



Mauresmo, Amélie (b. 1979)

by Linda Rapp

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Amélie Mauresmo is the first professional tennis player since Martina Navratilova to come out publicly as a lesbian, and one of the few elite athletes to come out while still competing. She has almost twenty tournament titles to her credit and has held the number one ranking of the Women's Tennis Association.

Amélie Mauresmo was born July 5, 1979 in St.-Germain-en-Laye, not far from Paris, but her family moved to a village in northern France while she was still a baby. She was first drawn to tennis during the 1983 French Open. While her parents watched the television broadcast of French tennis player Yannick Noah's victory over Mats Wilander, the four-year-old Mauresmo tried to mimic the moves of the French champion.

Mauresmo has devoted her life to tennis. When she was only eleven she was proficient enough to attract the attention of the French tennis federation, which offered financial support so that she could attend a tennis school in the south of France. Two years later she moved on to the training center in Paris used by France's Olympic athletes. Mauresmo frequently suffered from homesickness and said in retrospect that if she had it to do over, she would not leave home at such a young age.

Throughout Mauresmo's teen years her tennis continued to improve. She won both the French and Wimbledon Junior championships in 1996.

Injuries, particularly back problems, an ongoing plague of Mauresmo's career, kept her out of action for much of 1997, but she rebounded the following year, playing well and reaching the final of the German Open. Her consistent play earned her a number 34 ranking from the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) and an invitation from Yannick Noah to join the French Federation Cup team.

Although Mauresmo continued to play well and advanced to number 29 in the WTA rankings, she decided to sign on with a new coach, Isabelle Demongeot, who ran a training academy in St. Tropez.

Demongeot introduced Mauresmo to her friend Sylvie Bourdon, who was eager to meet the tennis star. Mauresmo and Bourdon soon fell in love, and Mauresmo left her parents' home to move in with her new partner.

The move exacerbated tensions between Mauresmo and her family, who were already aware of her lesbianism but not accepting of it. After Mauresmo went to live with Bourdon, with whom her parents and brother did not get along, the family ceased to speak to her.

Mauresmo came out publicly as a lesbian during the 1999 Australian Open, where she defeated top-ranked American Lindsay Davenport in the semi-finals and faced Swiss player Martina Hingis for the championship.

At a press conference after their match Davenport commented, "A couple of times . . . I thought I was



A photograph of Amélie Mauresmo on the court created by Jimmy Harris in 2005. This image is used under a Creative Commons 2.0 license. For more information, see <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>. Some rights reserved.

playing a guy out there, the girl is hitting so hard, so strong." Her statement regarding Mauresmo's strength and prowess was made innocently and might have attracted little attention had not Hingis in an interview with the German-speaking press said insultingly of Mauresmo, "Sie ist ein halber Mann" ("She is a half man") because she had a girlfriend.

Davenport was deeply disturbed by the way her comment was interpreted in the press and wrote Mauresmo a heartfelt note of apology, which Mauresmo described as "very gentle words, very sincere."

Hingis, on the other hand, offered a *pro forma* apology on Centre Court after winning the tournament, but promptly informed reporters that "I'm not regretting anything I said about her."

Ironically, the homophobic Hingis is named after Martina Navratilova, widely regarded as the best woman tennis player of all time, who courageously affirmed her lesbianism although it undoubtedly cost her a fortune in commercial endorsements to do so.

Hingis's comments did have the salutary effect of focusing attention both on homophobia in the tennis world and on the active participation of lesbians in sports. Indeed, whereas in the past allegations of lesbianism have damaged tennis stars, in this case Hingis's comments had the effect of rallying support for Mauresmo.

A few weeks after the Australian Open, Mauresmo and Hingis met again in the Open Gaz de France tournament in Paris. French fans were vigorous in their support of Mauresmo and booed Hingis. Mauresmo won the match and went on to the final, where she lost in a third-set tie-breaker to American powerhouse Serena Williams.

Words of support and encouragement for Mauresmo poured in. She was particularly pleased to receive a lengthy message from Navratilova, whom she had not met.

Mauresmo's corporate sponsors, including Nike, stuck with her, and she continued to attract new fans. Among their number are many lesbians who have enthusiastically cheered her progress.

Mauresmo's relationship with Bourdon ended after three years, but she found a new love, Pascale Arribe. She was also reunited with her family, who got along well with Arribe.

Unfortunately, the happy situation was short-lived. Mauresmo's father died of cancer in early 2003 at the same time that she and Arribe were breaking up. Mauresmo said that her father's death "made her grow up."

Mauresmo showed renewed confidence on the court in 2004. She won a career-high five tournaments and reached the finals of three more. As a member of the French Olympic team she also won a silver medal at the Athens games. Because of her consistently fine performances she held the WTA number one ranking for five weeks during September and October.

For some time Mauresmo had the distinction of being one of the very few players to be top-ranked without a Grand Slam victory. In an interview with the French sports magazine *L'Équipe* she stated that becoming number one gave her an even greater desire to work hard and go farther.

Mauresmo's first Grand Slam victory came in the 2006 Australian Open. Afterward, she said that she would at last get to savor a bottle of 1937 Château d'Yquem that she had bought seven years earlier and was saving for the celebration of her first championship in a Grand Slam event.

Mauresmo entered the 2006 Wimbledon competition ranked number one in the world and as the top seed, but doubters did not expect her to actually win the championship. However, she played impressively, losing

only one set on her way to the final against Justine Henin-Hardenne. After a slow start there, Mauresmo regrouped to take control of the match and come from behind to win the championship.

Mauresmo retired from professional tennis in December 2009. The French tennis community subsequently honored her with a special tribute during the GDF Suez (formerly Gaz de France) Open tournament in February 2010. After the showing of a video retrospective of the highlights of her career, Mauresmo was joined by her mother, former and current members of the women's tennis tour, and other celebrities for an emotional valedictory.

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