

“Russian Sensation” or “Mean Girl”?
Maria Sharapova, Drugs Bans, and ‘Schadenfreude’

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on one of women’s tennis’s most discernible athletes—Russian tennis player, Maria Sharapova. Having fled the fallout of the Chernobyl Disaster in 1986, Sharapova’s parents moved to Nyagan, a small town in northwest Russia. Athletically talented from a young age, Sharapova began developing her game at a time when the Soviet Union was emerging from a period of athletic wilderness.¹ Best evidencing this, many Western nations, including the US and West Germany, boycotted the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow, a feat reciprocated by the Soviets at the 1984 Games in LA.² Thus, these factors combined makes Sharapova a fascinating case study.

Her prominence in global tennis also means that over the past decade, she has become one of the most *marketable* tennis players – and even, athletes – in the world.³ More problematically, however, Sharapova has also gained considerable notoriety because of her 15-month drug ban that stretched from the 2016 to the 2017 season.

This chapter is structured thus: First, it contextualizes some of the important gendered dynamics of tennis’s structure. Second, I provide a biography of Sharapova’s career, her early years developing as a tennis player, her move to the US, her transition to professionalism, and her success on the global tennis tour. Third, I provide a media analysis of Sharapova’s drug ban, outlining media responses, player responses, and the impact of her ban on professional tennis. Finally, I conclude with some short observations about the

importance of Sharapova's prominence in tennis, and the impact of her doping on the professional game.

Tennis, Gender, and Media

Tennis is generally considered to be the most popular individual, competitive sport in the world.⁴ Evidencing this popularity, the professional game's coveted Grand Slam tournaments – the Australian Open, the French Open, Wimbledon, and the US Open – play host to millions of spectators each year. In 2017, more people attended these events than ever before.⁵ These events also continue to command significant levels of global media attention.⁶

One of the factors that separates tennis from other popular sports – and likely facilitates its global popularity – is the dynamic under which the sport operates. Physically demanding for all its athletes, it is unlike popular and traditional team sports in that it can be both gender-segregated, i.e. men v. men or women v. women, and unsegregated, albeit only in its 'doubles' format. At the sport's elite level, the unusual dynamics of tennis also mean that there are various different versions of the sport, such as 'singles,' 'doubles,' and 'mixed doubles.' There are also various adaptations for disabled participants, too.

One of the biggest controversies of tennis, however, concerns the length of matches. Men's tennis matches, for example, are typically longer, comprising the best of five sets. By contrast, women's tennis comprises only the best of three sets. The reasons and traditions for this are unclear, but it is widely accepted that it is due to perceptions regarding the comparable weakness of women's bodies.⁷ Roth and Basow, for example, write that, "...sports often value male strengths...over female strengths".⁸

These gendered dynamics have been the source of consistent controversy over the past few decades. Even as far back as 1973, the infamous *Battle of the Sexes* match in which

Billie Jean King defeated Bobby Riggs represented a clash of traditional gender ideology with the growing feminist politics of the era.⁹ A similar feat was repeated 20 years later, when Jimmy Connors defeated Martina Navratilova. Highlighting the public interest in mixed-gender tennis, each of these events drew significant viewing figures, with thousands watching inside the arena with millions more watching at home on the CBS television network.¹⁰

While these debates have not altogether disappeared,¹¹ contemporary gendered debates are largely situated around prize money, and, specifically, over whether male and female players should receive equal pay given the disparity in match length. Indeed, it has only been in the last decade that all Grand Slam tournaments have offered equal pay for both male and female champions.¹² Discussions concerning equal pay have been particularly evident in sport media's coverage of tennis.¹³ This has even been a topic frequently discussed by both current and former high-profile players, too. For instance, Sergiy Stakhovsky, Serena Williams, and Martina Navratilova have all acknowledged this topic in recent years. Former Australian Number One, Pat Cash, even has a page on his personal website dedicated to the topic, in which he proposes two solutions to the so-called issues with equal pay.¹⁴ It is also a topic which has been discussed by the game's current crop of players; Serbian star Novak Djokovic and leading Spanish player Rafael Nadal recently claimed that because men bring greater levels of media attention to the sport, they should earn more in prize money.¹⁵ Both were widely condemned in the sports world for their comments.¹⁶

This line of reasoning is one that has fostered significant interest in the academic world. Indeed, a plethora of research has documented how sport media's representation of women's tennis has been complicated by a range of factors, including under-representation, misrepresentation, sexualization, eroticization, racism, sexuality, and trivialization¹⁷ as I will discuss in the context of Maria Sharapova later in this chapter.

On the surface, then, Djokovic's and Nadal's comments are problematic. As the research above implied, women's tennis continues to receive far less scrutiny in comparison to the men's game, although this is clouded by a number of issues. Nevertheless, some of the most successful tennis players – both male and female – represent some of sport's most prominent athletes. Swiss champion, Roger Federer, the most successful male player of all time, even has his own fashion label, as does female player Serena Williams. These athletes, along with several other high-profile tennis players, represent what Thompson calls the “human brand.”¹⁸ Accordingly, claims that male players are the primary drivers in tennis' popularity is short-sighted, and, thus, worthy of greater academic attention.¹⁹ However, while these calls for greater academic scrutiny are of course legitimate, they are beyond the scope of analysis for this chapter. Instead, I focus on the sporting life of Maria Sharapova, starting first with her early years and the development of her tennis game.

The Early Days

Maria Sharapova was born in April 19, 1987 in Nyagan, a small town in northwest Russia that was then still The Soviet Union. Her parents, Yuri and Yelena, hailed from the now-Belarusian town of Gomel, around 200km from Chernobyl. In 1986, shortly before Yelena became pregnant with Maria, the family learned of the catastrophic disaster at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. Despite being initially reassured by local officials, the family escaped the deadly radiation by heading north, an escape that Yuri Sharapova has described as a “crazy, crazy time,”²⁰ recalling their long and crowded trip, first to Siberia, then to Yekaterinburg, before the family finally settled in Nyagan. Interestingly, Maria Sharapova credits the Chernobyl Disaster as the event that ultimately made her a tennis player, as it resulted in her family's relocation across the Soviet Union.

In her autobiography, *Unstoppable: My Life So Far*, Sharapova fondly describes her parents' early years, recalling how they had met at school and quickly became enamoured of one another. While her mother was educated, her father had left school at an early age to pursue a career in maintenance. An athletic man, he had a particular interest in ice hockey and mountain-climbing. Interestingly, however, it was not until he was an adult that he played tennis for the first time, which was likely due to the fact that in the Soviet Union, tennis was a sport typically reserved for any remaining aristocracy and was rarely played by the working class.²¹ This, as Sharapova writes, was a seminal moment. She recalls: "He fell in love with the game...He was preparing himself, though he did not know it. He was in training to become that strange and exotic thing, a tennis parent."²²

Her family would move to Sochi in 1989, and two years later, Sharapova was presented with her first tennis racquet while being assigned to her first tennis club and coach, Yuri Yudkin. Having been involved in tennis for several years, Yudkin was a well-known figure in Sochi insomuch as parents in the area would wait for his assessment of their children's tennis ability. Shortly after her arrival in the club, Sharapova was soon receiving private training from Yudkin, who she credits with helping her build stamina, toughness, and speed, which make up the bulk of her enviable skill set.

But after training Sharapova for less than a year, Yudkin advised Sharapova's father that in order to progress her career, she would need to seek better training elsewhere. Thus, in a matter of weeks, Sharapova's father resigned his job and dedicated himself to supporting the development of her career. In 1993, they began attending a Moscow tennis clinic run by Martina Navratilova, one the most successful players of all time, who soon recommended that the talented Sharapova seek training at the IMG Tennis Academy in Miami, Florida, a center that became known for developing future champions, including Andre Agassi and Monica Seles. When they returned to Sochi, Sharapova's father immediately began planning

the family's move to the US. However, the political climate of the time complicated matters for the family.

Indeed, the breakup of the Soviet Union only two years previously meant that travel to countries like the US, which remained for many the 'Capitalist Enemy,' was still heavily restricted.²³ In her autobiography, Sharapova recalls her father pleading with the Russian Embassy in Moscow to allow the family to travel. Eventually, they were granted a three-year visa to travel to the US, something that she described as a "golden ticket...[a] miracle."²⁴ There were, however, two major issues with this news. First of all, Sharapova's mother had not been permitted to travel with them, joining Maria and her father some two years later in 1995. And secondly, Yuri, was forced to spend all of his life's savings and borrow on top of that approximately \$700 to make the trip. Indeed, upon arrival in the US, Sharapova's father worked a series of low-paid jobs to support her tennis lessons.

Having initially trained at the Rick Macci Tennis Academy, she was then signed by IMG in 1996, who funded her \$35000 tuition fee. Joining IMG was a significant moment for Sharapova and her father for it removed their financial concerns. They now had guaranteed rent, food, travel, and medical support. In addition, joining IMG also resulted in the now 11-year-old Sharapova to sign with Nike, becoming one of their youngest athletes in the process. Her first Nike contract was worth \$50,000 plus opportunities for performance bonuses.

But despite Sharapova's improved economic situation and obvious tennis talent, she describes her life in the tennis academy as having been "miserable." In her autobiography, for example, she recalls:

I want to call it a prison, but I guess it was really just a tennis prison. All the academies are like that—laid out like prisons, with the stout buildings and the neat paths, the curfews and yards, the food lines, the bragging and the arguing, with the women over there and the men are over here...I was lonely. I barely saw my father...Life in the dorm was no fun.²⁵

Given that previous research has documented the likeness between sports academies and prisons²⁶, Sharapova's comparison here is perhaps unsurprising. Goffman formulated the concept of the "total institution" to conceptualize a person living within strict confines - usually referring to prisoners or those in a mental asylum.²⁷ In sports academies, as with Sharapova's example above, athletes also operate in an isolated, enclosed, and controlling environment; Anderson therefore describes sport as a "near-total institution."²⁸ His work argues that, while athletes hold more power than prisoners, given that athletes have the ability to quit sport should they desire, there nevertheless remain similarities between these two circumstances. This is especially the case in professional sport; in Sharapova's case, there was an added weight of expectation – from sponsors, for example – for her to be a successful athlete. Accordingly, she had a particularly gruelling training schedule in the academy:

- 5:30am Wake up
- 5:45am Breakfast
- 6:15am Practice on Nick's court
- 7:30am Clinics and drills
- 12:30pm Lunch
- 1:30pm Practice
- 4:00pm Fitness
- 5:00pm Dinner
- 7:00pm 'Schoolwork'
- 9:00pm Bed.²⁹

This, she recalls, remained the same throughout her time at the academy. Moreover, much like other research on professional sports friendships³⁰, she also described her dorm-mates as "competitors, not friends," suggesting that she enjoyed few close friendships in her time at the academy.³¹ This is something that would later prove an integral part to Sharapova's life in professional tennis.

Nevertheless, despite her unhappy time in the academy, Sharapova continued to develop into a talented tennis player. By 2000, she began to compete in notable, but still amateur, tournaments. This, she maintains, was an extremely competitive time in her transition from amateur to professional tennis player: “Only the best youth players in the world make it into these tournaments. Only the best of the best make it out. It’s like the eye of a needle. Just a handful get through to the next stage.”³² At first, her wildcard entry into many of these tournaments³³ resulted in several defeats. However, through the perseverance of her coaches in developing her into a professional tennis player, she competed at age 14 in her first professional event

She was consistently ranked highly in the junior world singles rankings and reached the final of eight junior singles tournaments, including two junior Grand Slam events, Wimbledon and the Australian Open in 2002, winning three. Her grounding in these events, coupled with her training and development in the US, had prepared for participation in professional tennis.

Turning Professional

In 2003, at just 16, Sharapova joined the professional tennis circuit. Despite her excitement in turning professional, however, Sharapova describes how she initially “struggled to find a rhythm on the tour.”³⁴ Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that in the first two Grand Slam tournaments of the year, the Australian Open and French open, she was defeated in the first round of each. As previous research has documented with professional athletes’ migration and travel across the world,³⁵ Sharapova struggled to adapt; she recalls the long travels to Melbourne and Paris for Grand Slam tournaments, only to lose in the early stages of each, thus marring her enjoyment of her location. What was perhaps also problematic here,

however, was the fact that she had begun to receive a reputation for being a ‘cold’ person and had few friends on the tennis circuit,³⁶ a theme to which I will return later in the chapter.

In 2003, the same year as her breakthrough in the professional game, she also participated at Wimbledon for the first time, beating Ashley Harkleroad in the first round, Elena Bovina in the second, and Jelena Dokic in the third before losing to Svetlana Kuznetsova in the fourth round. But her progression to the fourth round was a “rebirth,”³⁷ and her success had led to her being description as a “Russian sensation.”³⁸ A small caveat to her success, however, were the critics who described as being “noisy” on court. For instance, one newspaper described her having “the scream of a small jet engine,” rendering her as the “Queen of Scream,”³⁹ though she responded to such criticism by admitting that “I don’t even know I’m doing it.”⁴⁰

Nevertheless, in September 2003, Sharapova finally secured her first professional victory at the Japan Open. She followed that success by winning the Quebec’s Bell Challenge that December. As a result, she was named the WTA⁴¹ Newcomer of the Year, which was, of course, a significant moment for Sharapova. By the following year, having reached the third-round of the Australian Open and the quarter-finals of the French Open, Sharapova had begun to pave the way for her Wimbledon success later in the year.

Having settled in London prior to the start of the tournament, Sharapova recalls being in a relaxed mood, ready to compete. Having made it through matches against the likes of lesser known talents as Amy Frazier, Daniela Hantchova, Anne Keothavong, Yuliya Beygelzimer, and Ai Sugiyama, Sharapova met the fifth seed, the more heralded Lindsey Davenport in the semi-finals. This, she recalls, made her nervous, and she began to question her own ability and experience in the professional game. Sharapova was also in awe of the Wimbledon traditions, i.e. the quality of the court, the fan-base’s knowledge, etc. Moreover, she had not previously played against Davenport who was much more experienced in that she

had been playing professionally since the early-1990s. Such anxieties contributed to Sharapova's poor start to the match, something Sharapova herself would acknowledge: "I was overpowered, overmatched. She was a woman. I was a girl. She was big. I was small. She hit the corners. I hit the net."⁴² And yet, following what turned out to be a welcomed rain delay, Sharapova recovered to beat Davenport in three sets, thus setting up the final against Serena Williams.

Williams, the top seed at Wimbledon in 2004, had won the previous two tournaments, as well as the Australian Open the previous year. She would later, of course, become one of the most successful female tennis players of all time. But Sharapova, despite her complaints of a mild illness before the final, shockingly defeated Serena Williams in straight sets. Although Sharapova was ranked 13th in the world prior to this tournament, she was not expected to be this successful, leaving *The Washington Post* to describe her victory as "the most stunning upset in memory."⁴³ In doing so, she also became the third-youngest winner of the women's singles event, and the second-youngest in the Grand Slam era.

Given Sharapova's stunning achievement in winning Wimbledon in this fashion, one might expect the earlier "Russian sensation" narrative to dominate proceedings. But, despite her success, her achievements were largely trivialized in favour of sexualisation. Indeed, in their analysis of sports media's coverage of tennis Grand Slams, Messner, Duncan and Willms wrote, "Commentators rarely seemed to report on Sharapova without also commenting (often jokingly) on her appearance."⁴⁴ This was sometimes subtle, but oftentimes not. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Harris and Clayton outline how sport media's representation of female athletes centres on sensuality⁴⁵, heterosexuality, and sexualisation—as has other, more recent research, too.⁴⁶ Vincent and Crossman's analysis of sport media further shows how Sharapova was "replete with ambivalent and seemingly contradictory references to her fellow Russian, Anna Kournikova."⁴⁷

In the late-1990s and early 2000s, Kournikova's prominence in professional tennis had facilitated sport media's coverage of women's sports to "individual athletes presented as icons of white, heterosexual, feminine attractiveness."⁴⁸ While Kournikova had some success – she won Australian Open doubles events in 1999 and again in 2002 – it is generally accepted that she was an inferior player to Sharapova. She never won a singles Grand Slam tournament, and her peak achievement had been to reach the Wimbledon semi-finals in 1997, losing to the eventual winner, Martina Hingis. In spite of Sharapova's success, however, she received the same treatment and was framed as "an object of desire and beauty to be gazed upon."⁴⁹

General media attention of Sharapova also increased exponentially following her maiden Wimbledon success. She had also become increasingly marketable, receiving numerous requests to 'brand' certain products after her rather stunning upset. Indeed, she recalls the immediate aftermath of her win in her autobiography: "The telephone rang, the agents called, the offers poured in...How do you say no when the world is on the line?"⁵⁰ She soon began representing notable organizations as Motorola, Canon, Head, and ESPN. A new and attractive commercial entity, a freshly minted top-10 tennis player who was also one of the youngest Wimbledon champions of all-time was evidence enough that Sharapova had in fact arrived on the big stage, generating in her wake what Isidore described as "Maria Mania."⁵¹

"Maria Mania" at Center Court

Although she failed to win any of the four 2005 Grand Slam events, making it to three semi-finals and one quarter-final before losing to the eventual winners of each tournament, she ended that Grand Slam season ranked number one in the world. In 2006, having reached

the semi-finals of the Australian Open and Wimbledon, she won the US Open by beating Justine Henin-Hardenne in the final. She was then defeated by Serena Williams in the final of the Australian Open in 2007, but then won the tournament the following year without dropping a set, despite being an underdog for most of her run there.

The competitive nature of professional tennis, however, meant that Sharapova’s Grand Slam achievements were largely underwhelming, and particularly given the early promise she displayed at a young age. More importantly, Sharapova also had numerous injuries including a recurring shoulder injury, a hamstring injury, and an ankle injury, all of which impacted her on court performance. Indeed, she missed the 2008 US Open and 2009 Australian Open due to injury. In all, her injuries, along with an increasingly dominant Serena Williams, contributed to her lack of success in Grand Slam tournaments moving forward, which helps to explain why it would take her another four years to win another, the French Open in 2012 (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Sharapova’s Grand Slam Record⁵²

Year	Australian	French	Wimbledon	US
2004	3R	Q-F	W	3R
2005	S-F	Q-F	S-F	S-F
2006	S-F	4R	S-F	W
2007	F	S-F	4R	3R
2008	W	4R	2R	-
2009	-	Q-F	2R	3R
2010	1R	3R	4R	4R
2011	4R	S-F	F	3R
2012	F	W	4R	SF
2013	SF	F	2R	-
2014	4R	W	4R	4R
2015	F	4R	S-F	-
2016	Q-F	-	-	-

W: Winner **F:** Finalist **S-F:** Semi-Final **Q-F:** Quarter-Final **1-4R:** First-Fourth Round

Sharapova's apparent 'cold' reputation also meant that she received little support or sympathy from her fellow competitors. Although previous research has documented that close friendships are often restricted in elite sport due to its competitive nature,⁵³ it is particularly unusual in an individual sport like tennis for a player to gain such a reputation. In 2013, Sharapova herself confirmed her distant relationship from other players: "I'm not really close to many players...Just because you're in the same sport doesn't mean that you have to be friends with everyone."⁵⁴ This, of course, did little to settle any mounting controversy and led to numerous personal slights such as when Britain's *The Telegraph* described her as a "locker-room loner,"⁵⁵ while the *New York Post* asked "Why does everyone in tennis hate Maria Sharapova?"⁵⁶

But it was her conspicuous absence from any Grand Slam tournaments beyond the 2016 Australian Open and the responses to it that is worthy of consideration here as it was during this tournament that she failed a routine drugs test at the request of the International Tennis Federation (ITF), a matter she tackles head-on in the prologue of her autobiography:

Three weeks into the season, I got an e-mail from the ITF...Meldonium had been found in my urine, and in January 2016 Meldonium had been added to the World Anti-Doping Agency's list of banned substances. In other words, I was now a drug violator. I'd be suspended from competition immediately.⁵⁷

As the above illustrates, Sharapova took great pains to both address and examine her doping issues in her autobiography. Meldonium, she writes, is a supplement that she had been taking for a decade after it was recommended by a family doctor to reduce her fatigue. While she is critical of the drug's inclusion on the banned substance list, she denied that it enhances performance in any way. But she also accepts responsibility for her failed drug test that appears to have forever tarnished Sharapova's reputation within the tennis community.

A Controversial Figure

Following Sharapova's 2016 positive drug test, she was provisionally suspended in March by the ITF before the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) announced that Sharapova would be banned for two years, ultimately reduced to 15 months on appeal. This was largely because she had taken Meldonium for over a decade and had not faced any doping issues during that time. They also determined that she had taken the drug for medical reasons, rather than as an attempt to enhance performance.

The media response to Sharapova was primarily one of shock under the guise of both condemnation and sympathy. Several newspapers were critical of the apparent ample warnings Sharapova had received prior to her drug test informing that Meldonium was now on the World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA) banned substance list. In the *Daily Mail*, John Greechan was positively scathing in his attack on Sharapova:

It is the unblinking arrogance that really sets the gallstones rumbling. The cheating, the sneaking, the bribery and even the lame, half-hearted excuses? None of that would be quite so bad if only it was all accompanied by even an ounce of humility.⁵⁸

Also in the *Daily Mail*, Oliver Holt claims that Sharapova's case is evidence of an endemic drug problem in Eastern European sport more broadly, arguing that, "Sharapova may or may not have had legitimate medical reasons for using [M]eldonium, but it is unlikely the hoards of Russian sportsmen and women who have been using it were all suffering from heart problems."⁵⁹ This points toward the large-scale doping controversies surrounding Russian athletes over the past five years.⁶⁰

In *The Independent*, however, Paul Newman was more sympathetic. He describes Sharapova as "the ultimate sporting professional," adding that her drug ban was "one rare moment of unprofessionalism [which] had cost her the chance to carry on playing tennis."⁶¹ And in *The Times*, Martin Ziegler queries the use of Meldonium as a performance-enhancing

drug.⁶² This same line of reasoning was also adopted by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who defended Sharapova, adding that Meldonium “was never considered as doping. It doesn’t influence the result...It just keeps the heart muscles in good condition.”⁶³ Accordingly, in light of Putin’s comments, Sharapova was provisionally selected for the 2016 Olympic squad.⁶⁴

Peer Condemnation

Given that Sharapova has gained a reputation for being cold and aloof on the tennis circuit, it is perhaps unsurprising that her fellow players were largely disinterested in aiding her during this plight. Indeed, there was little support or sympathy toward her whatsoever. Among female tennis players, former French Open finalist, Dominika Cibulkova remarked: “I don’t feel sorry at all for Sharapova[sic] and I don’t miss her on the tour. She’s a totally unlikeable person. Arrogant, conceited and cold.”⁶⁵ Similarly, French player Kiki Mladenovic added that Sharapova “has no excuse that can defend what she’s done...She wasn’t really liked. I respected her for her career[sic] but she wasn’t really nice or polite.”⁶⁶ Caroline Wozniacki, Petra Kvitová, and Victoria Azarenka were also scathing in their assessment of Sharapova’s plight.⁶⁷ Only Serena Williams, one of her biggest rivals, expressed any sympathy, though she was also supportive of any ban imposed on Sharapova.⁶⁸

The lack of support afforded to Sharapova was similarly evident among former players. Retired star Jennifer Capriati, for example, wrote on social media that her own career had ended prematurely because she had “refused to cheat...I had to throw in the towel and suffer.”⁶⁹ Former player-turned-broadcaster John McEnroe was cynical of Sharapova’s explanation of ignorance, proclaiming: “It would be hard to believe that no one in her camp, the 25 or 30 people that work for her, or Maria herself had no idea that this happened.”⁷⁰

Acknowledging this glaring lack of support for Sharapova, former player Chris Evert attributed this to her lack of popularity on tour: “She has always isolated herself from the rest of the tennis world, from the players...Her friendships are outside the tennis world.”⁷¹

Male players were equally as negative in their discussions of Sharapova. The highest-ranked players at the time, the so-called Big Four of Andy Murray, Rafael Nadal, Roger Federer, and Novak Djokovic, publicly criticized Sharapova’s actions, claiming among other matters that she deserved her punishment. Nadal, who has been frequently accused of doping in the past, added that while “mistakes happen...she must be punished.”⁷² Djokovic initially expressed his sympathy for Sharapova but would later proclaim that “she must be prepared for punishment.”⁷³ And Britain’s Andy Murray was especially critical of Sharapova, of whom he remarked: “It’s your responsibility to know what you’re taking is legal.”⁷⁴

In the aftermath of Sharapova’s announcement, Murray, who had always been particularly critical about doping in tennis, told Britain’s *Daily Mail* that he had been “suspicious” of certain players because “they don’t seem to be getting tired.”⁷⁵ However, former German champion Boris Becker, who, at the time of Sharapova’s announcement was coaching Novak Djokovic, was in turn quite critical of Murray’s comments:

We have random drug testing and unless it’s proven, they are 100 per cent innocent...To assume something because somebody has won a Grand Slam or is fitter is totally out of order. Andy is one of the fittest players on tour – he often outlasts players and nobody is questioning his ethics.⁷⁶

Thus, for Becker, Sharapova’s situation was enough to inspire confidence in the way tennis authorities are currently addressing issues of doping, rendering her negative test and subsequent ban as evidence that the sport was indeed taking the matter quite seriously.

Damage Control

Sharapova's unsympathetic peers, largely supportive of her ban, failed to notice that her drugs ban was affecting her personally and the sport equally so. So, for example, many of Sharapova's commercial endorsements with certain organizations were also suspended, which was a huge matter given how far women have come in terms of garnering such endorsements. Prior to her suspension, she had been listed by the US's *Forbes* magazine as the highest-earning female athlete in the world. Following the ban, however, high-profile organizations, such as sports brand Nike, luxury watchmaker Tag Heuer, and car manufacturer Porsche, for whom Sharapova had become the first female ambassador, either ceased or suspended their commercial relationship with her.⁷⁷ In her autobiography, Sharapova expresses her disappointment with what she calls the "coldness" with which her endorsers showed, particularly Nike, who had sponsored her since she was 11.⁷⁸

In contrast to these organizations, racquet manufacturer Head continued to publicly support Sharapova and even extended their contract with her. Their statement read: "Head is proud to stand behind Maria, now and into the future...For more than a decade, Maria Sharapova has been a role model and woman of integrity who has inspired millions of fans around the world to play and watch tennis."⁷⁹ Head celebrated her eventual ban reduction by the CAS on social media, promoting the hashtag, #WeStoodWithMaria, though were widely criticized for doing so.⁸⁰ *The Guardian's* Andrew Jerrell Jones described Head's support as "a defining statement, showing how the loyalty by her litany of backers can produce such stunning lack of self-awareness."⁸¹

The after-effects of Sharapova's ban could also be seen was through her absence at major tennis tournaments. According to Dan King in *The Sun*, "Maria Sharapova's likely absence from Wimbledon would be a major blow according to the chairman [Philip Brook] of the All England Club."⁸² Indeed, Philip Brook commented that, "It would be a great shame if Maria was not here."⁸³ These comments were made in light of Sharapova's popularity at

the tournament, and there were fears that her absence from participating in the competition would negatively impact on spectators' interest and television audiences.

Finally, and arguably the most significant way by which the Sharapova's doping affected tennis was through the numerous calls for changes to the approach to doping in tennis. This came following both Sharapova's announcement but also against the backdrop of problematic findings in an ESPN survey. This survey polled 31 professional players, finding that almost 25% of them knew of a fellow professional player who had doped at some stage in his or her career.⁸⁴

Accordingly, there were calls for greater transparency in the way that professional tennis addresses doping issues. In an interview with *The Guardian*, David Haggerty, President of the ITF, acknowledged: "We've discussed the possibility of announcing provisional suspensions... We understand the importance of transparency. We're also doing that with the Integrity unit; they've begun to publish a quarterly report."⁸⁵ This was also an approach advocated by Andy Murray, who, even before Sharapova's ban, agreed for the need for transparency.⁸⁶ He later called for the ITF to release the drug testing records of all players, thus removing suspicion from 'clean' players. As he concluded, "Publishing your data and your testing results... obviously leaves much less doubt."⁸⁷

The publication of drug testing results was also supported by Rafael Nadal, who has suffered a multitude of injuries throughout this career and had successfully sued the then-French Minister for Health and Sport Roselyne Bachelot for her comments that he had served a secret drug ban in 2012. Given that this case was ongoing when Sharapova's announcement was made, Nadal captured the moment by calling for all of his drug tests to be publicly released:

It would be much better for the transparency of the sport in general to say, 'Rafa Nadal is passing an antidoping control today and the result is going

to be in two weeks'. In the result, you publish the results. The anti-doping control is negative.⁸⁸

Even Sharapova criticized the ITF for their apparent poor handling of her situation. While she initially accepted responsibility for failing her drug test, she later wrote of feeling “blindsided...trapped, tricked” by the ITF for their failure to keep her abreast with notifications pertaining to her drug ban.

A Checkered Return

Sharapova returned to tennis in April 2017, describing it as a “dream” to be playing competitively again.⁸⁹ She also spoke of her drugs ban and claimed that it was “time to move on” from discussions of it.⁹⁰ She was handed wildcard entries to tournaments in Germany, Spain, and Italy; however, she was not granted one to the first Grand Slam event she was eligible for—the vaunted French Open. But she also rounded into Grand Slam form quite swiftly. Despite an injury that prevented her from playing at the UK’s Birmingham Classic event, she returned to Grand Slam tennis after receiving a wildcard to compete at the 2017 US Open.⁹¹ Interestingly, in stark contrast to many athletes returning to sport after a drugs ban, Sharapova was not met with a negative response from fans. As Simon Briggs in *The Times* wrote, “We heard no echo of the boos that had greeted Justin Gatlin at London’s Olympic Park.”⁹²

While spectators may have been forgiving of Sharapova’s doping, her fellow players were not so. A host of male and female players were critical of various tournaments’ decisions to grant Sharapova wildcard entry. Romanian player, Simona Halep, for example, said that it was “not OK to help with a wildcard the player that was banned for doping...I cannot support what the tournament director did.”⁹³ French player, Alizé Cornet, described it

as “shameful” that Sharapova should be granted wildcard entry, claiming that any “player who has tested positive should start from scratch like everyone else and win her place back.”⁹⁴ Another French player, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, was also uneasy: “I would not do it...It’s like if you give a sweet to a kid who did a bad thing, it’s going to do it again. It sends the wrong message.”⁹⁵ Similar opposition was vocalized by Roberta Vinci, Caroline Wozniacki, Dominika Cibulkova, and Adnieszka Radwanska, and Angelique Kerber.

Sharapova only received support from a handful of other players. Czech player Karolina Pliskova said that “Tennis needs a star like Sharapova is, so I don’t have anything against it.”⁹⁶ And Spanish player Garbine Muguruza praised Sharapova for her hard work in returning to professional tennis. She countered that Sharapova was “a great fighter, great attitude, big fight, spirit on the court...I guess she will improve the tournament.”⁹⁷ And former player Kim Clijsters argued that since Sharapova had served a suspension, that should be deemed the end of the matter. Clijsters maintained that by having served her sentence, Sharapova had paid her debt to the sport in a way that was probably more difficult for her than many seem to have imagined.⁹⁸

It is also important to note that the 2017’s US Open itself had to overcome several high-profile players missing from the tournament. Neither Serena Williams nor Novak Djokovic competed, nor had Stan Wawrinka and Victoria Azarenka. And Andy Murray, struggling through injury, was subsequently defeated earlier in the tournament. Thus, in contrast to the negative commercial effects that Sharapova’s drug ban had had on Grand Slam tournaments, her inclusion in the tournament brackets seemed to be welcomed by tournament organizers struggling to maintain viewership. As Simon Briggs wrote: “All these absentees make Sharapova...an even more valuable currency than usual.”⁹⁹ This could be the case in terms of fan popularity or even due to the fact that a previously-banned player could spark more interest due to its controversial nature.

Answering Difficult Questions

Despite Sharapova's drug ban, she has always been a controversial figure in the often buttoned-down tennis world. The challenges of being a talented young athlete in early post-Soviet Russia alongside the familial difficulty she suffered in her early years in the US, the challenges of living in a 'prison-like' tennis academy, her matriculation into professionalism, and her professional career and the challenges within it, Sharapova has always shown a troubling though rarely dull career arc. And yet, her reputational and personal foibles notwithstanding, it would ultimately be injuries that would prevent her from fulfilling her complete promise. Indeed, at the time of writing, Sharapova has won four Grand Slam tournaments, an astonishing feat for most on the tour, though hardly the total that many assumed would mark her place (see Table 1).

In sport, of course, reputations are made quickly and are nearly impossible to alter. As I noted in the previous section, the negative fan reaction to American sprinter Justin Gatlin at the 2017 World Athletic Championships in London is prime evidence of this. It is thus unsurprising that, following her return to tennis, she was asked difficult questions about her doping—as well as numerous fellow players condemning tournaments' decisions to grant her wildcard entry. Thus, even for a highly-promising and successful athlete like Maria Sharapova, the negative stigma of doping remains attached to athlete throughout their career.¹⁰⁰

The example of Sharapova also raises several key questions regarding doping in tennis—and indeed sport more broadly: is greater transparency with regard to tennis and doping required? Are there ongoing issues in tennis and its doping, particularly given that

so many players claim to know a fellow player who has doped? Is there any benefit in banning drugs like Meldonium which have no known effect on an athlete's performance? Do we even go as far to say that performance-enhancing drugs in sport should be legalized? Would sport maintain its popularity if that were the case? Could it be that certain sports would be easier 'sold' if drug use was legalized? These are important questions, and while scholars have debated this age-old topic several times, still remain valid.

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