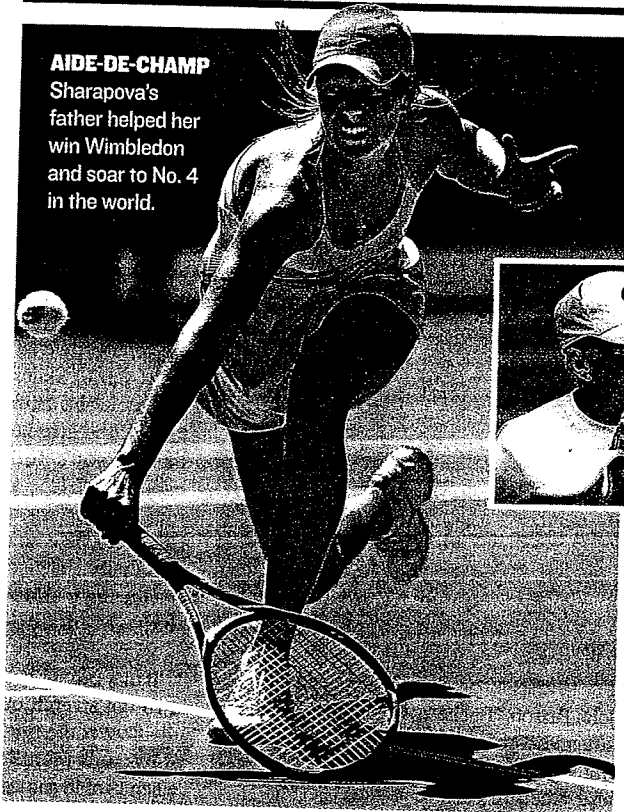


# Inside Tennis

by L. Jon Wertheim

## AIDE-DE-CHAMP

Sharapova's father helped her win Wimbledon and soar to No. 4 in the world.



## What a Racket

Are personal coaches really necessary on tour? And if they are, why can't they coach when players need them most?

**I**S THERE a more peculiar livelihood than coaching a professional tennis player? You spend 30 weeks a year on the road and while away innumerable hours improving mechanics on a practice court, fashioning strategy in a hotel lobby, discussing opponents in the backseat of a courtesy car. Then, at the moment of truth, when the match begins, you sit in the stands, sunglasses wrapped around your face, and watch as impassively as possible lest you violate tennis's strict rules against... coaching.

Perhaps because the term *tennis coach* is so oxymoronic and

the job's duties are so ill-defined, its practitioners span an impossibly wide range—from dignified former champions like José Higuera (onetime coach of Jim Courier), who can hit with the best of his charges, to irrepressible stage fathers like Yuri Sharapov (coach of Maria Sharapova), who couldn't beat a decent club player. There's Darren Cahill, Andre Agassi's coach, who meticulously scouts opponents and possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of every player his client might face. There's also Oracene Williams, coach of her daughters Venus and Serena, who admits that tennis often bores her. Time

and again the Williams sisters have shown up for early-round matches not knowing whether their opponents were right- or lefthanded, yet under Oracene's tutelage they've won many of their combined 10 Grand Slam titles.

Throughout his laureled 2004 season, Roger Federer didn't even *have* a coach. Striking a blow for self-sufficiency, he relied on his own instincts for strategy, preparation and self-correction. His match record going it alone: 74-6. "I found," he says, "that I like being my own boss." Given Federer's success, you might

think that tennis coaches are imperiled—that a player needs a coach the way Agassi needs a hair stylist. But you'd be wrong.

As the Australian Open kicked off last week in Melbourne, it was clear that coaches have never held more prestige. Even the most marginal qualifiers arrived with coaches in tow. And an army of top-flight players, led by Andy Roddick, showed up with new high-priced aides-de-camp, convinced that "having a second set of ears and eyes," as Roddick puts it, is indispensable.

"Hiring the right coach is one of the most important moves a player can make," says Roddick,

who defenestrated Brad Gilbert last month and immediately replaced him with Dean Goldfine, longtime coach of the recently retired Todd Martin (who now coaches Mardy Fish). "Obviously for scouting and analyzing, but also for just keeping things fresh out here, having a coach is so key?"

Even Federer decided to end his solo mission, hiring Tony Roche, the Australian star of the 1960s and '70s who later coached Ivan Lendl and Pete Dinkovitch, to work with him part time. "It's a relief," the world No. 1 said, "that there will be help at times when I want it."

What's more, the absurd constraints on coaches may be coming to an end. For years there have been murmurs about letting players be coached during matches. Earlier this month the women's tour signed an \$88 million sponsorship contract with Sony Ericsson. The deal hinged on the WTA's willingness to integrate Sony Ericsson technology into tennis, and there have already been informal discussions about allowing coaches to sit courtside and supplying them with wireless mikes so TV audiences can eavesdrop on their instruction.

"I think fans would love it," says Dee Dutta, Sony Ericsson's global marketing chief. "These coaches have sort of become celebrities in their own right, haven't they?" □

## Pocket Rochus



For a player believed to be the most diminutive Top 50 male in the Open Era, 5' 5" Olivier Rochus has been producing Brobdignagian results of late. After reaching the semis and final of the Adelaide and Auckland tune-ups, respectively, the 24-year-old Belgian made it to the fourth round of the Australian Open before losing a nail-biter to fourth seed Marat Safin (*above*), 4-6, 7-6, 7-6, 7-6.

Rochus goes entire matches without hitting an ace, but he offsets his power deficit with a beguiling combination of accurate shot-making and blinding foot speed. He also plays a mean game of doubles—he and Xavier Malisse are the defending French Open champions.

It's tempting to wonder how Rochus would fare if tennis had weight classes—if he didn't surrender almost a foot in height and 65 pounds in left to opponents like Safin. But Rochus, who will enter the top 40 in the next ATP rankings, doesn't give it a thought. "In tennis," he says, "the bigger player doesn't always have the advantage." —L.J.W.

## What a Racket

1. Can a Tennis coach , coach during a tennis match?  
A.) yes      B.) no
  
2. Who is Andre Agassi's coach?  
A.) Higuera      B.) Cahill      C.) Williams      D.) Smith
  
3. Which player started his pro career without a coach?  
A.) Williams      B.) Roddick      C.) Federer      D.) Agassi
  
4. Which company signed a 88 million sponsorship contract?  
A.) Sony Ericsson      B.) AT & T      C.) Lexus      D.) Dell
  
5. Who is the new coach of Andy Roddick?  
A.) Gilbert      B.) Williams      C.) Cahill      D.) Goldfine
  
6. How tall is Oliver Rochus?  
A.) 5'8"      B.) 5'5"      C.) 5'      D.) 5'10"
  
7. Which tennis players are coached by their mothers?  
A.) Venus & Serena      B.) Jill & Jack      C.) Bob & Ted      D.) Sally & Wilma
  
8. What was Federer's record without a coach?  
A.) 70-4      B.) 74-6      C.) 60-14      D.) 64-10
  
9. What country is Rochus from?  
A.) USA      B.) Russia      C.) Belgian      D.) Czech
  
10. Who is the number one player in men's tennis?  
A.) Roddick      B.) Williams      C.) Federer      D.) Agassi