back to reflect upon the outcome of their encounter. Nevertheless, Victoria has clearly come a long ways from a ranking of 124 to her already meaningless #41 position used for entry purposes at the Open. A major win, over a former #1 and multiple Grand Slam Champion such as Hingis, can have a way of upgrading people's assessment of her potential in short order.

However, the unexpected victory by Agnieszka Radwanska against defending Champion, Maria Sharapova, proved to be the ultimate good news story of week one. If one assumes that the future holds in store what the past indicates to be very achievable, this young woman has game. Combined with her younger sister's great potential, the tennis world has really got something to look forward to with delight.

Add to the mix, all these players have more work to be done in week 2. Their U.S. Open point values achieved in the first week can grow more rapidly as future match victories earn much greater point rewards. There are definitely more revelations to come in week 2.

If one of these previously unheralded competitors continue with their current success, engineering subsequent victories over either or both of the remaining top seeds in the bottom half of the draw, Kuznetsova and Chakvetadze, the reigning tennis wisdom behind the seeding process will be further shaken to its statistical roots.

Be wary of the numbers, sometimes human efforts excel beyond reason and such results are not so easily predicted with numerical infallibility.