

Maria Sharapova earned her first million dollars at just 17 years old when she became the first Russian tennis player in history to win at Wimbledon, the third youngest women's champion in the tournament's history. It was a stunning victory against defending champion Serena Williams. She collected a cheque for £560,500.

At 20 now, Sharapova is already the highest paid woman athlete in the world today. While she has collected more than US\$10 million in prize money, her Sharapova brand name and image are even more lucrative, drawing in an endless stream of corporate suitors, swelling her bank account by another US\$20 million annually from product endorsements and sponsorships.

You can see her linked to toothpaste (Colgate), cameras (Canon), mobile phones (Sony Ericsson), automobiles (Land Rover), watches (Tag Heuer), energy drinks (Gatorade), fashion (Samantha Thavasa), fragrances (Parlux Fragrances, Inc), sports wear (Nike) and even orange juice (Tropicana). Prince Sports Inc probably paid a prince's ransom to nail down a lifetime sponsorship deal for Sharapova to use their racquets until the end of her professional career. Sharapova's first tennis racket, a Prince Tour Diablo, was a hand-me-down from a family friend.

"I don't think about Wealth"

If you like Sharapova to attend an event, her appearance fees will set you back at least US\$1million each time.

I asked Sharapova, on her first visit to Singapore, how it feels for someone to be so wealthy at such a young age. She replied, "I don't think about wealth. I think about my passions and my love for tennis. It's brought me to where I am today, help me become more mature; help me become the person I am as well. It's helped me in many different ways. Wealth is a thing you don't worry about because my passion lies in tennis and I know that with great results, I will be fine. I just

The Day Maria Sharapova Made her First Million

Tennis ace Maria Sharapova is the highest paid woman athlete in the world today. And yet, she does not need to be the world's number one tennis player to earn mega bucks. *MillionaireAsia's* **Brian Yim** enjoyed an exclusive interview with world's number 5, Maria Sharapova when she was in Singapore recently for an exhibition match against fellow Russian compatriot, and 6th seeded Anna Chakvetdaze (below, left).



"I just have to work hard, get better and millions will come."

have to think about working hard and getting better and millions will come."

Sharapova exudes wisdom, confidence and a level of maturity well beyond her years. Although she is reported to be haughty and dismissive at times and she was famously quoted as saying, "I am not the next anyone; I'm the first Maria Sharapova," I saw nothing of the prima donna as she showed that she has her head squarely on her shoulders and turned on her charm offensive during her whirlwind 2-day stay in Singapore for an exhibition match against fellow Russian compatriot, and 6th seeded Anna Chakvetdaze on Dec 30, 2007.

Towering at 1.88m (6ft 2in) and with her model looks, one can well understand why Sharapova is credited for "the reason why men watch women tennis."

Asked who she looks up to most in life, Sharapova replied without hesitation that it is her parents, Yuri and Yelena. Her father Yuri played a seminal role in helping put his daughter on the path of professional tennis.

**Talent Spotted by
Martina Navrátilová**

At the age of 6, Yuri arranged for Sharapova to attend a Masters Class conducted by Martina Navrátilová who is undoubtedly one the greatest women's tennis player in the history of the sport and 7 times world champion. Martina saw something special in Sharapova and urged Yuri to send his daughter to attend the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy in Bradenton, Florida. The academy is known for its tough training which stresses discipline and responsibility on and off court, to create champion athletes.

The family made some hard decisions and it was decided that Sharapova would be separated from her mother and would go with her father to the United States to attend the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy, with help from the Russian Federation. She was only 7 then. It was 2 years later before Yelena could reunite with

The Kinder Side of Sharapova

Sharapova was appointed a Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in February 2007 and donated US\$100,000 to UNDP Chernobyl-recovery projects. Her family fled the nuclear disaster area to Siberia where Sharapova was born. She is planning on traveling back to the area after Wimbledon in 2008.

She also helped develop the Maria Sharapova Foundation, which is dedicated to helping at risk and under privileged children to get the resources and education to be successful in life and to achieve goals.

“You know, one of the greatest things about being an athlete and, you know, making money is realising that you can help, you know, help the world, and especially children, whom I absolutely love working with.”



Millionaireasia
EXCLUSIVE

“
CONVERSATION WITH
**MARIA
SHARAPOVA**
”



her family after she finally obtained her travel visa.

Tough Training

The tough training at the Academy and her equally tough father shaped Sharapova and help her develop an aggressive and killer instinct on the courts. Her trademark “Sharapova Shriek”, while amusing to spectators, unsettles and distracts her opponents.

After having clinched several youth championship titles, she turned professional in 2001 when she was 14 and went on to win a string of championship successes over the years.

Sharapova won her first professional tournament in April 2001, and her first Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) tournament soon after in 2002. Then in 2004, she accomplished her historic feat by propelling from 13th seed to snatch the Grand Slam title at Wimbledon to become world number 1 at 17 years old. That was her golden ticket to untold riches.

She said: “A great tennis career is something that a 15-year-old normally doesn’t have. I hope my example helps other teens believe they can accomplish things they never thought possible.”

After that win at Wimbledon, the first person she hugged was her father. She also telephoned her mother.

Most Important Lesson in Life

With all the heady victories I asked Sharapova what is the most important lesson she has learnt in life. She said, “You have to be realistic about what you do. No matter how good things will be, there is going to be some downsides to it. You are never going to be perfect, you have to realise that. When success comes, it’s always sweeter after having all the downfalls. You have to realise that a career is not always going to be on a high note.”

So what would she be interested to do if not for her tennis career?

“I love to do something with fashion and have my own line and be someone in the creative business. I like also to do something with spas also because I appreciate the idea of healthy well being and having a healthy lifestyle. These I love to do after tennis.”

Meanwhile, she is basking in the glory of a meteoric career as her star continues to sparkle. ■