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# Maria Sharapova

**Born:** April 19, 1987

Nyagan, Russia, Soviet Union (now in Russia)

**Also known as:** Maria Yuryevna Sharapova (full name); the Siberian Siren; the Queen of Screams

## Early Life

Maria Yuryevna Sharapova was introduced to tennis at the age of four, and she immediately fell in love with the sport. Coached by her father Yuri, she practiced constantly, hitting tennis balls at the side of her house. At the age of seven, Maria and her father moved to the United States so she could attend the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy in Bradenton, Florida. Because of visa restrictions, her mother was unable to join her for two years.

Maria and her father were forced to live in near-poverty. Yuri worked at a number of low-paying jobs

to support Maria's training. Soon, Maria was one of the star pupils at Bollettieri's and began winning junior tournaments. In 2001, she turned professional at the age of fourteen.

## The Road to Excellence

In 2002, Maria won her first professional tournament, the International Tennis Federation (ITF) challenger in Gunma, Japan. The ITF provides entry-level competitions to help players qualify for the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) tournaments. Maria won three ITF events and became the youngest player ever to reach the finals of the Australia Junior Open.

In 2003, Maria won her first WTA tournament, the Japan Open, and added another ITF-event victory. She qualified for all four of the WTA major tournaments: the Australian Open, the French Open, the U.S. Open, and Wimbledon. These competitions are collectively referred to as the "Grand Slam" of tennis. While she lost in the early rounds of these tournaments, she showed the drive and ability that soon led her to many world championships.

The public and press became fascinated by Maria not only because of her tennis achievements but also because she was a 6-foot-2-inch blond with exceptionally good looks. In 2003, *YM* magazine, a leading teen publication of the time, named her one of the "coolest girls" in the United States. That same year, she agreed to her first endorsement contract for NEC computers in Japan.

## The Emerging Champion

In June, 2004, Maria reached the quarterfinals of the French Open, and later that month, she won both the singles and the doubles championships at Birmingham, England. As the latter were on grass courts, she went to Wimbledon's grass courts encouraged by her chances. In one of the greatest upsets in the history of women's tennis, Maria won at Wimbledon, beating Serena Williams. That year, she went on to win three more WTA events and finished the year as the number-four ranked player in the world. Her five tournament victories were second only to Lindsay Davenport's seven. She was



*Maria Sharapova eye to the ball in 2003. (AP/Wide World Photos)*

named WTA player of the year and WTA most improved player of the year.

Maria's success and style of play started to draw criticism from other players and members of the press. Maria is a loud and boisterous athlete whose grunts and groans can sometimes be heard all the way to the next court. Some players complained that this threw them off their games, but Maria insisted her game necessitates vociferousness.

### Continuing the Story

In 2005, Maria won three WTA events and reached the semifinals of three of the four Grand Slam tournaments. She spent several weeks as the number-one ranked tennis player in the world, the first Russian woman ever to reach that status. Still, her failure to win a Grand Slam event made the year somewhat disappointing for her.

In 2006, Maria reached the semifinals of the Australian Open and Wimbledon. At the U.S. Open, she beat the top two players in the world on her way to winning her second Grand Slam title. She finished the year with a total of five wins and was ranked as the number-two player in the world.

In 2007, Maria won only one event and suffered from nagging injuries. Fully recovered from her injuries, in 2008, Maria won the Australian Open in January, her third Grand Slam victory, and followed that with another win in February at Doha, Qatar, which was her eighteenth career title overall.

### Grand Slam Victories

- 2004 Wimbledon
- 2006 U.S. Open
- 2008 Australian Open

### Other WTA Victories

- 2003 Bell Challenge
- 2003-04 Japan Open Tennis Championships
- 2004 Korea Open Tennis Championships
- WTA Tour Championships
- 2004-05 DFS Classic
- 2005 Pan-Pacific Open
- 2005, 2008 Qatar Total Open
- 2006 Zurich Open
- Generali Ladies Linz
- Indian Wells Masters
- 2006-07 Acura Classic
- 2008 Bausch & Lomb Championships

### Milestone

First Russian woman to be ranked number one (2005)

### Honors and Awards

- 2003 Women's Tennis Association (WTA) Newcomer of the Year
- 2004 WTA Player of the Year
- WTA Most Improved Player of the Year
- 2005 Russian Tennis Federation Best Female Player of the Year
- Master of Sports (Russia)
- 2005, 2007 ESPY Award: Best Female Tennis Player
- 2007 ESPY Award: Best International Female Athlete
- 2008 United States Sports Academy Female Athlete of the Month (January)

Maria's on-court success, augmented by off-court talents and interests, made her the wealthiest and most photographed female athlete in the world. She designed her own tennis outfits, and the one she wore at the 2006 U.S. Open, inspired by a dress worn by Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, particularly impressed the fashion world. Maria appeared in the 2006 *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue and is regularly on *People* magazine's list of "the Fifty Most Beautiful People in the World." Her endorsements include Nike, Prince, and Canon.

### Summary

Maria Sharapova is the first female athlete to fully combine sex appeal with the drive and talent to be one of best in the world at her sport. Largely because of her success, female athletes can embrace their femininity and be taken seriously as athletes. Furthermore, she has given help to others. She has never forgotten her humble beginnings in Russia and started the Maria Sharapova Foundation for at-risk children. She also acted as ambassador for the Russian city of Sochi in its successful bid to host the 2014 Winter Olympics.

*Jerome L. Neapolitan*

### Additional Sources

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