



Navratilova, Martina (b. 1956)

by Tina Gianoulis

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The hallmarks of Martina Navratilova's tennis game are strength and speed. Her tennis career and her personality are also characterized by an emotional openness and an honesty that have won the respect of her friends and opponents both on and off the court.

Navratilova was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia on October 18, 1956. Her parents divorced when she was three years old. Her mother, a ski instructor, married Mirek Navratil when she was six. He was a loving and supportive stepfather, who was her first tennis coach.

A shy, awkward teenager, she nonetheless managed to win championships in her native Czechoslovakia. More remarkably, in search of personal freedom and a chance to advance as a professional tennis player, she managed to defect from her native country, alone, in the middle of the night.

"I've always had this outrage against being told how to live, what to say, how to act, what to do, when to do it," Navratilova told *Sports Illustrated's* Alexander Wolff in September 1994. This outrage explains not only her defection to the United States, but also the direct, unapologetic way Navratilova conducted her tennis career.

It may also explain her decision to come out of the closet and live openly as a lesbian.

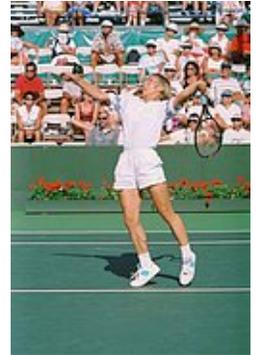
In 1975, Navratilova entered the United States as a pudgy, unsure adolescent. Over the next twenty years, she honed herself into an aggressive serve-and-volley player, with a muscularity and drive that often alienated those who preferred more femininity in their female athletes. Nevertheless, her dynamic style revitalized world professional tennis.

Her career was record-breaking on many fronts: she holds the world record of 167 singles titles, including nine straight Wimbledon singles titles, four U.S. Opens, three Australian Opens, and two French Opens. Between 1983 and 1985, she and partner Pam Shriver won 109 consecutive doubles matches; and in 1984, she won 74 straight singles matches.

By virtue of her determination, heart, and outspoken forthrightness, she gained the respect of even those who wished her to remain an outsider.

Although her fierce honesty had compelled her to list herself as "bisexual" on her application for asylum in the United States, at a time when such honesty could have been grounds for denial of asylum, Navratilova did not come out publicly until 1991, when an ex-lover's palimony suit put her private life in the press.

However, once the decision had been forced upon her, she came out unreservedly, publicly supporting gay rights and causes.



Martina Navratilova on the court in 1994. Photograph by Angela Brinskele. Courtesy Angela Brinskele.

Inspired by the power she felt at the 1993 Washington, D.C. March for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Rights, she and her business partners developed the Rainbow Card, a VISA card that raises money to support gay and lesbian non-profit groups. Since its inception in 1993, the card has raised over one million dollars.

Although many in the straight world respect Navratilova for her courage in coming out, the decision has nevertheless proved costly. Commercial endorsements, the bread and butter of famous athletes, had never come easily to the tough, foreign-born Navratilova, whose self-confidence bordered on arrogance. After she was outed, they dried up almost completely.

Only in 2000, after being out for almost ten years, and a household name for more than twenty, was Navratilova signed to an advertising contract for a major company, to appear in advertisements for the Subaru Forester.

After several years of retirement from competition, Navratilova made a limited comeback in 2003. She teamed up with India's Leander Paes to win the Australian Open mixed doubles championship in January 2003. Her triumph, at age 46 years and 3 months, made her the oldest winner of a Grand Slam title. In 2004, Navratilova and Lisa Raymond competed in doubles matches for the United States tennis team in the Athens Olympics.

Navratilova retired definitively from professional tennis in September 2006 after she and Bob Bryan won the mixed doubles tournament at the U.S. Open. With the victory, she earned her three hundred forty-fifth title. An impressive fifty-nine of her championships came in Grand Slam competitions.

Navratilova has been romantically linked to other high-profile lesbians, among them author Rita Mae Brown and Hunter Reno, niece of Janet Reno, Attorney General of the United States under President Clinton.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.