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Martina Navratilova, an all-time sports great, tells POWER about rivals, doping and chauvinism – with no topspin

# GRAND SLAMI GAL

BY PETER RITTER | PHOTOGRAPHY LAURIE FLETCHER







SPORTS FANS LOVE to trade bold, heretical pronouncements about the Best This or the Greatest That. Here's one for your consideration: Martina Navratilova is the greatest tennis player in history. Note: not the greatest *female* tennis player. Simply the greatest. Ever. Period. ¶ Consider the stats: 18 Grand Slam singles titles; 31 women's doubles titles; and 10 mixed doubles titles. She reached the singles finals at Wimbledon 12 times and won a record nine of those. Her career title wins – 167 in singles and 177 in doubles – are both records for the modern era. Navratilova's 74 consecutive wins is the longest streak in the game's history. In 2006, when she won her final professional match at the US Open, Navratilova was just shy of her 50th birthday, an age at which most tennis players have been retired for decades.

But the numbers don't tell the whole story. They don't tell you about Navratilova's thrilling, decades-long rivalry with friend and nemesis Chris Evert, who played Frazier to Navratilova's Ali, Bird to her Magic Johnson, and who, along with Navratilova, defined women's tennis for a generation. They don't tell you about Navratilova's legendary competitive drive – she calls it her “gladiatorial” instinct – which led her to defect from her native Czechoslovakia, with its genteel European baseline style, at age 18 to bring her slashing serve-and-volley game to the US. And the numbers don't explain Navratilova's fierce determination to compete and win on her own terms, as a lesbian in a straight world, and as an outspoken, politically active woman in a sport dominated by big male personalities.

Navratilova spends her retired years as a TV commentator, gay rights activist, mystery novelist, airplane pilot and painter. Some of the canvases in her Art Grand Slam project, made by knocking paint-covered tennis balls against a canvas, were included in Hong Kong's Art HK exhibition last month. The tennis champion sat down with *POWER* in Hong Kong to talk about what keeps her going and reminisce over highlights from her storied career on the court.

**Let's start with sports. When you look back on all your wins, which ones stand out the most?**

People always want to know the biggest ones. But I think for me, it's the body of work. Of course, there are some matches that stand out more than others. They're special for different reasons. I think the happiest matches, there are probably a couple: the first time I ever won a tournament, which was in 1974, at the Virginia Slims tournament in Orlando. I was 17 years old, and certainly not expected to win. And then there was my first Wimbledon four years later. You never know if you're ever going to win it until you win that first time. All the Wimbledon wins were special, but that first one was really the happiest because of that. And then winning my last match ever, which was the 2006 US Open mixed doubles title with Bob Bryan. That was also probably one of the happiest because it was the last competitive match I played and I finished on a high note and played well. It was a storybook ending for me. So those would stand out the most. But there were so many in between that were special for different reasons. The first time I beat my mom I was happy as could be. It was the first time I knew I was going to be a good player because I could beat her, as young as I was.

**Are there any that you'd like to play over?**

There's a bunch, actually. All the Grand Slam finals I lost, I'd like to play over again. Especially against Conchita Martinez [in 1994] because I think tactically I didn't play smart. And Helena Sukova in the [1984] Australian Open semifinals. I played a nervous match. She played great against me, then she played crap against Chris [Evert] the next day. I was like, “Why couldn't she have swapped it?” She had two double faults against me in three long sets and 14 double faults against Chris in two sets. So that tells you right there. In fact, a couple more double faults on my end and I probably would have won the match. It was that close. So those two. And Steffi Graf in the US Open semifinals in – what year was it? – 1989, I think. So there's a few.

**Do you remember the first time you played Chris Evert?**

It was 1973. I beat her in 1975, but I lost to her six or seven times before I finally beat her. Yeah, I played her in Akron Ohio. I was 16 and lost 7-6, 5-4, 6-3.

**That was one of the great sports rivalries.**

No, I think it's *the* greatest rivalry between two people, because we played each other 80 times and most of the time one of us was number one, and one of us was number two.

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Earrings and watch CARTIER

Ring MARTINA'S OWN

Tank top ALEXANDER MCQUEEN, JOYCE

Jacket JIL SANDER, JOYCE

Trousers TORY BURCH, LANE CRAWFORD

It was like Federer and Nadal over 15 years. So, yeah, it was pretty serious.

**What was your relationship like with Chris personally?**

We've had our ups and downs, but overall we're good friends. We speak to each other regularly. We have a connection that I'll never have with anybody else and she'll never have with anybody else because of the history. There were so many special moments we spent together on the opposite end of the spectrum of emotions, where one of us was extremely happy and one of us was extremely sad. That's why when I played doubles with her at Wimbledon and we won, it was the only time both of us were ever happy at the same time. I cherish that memory quite a bit. Yeah, we hang out. We like each other. Of course, there was some tension, as there would be with that kind of situation. Tennis is such a one-on-one competition. I didn't realize it as much when I was playing. But when I stopped and started doing TV, I realized it truly is like two gladiators going at it. Of course, no one gets killed. But the tension of one-on-one competition, the adversarial feeling that you have, is really intense.

**You've said that the women's tour was friendlier than the men's tour, that there was a little bit less politics between competitors. Do you think that's still true?**

Times have changed so much. I think the players themselves have changed because now all the players are traveling with somebody, at least a coach, [and] most of them are traveling with friends, parents, [or] a girlfriend. We couldn't afford that, so the players hung out with each other. Now the players hang out with their own group. There's no interaction. Most of the interaction happens in the locker room. But outside the locker room, they don't really spend that much time together, or not nearly as much time as we used to.

And it's always more difficult for the women because we have to fight so much

harder for the sponsors. Guys have it a lot easier that way. Say you come to Sony and say, "Would you like to sponsor tennis?" Their first thought is men's tennis. That's their first reaction, "No, women's tennis." So you're always playing second fiddle. Of course, that's changed a lot. It's a lot easier now in terms of marketing. But it's still a man's world. That's where the money is.

**The sponsorships are so much larger now. How does that change life for the players? How would your life have been different?**

Proportionally, the players at the top, the Lendls, the Federers, they're making a much higher percentage on endorsements than prize money, probably a 5:1 or even a 10:1 ratio. Federer may make US\$5 million in prize money and \$30 million in endorsements. In my day, it was probably 1:1 – and that's if you were doing well. Earlier, it was even less.

Way back in the 1970s, maybe half the money came from endorsements that I got from prize money. So it's astronomically higher as the possibilities have also grown worldwide. Before, endorsements were for the US or Germany or France. Now it's much more global. Asia of course has opened up now. When tennis went Olympic, China started paying attention, Russia started paying attention. I mean, look what happened with Russia in women's tennis. It's astonishing. At one point I think five of the top 10 women were Russian. On the men's side, they've had great champions as well. And China is now coming to the fore.

**Is there anything bad about that for the players?**

There's more demand on their time with the endorsements, doing the photos shoots, doing glamour layouts, interviews, that kind of thing. So the demands on their time are bigger. I had that as the top player in the world. But now the top 10 have it. So you have to be really careful that it doesn't take away from your preparation for matches.

**But aside from your preparation for matches, does it do anything weird to your personality or to your life?**

There are just more famous players now. It's more global. You get recognized more places. But it doesn't matter that much. A player's life is pretty concentrated anyway, because you're just going to places to play tournaments, and you're going to get recognized there anyway. So you don't feel it that much maybe until you stop playing and you go to these countries where you've never been and everybody knows who you are. Like coming here to Hong Kong, I'd never been here and people recognized me on the street. That was 20 years ago. I'm sure it's even greater for the top players now.

**In your autobiography, you write that when you were starting out, you and other greats like Billie Jean King had the sense that you were part of something really important, something greater than tennis even, and that younger players don't seem to have that same feeling.**

They take it all for granted because it's always been there for them. I was there at the beginning. Of course Billie Jean started the fight for equality, for equal pay and all that. I was there when it was happening, a couple years after it started. It started in 1971 with the Virginia Slims tour, and I joined in 1973. And Chris and I really felt the responsibility of carrying that mantle. Then the next generation was Steffi Graf. And for her, it's like it's always been there. And now we're 20 years later, 30 years later, so now the players, once they learn about tennis, they see there's a possibility of having a career in it. For us, it was, "I just want to play some tennis, then I have to get a job." Now tennis is a job.

**Let's get away from tennis. You've always been outspoken about issues that are important to you. Is that a responsibility for all athletes?**

I don't think you have a responsibility to speak out. You do have a responsibility to act in a certain way, because you're a role model for kids. That's what I was always

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aware of. Kids do look up to you. The press may blow you up, put you on a pedestal or whatever. But to a kid, you're an adult first of all. You're a hero because you're older and you can drive a car and all this stuff. So they want to be like you. If you wear a sleeveless shirt, they want to wear a sleeveless shirt. They don't want to put on a sweater if you don't put on a sweater, because they want to be just like you. So you have responsibility to act a certain way so that kids don't think bad behavior is acceptable.

As far as speaking out on issues, we all have the responsibility to behave a certain way. But to be an activist or be active in charities, it's not a responsibility, but it sure is nice if athletes do that because we have that ability to effect change. It's nice to have that pedestal and that platform and use it in a positive way. But that's not how it started out with me. Anytime I saw something that I felt strongly about, I would speak out about it, whether it was popular or not. That's just how I was. That's why I got in trouble in the Czech Republic, because I said what I thought.

#### Tell us about that.

Just the idea of not being able to speak what you feel, say what you think, do what you want, that's what I grew up with under the Communist system. That's part of the reason I left the country.

#### The Czech newspapers and TV stations didn't cover it when you won Wimbledon the first time. When you go back now, do people recognize you on the street?

Yeah, I'm recognized quite a bit. Not as much as I would have been if I'd stayed there. But everyone knows who I am. I mean the older generation. The younger generation is like, "Who's that?" But that's how it is in the States as well. But, no, I get nice recognition. People are excited to see me.

#### Do you spend much time there?

I was there quite a bit the last couple of years. My mom passed away a year and a half ago. Before that, I was there once a month for a

couple of years. Since then, only a couple times. I'll be going back more now. But it's difficult to go there without mom there. My sister lives in Sweden, so it's kind of empty for me there right now.

#### You've said that women athletes who speak out about things have it tougher because of gender stereotyping in the media and in society.

Well, it's just women generally, when they do something controversial or something bad. Like Jennifer Capriati getting busted for stealing a \$50 ring 20 years ago, 25 years ago, whenever it was, it's still mentioned in every article. A male athlete gets busted for drugs or drunk driving or having a gun in the car or beating up his wife [and] it's not mentioned in every article about him. It's sort of forgotten and forgiven. Men politicians are the same. I mean, look at Berlusconi. Imagine a woman politician doing what he has done and still coming back and being in power. No way, Jose.

So it's the double standard that men can get away with bad behavior and two years later all is forgiven. Women, they're never heard from again. It's beyond athletes. At least now we have the opportunity to go into politics. I was reading an article the other day about gay rights, about gay marriage and all this stuff. They say people are not ready for it, but there was a quote by Thomas Jefferson from 200 years ago: "Some people think women should someday be in politics, but our country's not ready for it, and neither am I." So this is Thomas Jefferson - "All men are created equal." Yeah, "men." Not women, apparently. I don't know what brought that up. What was the question?

#### I was asking about women athletes and stereotypes...

Yeah, women have come a long way. Gays have the fight now. But all in due time it will happen. One day, women will be treated the same as men. They'll be able to mess up and still have a life, have a shelf life as a politician or a corporate leader or whatever. At the

## Martina's Greatest Hits

**1972:** At age 15, wins Czechoslovakian national tennis championship

**1974:** Wins first professional singles title in Florida at age 17

**1975:** At age 18, defects to the US

**1978:** Wins first Grand Slam singles title at Wimbledon, clinching her first world number one ranking

**1982:** Wins both Wimbledon and the French Open

**1983:** Compiles an 86-1 singles record for the year, the best in the game's history

**1984:** Partnered with Pam Shriver, wins all four Grand Slam women's doubles titles

**1990:** Wins her final Grand Slam singles titles, at Wimbledon. It is her ninth Wimbledon singles title, a record

**1994:** At age 37, reaches Wimbledon finals, where she loses to Conchita Martinez

**2000:** Inducted into the International Tennis Hall of Fame

**2003:** After winning the mixed doubles titles at the Australian Open and Wimbledon, she becomes, at age 46, the oldest ever Grand Slam champion

**2006:** In her final professional match, with partner Bob Bryan, wins the mixed doubles title at the US Open, her 177th career doubles title



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moment that's not the case. But at least we have the opportunity to mess up.

**Your family took it roughly when you came out, right?**

In Communist countries, in Czechoslovakia, if you were gay – first of all they only talked about men in that way – it was considered a mental illness. My parents were not educated enough about it or what they heard was propaganda. So they educated themselves and read some books, and a couple years later my dad said, "You know, I realize now that it's ok. It's just how you're built, how you were born. And there's nothing wrong with it. We just want you to be happy." That's what every gay kid wants to hear from their parents. Imagine the trauma that gay kids go through when they have to come out to their parents, and then what happens to so many of them when they do. They get thrown out of the house, their parents don't talk to them, they get abused or whatever. Imagine if the worst thing that could ever happen to a straight kid was coming out to their parents, saying, "Mom, Dad, I'm heterosexual."

**Do you think the fact that you're out and talking in the media about your relationships makes it easier for kids who are struggling with that?**

Of course. It's always more difficult for the pioneers. What Jackie Robinson went through, [for] a black kid growing up now, it doesn't even enter their mind that, "Oh, my God, am I going to get signed because I'm African-American or because I'm Jewish or whatever?" That's not an issue. One day being gay will be a non-issue. Right now, obviously it's still an issue. You can get killed for it. There's still racial stuff going on, but not nearly as much as the discrimination against gays and lesbians. In some countries, it's punishable by death, legally. So obviously there's a long way to go.

**Time magazine had a story in 1982 using you as an example of a new feminine ideal, as a different kind of body shape than was**

**traditional. What got me thinking about that was Michelle Obama.**

Right, exactly. Her arms.

**There was this undercurrent of sexism with some of that.**

Of course.

**Like the possibility of a woman being strong hasn't totally sunk in yet.**

It drives me crazy, because if somehow Barack Obama was a Republican, do you think Rush Limbaugh would be making fun of Michelle Obama's arms? If Hillary Clinton was a Republican, do you think they'd be attacking her the way they are? No way. This attacking women for who they are – it just drives me crazy, absolutely crazy, because it is sexist, it is unfair. You're not making fun of George W Bush because of how he dresses or because of his hair or the fact that he's short. You don't bring that up, because it's not an issue. But you're talking about Hillary Clinton's hairdo and Michelle Obama's outfits, and making fun of it? She looks great. Look how hard she works out. She's in great shape. But these comments like "She looks like she could crush you." It's just indefensible. But then you look at what Rush Limbaugh says about Barack Obama, about how he wishes he would fail. What the hell does that mean? Explain that, please. What does that mean? You want the whole world to go down the tubes? Obviously, we need Obama to succeed on so many levels. Don't get me started on that.

**Have you ever thought about going into politics?**

I've been asked that many times. I'm pretty well-versed in what's going on, but no, because I'm too honest. Saying what you think, saying how it is, doesn't work. I think of myself much more as an activist than a politician.

**Not even a politician in the Schwarzenegger mold?**

I was just reading a piece about him in the

newspaper. He's struggling in California. How can anyone make it happen there given what's going on? [Former California Governor] Gray Davis apparently told him, "You need two things to succeed. You need a strong economy, and you need rain in northern California. And you can't do anything about either." So what are you going to do? I think he's done a great job, considering. But what's funny now is he's a leftist Democrat. He's not a Republican in any way.

**You've written mystery novels; you know how to fly a plane; you've driven racecars ...**

Fast.

**... and you're an artist.**

I'm a Renaissance woman. What can I tell you? I've also made tables. I'm a budding woodworker. I made two really cool tables, which I loved. I've still got the equipment. I've got to get back into that.

**So are you easily bored, or do you just have a lot of energy?**

I can put my feet up with the best of them. But I like to do things. I'm studying French now because I've been spending time in Paris. I'm conversing a little bit. I'm understanding a lot more. I just like to get involved wherever I am. I spent five months in Kenya and I learned Swahili a little bit because I wanted to be able know what people were saying. I didn't want to be an outsider. If I lived here, I would be speaking Chinese by now. I just want to be part of it, you know? I want to feel a place, and I don't think you feel it until you speak the language.

**Why a mystery novel?**

I always liked Agatha Christie. I've read a bunch of those books. And Dick Francis and his fabulous horseracing crime novels. And I thought, "Ok, I could do something in the tennis world."

**Did you bump off any rivals?**

Of course. Writing fiction, you can make it

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up as you go along. If you thinly veil some characters, you don't get in trouble.

**Aside from learning French, are there other big projects you're working on?**

The Art Grand Slam has been an ongoing project with [Czech artist] Juro Kralik, and it's still evolving. We've been doing that for seven or eight years now. When we started, we just did a couple things here or there because I was still playing. It's been the last couple years that's we've really gone full bore ahead.

**Is that a big business for you?**

We're just getting into the commercial side of things. We only started making [the paintings] commercially available last year. Until then, we just kept collecting and making things. We weren't really sure what the reception would be like. We've had a couple of exhibitions, and the stuff has been well received by art critics, which has been really nice. So now I'm like, "Okay, now we can start selling stuff." For me, it wasn't about the commerciality of it, but just about creating something that was fun and took a life of its own, and that sort of evolved into this project.

**But that's your main business venture?**

No, my main business involvement is with Tennis Channel, doing commentary for all the Grand Slams, which I love. The French Open is just around the corner, so I'll be pretty busy for the next couple of months. And I'm a fitness ambassador for AARP [American Association of Retired Persons], which is a huge organization in the US. I just did a photo shoot of different exercises for the older generation. Health and fitness is my passion, so I wanted to share that. I wrote a fitness book, *Shape Your Self*, and that started that whole AARP thing.

**What is the real reason for the obesity epidemic in the US?**

I think it started with the microwave back in the 1960s. When you could microwave food, it became so easy to eat these huge meals.

People just got lazy about their food. The preparation for it wasn't happening anymore. It was like, "How fast can I get this done?" So then the quality of the food went down. But most of all it's about the portions, the volume of the food in the States. If you look at cookbooks now, it's like double the size. In the 60s, a recipe might serves four. Now it serves two. So the portion has doubled. When my parents would go to a restaurant in America, they would always split a meal. I was in a restaurant that actually served a whole chicken. There was four of us, and we all ordered chicken. We had four whole chickens on the table. We could have eaten one for the four of us. It's crazy. So even when you eat well, you just eat too much of it. And of course most people do not eat well.

**That's something you struggled with when you moved to the US, right?**

I just put on weight because I was eating too much, period. But my metabolism was changing. It was that whole thing with becoming a woman. I put on 20 pounds [9kg] in two weeks – while playing tennis. You couldn't do that if you tried. My metabolism changed and I was eating more protein, fewer carbs. I did not discover McDonald's until a year and a half after I came to the States. That whole thing that I put on weight because I was eating McDonalds wasn't true. That didn't happen.

**When did you become a vegetarian?**

I didn't want to be eating animals. For seven years, I didn't touch anything. But then I started eating fish again. I do eat chicken here and there, and meat once in a while, but I try not to. I don't want to, but my body craves it sometimes.

**What kind of meat does it crave?**

Once in a while I'll have steak tartare.

**I wanted to ask one other question about something that's been in the news, the steroids scandal in baseball. What do you think baseball could learn from tennis as far as cracking down**

**on performance-enhancing drugs?**

In tennis, I think the drugs were abused much less than in baseball. We have had drug testing for now close to 20 years. But baseball has been like, "We don't really need [testing] because nobody was doing drugs." *Well, hello.* In tennis, it was much less of a problem. But I think now with the money, everybody will try to get an edge. With the money being what it is, if it means the difference between making it to the major leagues and not making it, of course people are going to take drugs. So you've got to control it for many different reasons. Most of all, you want a level playing field. You don't want people taking drugs because everybody else is taking them. You have to control it. You have to punish it.

At the same time, I don't like the way it works in the tennis world, where you're guilty until proven innocent. I could shoot you all with a machine gun, and I can still get out on bail. I'm not guilty until the jury convicts me. Now, somebody doesn't like me, and they put a little powder in my water when I'm not looking. I drink this. I go play my match. I get tested. Who knows? You have to prove you didn't do it. How do you prove something you didn't do? And there's no difference between you putting some crap in my drink, and steroids or really obviously cheating. If I start growing facial hair or whatever happens, then yes. But there's no difference [in the punishment].

When I was still playing, I walked into a pub in Holland to get some fruit juice. But there were people smoking pot. I'm like, "I cannot stand in line here in case I get some of it into my system and they test me two days later." I was petrified of somebody spiking my drink. There's no differentiation between people who may do something accidentally, a guy who goes to the bathroom and maybe somebody puts a little coke in his mojito. No. But the punishment is two years [suspension]. What baseball needs to learn is they can't keep putting their head in the sand. I think it's terrible because now it seems most of the stars have been doing it at one time or another. ■

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