

MARTINA NAVRATILOVA

# portrait. of a champion

She's the greatest tennis player the world has ever known and she's heading Down Under this month for the 100th Australian Open. Tough-talking, pistol-packing, Harley-riding Martina Navratilova talks here to KAREN MOLINE about her extraordinary life.

**O**n a cloudless day in Venice, Florida, a small town on the Gulf of Mexico, a woman rides a Harley-Davidson up to a small house by the beach. She takes off her helmet and leather jacket, and smiles, her handshake as firm as you'd expect from Martina Navratilova, the greatest tennis player who has ever lived. "Sorry we can't talk at my house," she says, as she runs her fingers through her blonde hair. "There are some things I need to keep private."

After living in Texas and Colorado, Martina has settled in Florida, which has an ideal climate for tennis training. Her own, much larger, home is a mile or so down the road from here, set back behind another house and a long driveway to keep prying eyes at bay.

She's earned the right to keep it off-limits, after pushing the boundaries of both sport and life as a gay woman ever since she defected from Czechoslovakia

at the US Open in 1975, when she was a mere 18 years of age. Back then, she knew few people in America. She spoke little English. She was driven, though. She's never been a quitter. She'll never be a quitter. At 48, she is still playing tennis professionally – and winning.

No other tennis player in the history of the sport has come close to her record, and possibly no one ever will.

Whatever you think of her trademark steely-eyed glint on the court, or her even more fiery outspokenness for gay rights, you surely have to concede that Martina's accomplishments – 167 singles titles, 174 doubles titles and 19 Grand Slam singles titles – are a staggering achievement of fitness, spirit and determination. No wonder there is a framed letter in her home from one special fan: movie great Katharine Hepburn. "What a terrifying but thrilling life you have," it says.

Martina's life has been a roller-coaster of thrilling, sometimes terrifying, extremes. All of them headline-grabbing. She has been threatened with kidnap by the IRA; been dragged through the US courts by a

lesbian lover in a humiliating "galimony" case; and pilloried by conservatives for her outspoken defence of gay rights. She's also been shot at, sensationally, by a former girlfriend during a lovers' spat.

Since coming "out of the closet" in 1981, Martina's amazing achievements on the tennis court have sometimes been overshadowed by her tumultuous private life and her resolve to speak out against what she believes to be sexual or political injustice – such as US President George W. Bush's opposition to gay marriage.

"Being gay isn't a philosophy – it's how I am," says Martina. "It's not a choice. Anybody gay knows it's not a choice. Is it your choice to be straight? No, of course not. That's just who you are. I never felt that I needed to excuse it or be ashamed, so I didn't have a problem with it. Because I lost money due to it, well, I'll lose money because I'm speaking out against George W. Bush. That's not going to stop me."

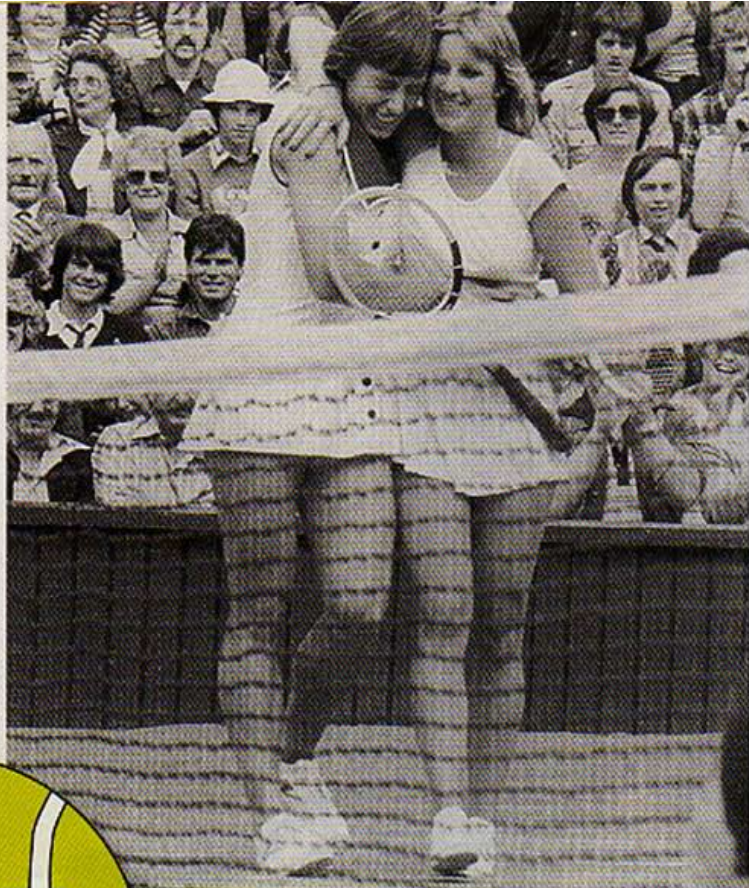
Despite her strident words, Martina is softer in person than one might imagine. She may be wearing biker boots and jeans, but her hair is artfully streaked ▶





Tennis immortal  
Martina Navratilova,  
48, has rewritten the  
record books in her  
sport and weathered  
storms in her private  
life to fulfil her dreams.





## MY FATHER WAS TELLING PEOPLE I WAS GOING TO BE A WIMBLEDON CHAMPION some day and I wasn't about to disagree with him.

and gold rings and bracelets adorn her arms and fingers. Several of her 14 small dogs, Spike, Kia, Buffy and Raven, appear with her assistant – “Dogs are one of my indulgences,” she jokes, and smooches them with kisses. “I never was hard. I played aggressive tennis. I’m not an aggressive human being,” she explains, stroking Kia, a blind Boston terrier.

“Still, where it bothers me the most is that if a woman makes a mistake, does something wrong, you are done. Out of a job. You will not get endorsements as an athlete. People don’t stop talking about it. Men do something worse and it’s like, ‘Oh, isn’t it horrible’ – and then, a year later, they get their job back.

“Look at Winona Ryder. Then think about what Hugh Grant did. She faced the court and did her deal, so you should just forget about it. People snickered about Hugh, and he’s back in business. That’s a double standard where it really, really pisses me off.”

She’s also lived with the stigma and prejudice attached to gay people. When Venus and Serena Williams burst on to the international tennis circuit, their mother, Oracene, complained about the

sexuality of women on the tour, hinting that her daughters might be corrupted. “I’m not embarrassed to say it,” Oracene said. “The women are there undressed and they, some of them, are lesbians. Young kids see that and think, ‘Maybe that’s me’, when it’s not.”

Martina scoffs at any such idea. “Let’s face it – if women are going to become gay, it’s not going to happen in the locker room,” she says. “When I first came along, I was petrified to change in front of anybody. I was ashamed of how I looked, too immature at first, then too heavy. I didn’t even want to be seen in my underwear, much less the altogether.”

Martina was born on October 18, 1956, in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Her parents divorced when she was three, and she moved with her mother, Jana, a ski instructor, to the village of Revnice, near Prague, where her mum had grown up. Her mother married Mirek Navratil in 1962, and Martina’s half-sister, also named Jana, was born a year later.

A true tomboy, Martina started skiing at two and later learned to play ice hockey and football. She began playing tennis at age five, after her maternal grandmother, who had once played tennis for the Czech

Federation Cup team, gave her an old wooden tennis racquet. Her stepfather encouraged her efforts, hitting balls with her for hours. His nickname for her was “Prut” or “Stick” and she was often mistaken for a boy. The first time she met the Czech tennis champ and coach George Parma, he asked, “How old is he?”

As soon as George saw her play, he realised Martina was a tennis prodigy and took her on as a pupil. Every week after school, she would lug her schoolbooks and sports gear onto the train for the half-hour journey to Prague. “I always tell people that I developed my strength and my speed running for trains when I was nine and 10 years old,” Martina says. “George would tell me to set my sights on becoming a good European player. My father was telling people I was going to be a Wimbledon champion some day and I wasn’t about to disagree with him.”

In 1968, Czechoslovakia was invaded by the Soviet Union. It was difficult to leave the country but, in 1973, Czech authorities allowed 16-year-old Martina, then a budding star, to travel to America to play in her first US tournament.

She lost to American champion Chris Evert, beginning what would become





one of the most amazing rivalries in the history of tennis. Chris was the epitome of the pretty, slim, manicured girl-next-door, while Martina was the gawky, chunky outsider. Both were phenomenal athletes, perfectly matched, and over 16 years their intense competition brought out each other's best.

Yet Martina didn't know that at the time. All she knew was that she had to escape the stultifying atmosphere of her Communist-run home country. She was followed by Czech spies, but was allowed to play in the US because the Communist officials believed that it was good for the country's image to have a tennis star.

Two years later, in September 1975, Martina defected in sensational fashion at the US Open – she sought and was granted political asylum.

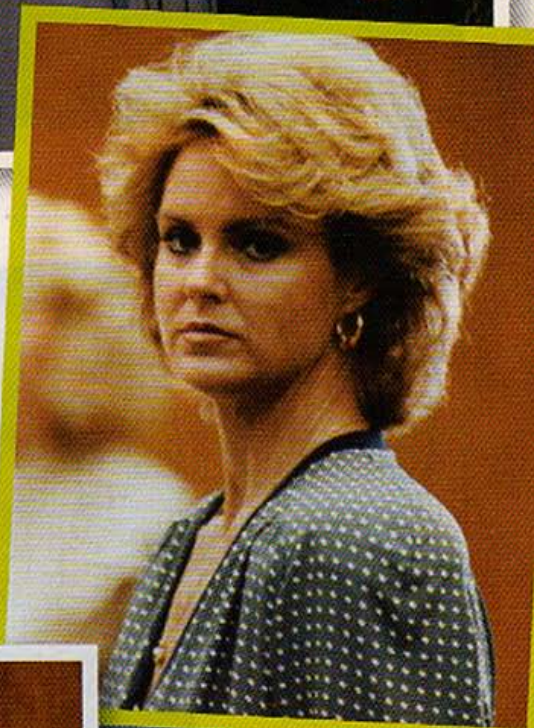
The adjustment to her new life was hell. Martina wasn't allowed to see her family for years, and nearly all traces of her accomplishments were erased from the Sparta tennis club in Prague.

Finding any stability while constantly on the road was difficult, and Martina compensated for it by eating the fattening junk food that she'd discovered on ample, tempting display. At one stage, she gained 12kg in a month gorging herself on fast food. Later, she went on a gruelling regimen of cross-training, weightlifting, diet and strict discipline to become known as The Bionic Woman of tennis. When I ask

about that tumultuous time, a shadow seems to fall over her face.

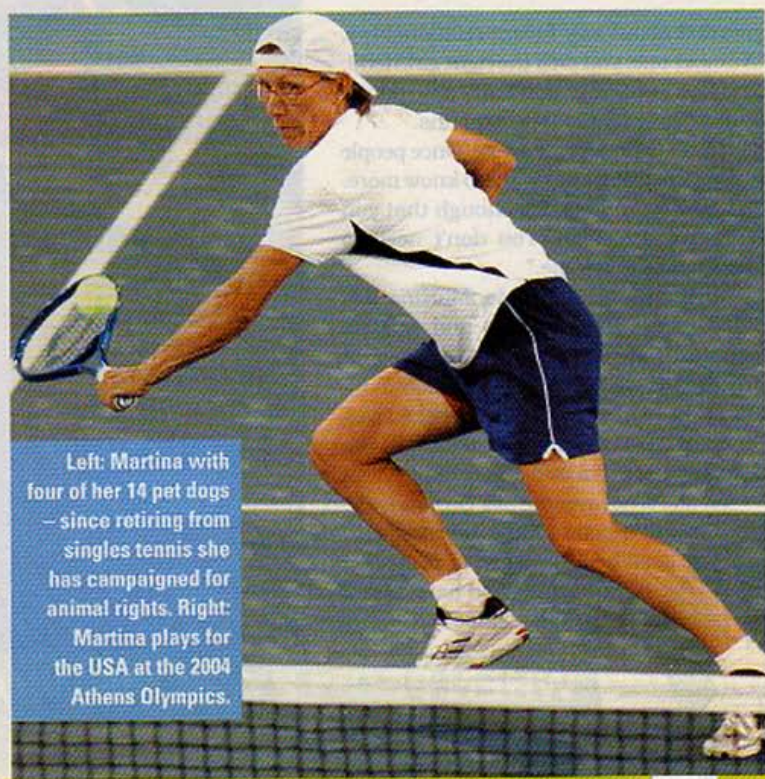
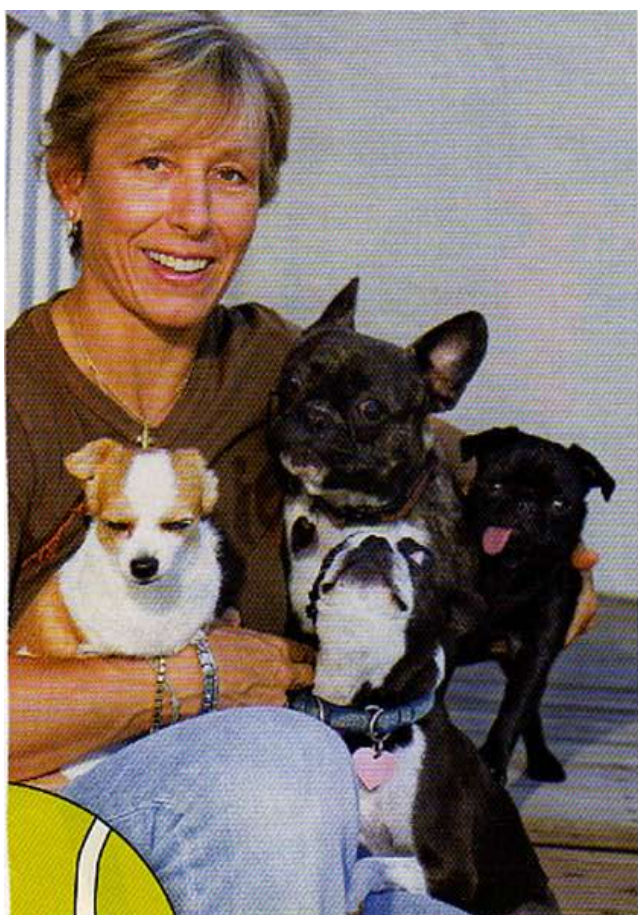
"Oh, let's not even go there," she says, staring off into space. "I was fearless. You are when you're 18." Then she chuckles and adds, "I don't wish I had that old body anymore. I was 10kg overweight. Now, I wish I had the ability to recuperate. That's the big difference. Plus pee breaks. After almost every set now, I have to go to the bathroom – and I have a big bladder, too. I can hold it for a long time, but when I move, it's dribbling. That's not good!"

Her early life as a new immigrant was hard. "There were times when the tour ▶



Opposite, from left: Martina hugs Chris Evert after beating her at Wimbledon in 1978; Martina and Chris in July 2000. This page, top left: Martina (right) with her mother, Jana Navratilova, at Wimbledon in 1979. Top: Judy Nelson, 38, and Martina, 27, a happy couple in 1984. Above: Judy at their "galimony" court hearing in 1991. Left: The pain of the "galimony" proceedings – Martina breaks down in court.





Left: Martina with four of her 14 pet dogs – since retiring from singles tennis she has campaigned for animal rights. Right: Martina plays for the USA at the 2004 Athens Olympics.

## IT TOOK ABOUT A YEAR FOR THE IMMENSITY OF THE DEFECTION TO REALLY HIT ME. And when it did, it hit me like a ton of bricks.

wasn't enough, the loneliness was too much," she wrote in her autobiography, *Martina*, published in 1985. "It took about a year for the immensity of the defection to really hit me. And, when it did, it hit me like a ton of bricks." She'd never felt so alone and unloved before, and when she lost in the first round of the US Open in September 1976, she collapsed, crying hysterically after the match.

Instead of eliciting sympathy, crowds turned against the young woman who clearly was struggling, not just with her tennis, but also with the separation from her family and friends, and her emotions as a maturing teenager.

So Martina scraped herself together, found reserves of courage and discipline she didn't know existed and, two years later, on July 8, 1978, defeated Chris Evert at Wimbledon. She also fell in love for the first time – with acclaimed lesbian writer Rita Mae Brown.

Her beloved stepfather railed about the relationship. "I'd rather you slept with a different man every night than sleep with a woman," he said. The relationship lasted three years. When it ended, in April 1981, they had a screaming, knock-

down fight – and Martina was shot at. Rita wrote in her autobiography, *Rita Will*, that she picked up the gun Martina had left on the bathroom sink, telling her to get rid of it and, when Martina ran out and hopped into her car, Rita followed her and shot out the back window.

After this episode, Martina's trainer, basketball star Nancy Lieberman, took the young tennis star into her home in Dallas, Texas, to offer her space away from the hothouse of women's tennis and the lesbian scene. "I'm not saying [lesbianism] is wrong, but I want to give her a fair chance of changing and seeing the other side," Nancy said at the time. "I'm not here to force guys on her, but just to help her get out of that environment."

However, Martina was soon in love again. This time with a married woman, Judy Nelson, a Texas doctor's wife and mother of two boys. She and Martina met in 1982 at a tennis tournament in which one of Judy's sons was a ballboy. In 1984, Martina invited the family to travel to England to watch her play at Wimbledon. The doctor stayed at home in Fort Worth, Texas, but Judy went. And stayed. As the '80s wore on and Martina dominated women's tennis, she would rush to the

stands and publicly kiss Judy after her matches. It was a major scandal. The media went crazy.

Martina and Judy were happy for nearly eight years, though their parting, in 1991, was about as horrendous as break-ups can be. That year, too, Martina was threatened by the IRA, who said they intended to kidnap her. "I used to carry a gun with me on tour because of an IRA threat," she recalls. "I have several guns at home and would not hesitate to use one if someone entered my bedroom."

Martina also had to contend with emotional blackmail when Judy Nelson sued her for half of all money earned by Martina in their years together, claiming there was a "non-marital cohabitation agreement" signed in 1986. Worse, there was a video of Martina agreeing to the divvying of the assets. In the press, Judy was portrayed as a gold-digger, but in her legal action, Judy saw herself as the wronged "wife". The couple settled out of court, but the bitterness still rankled.

The "galimony" case, as it was dubbed, marked a turning point for Martina. Overnight, she went from standing on the sidelines of gay rights to being on centre court. It has also made her extremely ▶



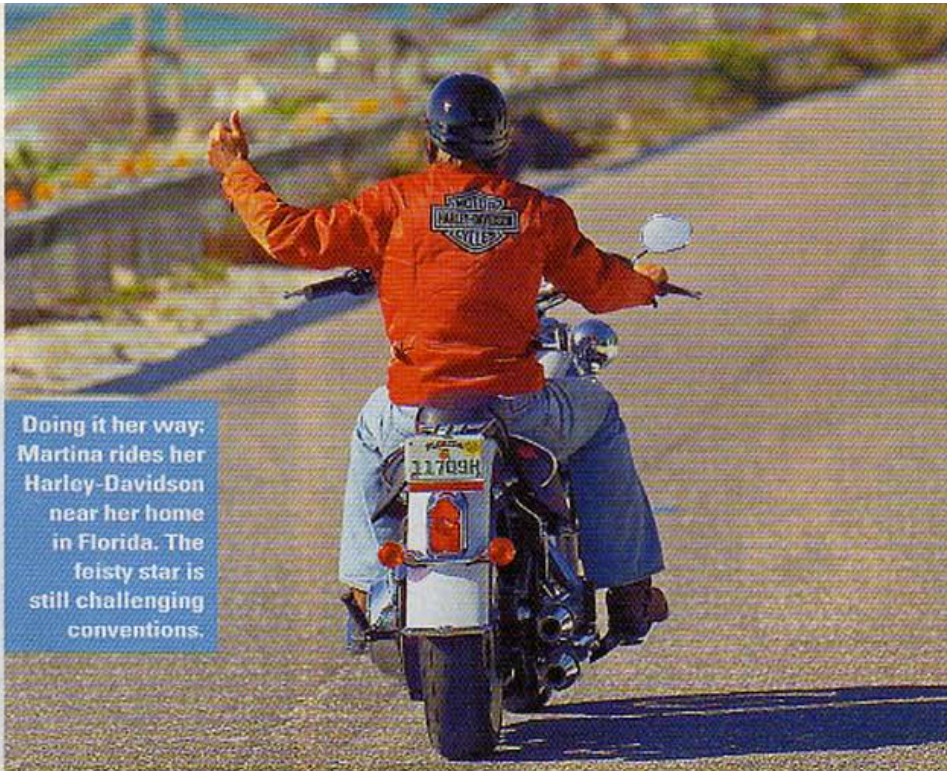
guarded about any future relationships. "Number one: you pick the right girlfriend. Number two: you don't do any public stuff in your home," she explains.

"I have to protect my space. Once people know something, they want to know more. To know *everything*. It's enough that you know I'm a lesbian. You don't need to know who's in my life."

During the past decade, Martina has dated model Hunter Reno and English sculptor Danda Jarolimek. "So, I keep it private. It's easier now. I got much more attention as to who I was with when I was 25, than now." Her smile widens. "It's not sexy anymore. I'm over the hump!"

Yet she is not over the hill. On court, she is still a potent force, glowing with good health. Her skin, protected by sunscreen and hats, is still remarkably smooth.

Doing it her way: Martina rides her Harley-Davidson near her home in Florida. The feisty star is still challenging conventions.



WHEN PEOPLE ASK ME WHAT MY GREATEST ACCOMPLISHMENT HAS BEEN, I SAY: *LIFE*. Leading by example. Standing up for what you feel is right.

She extols the benefits of a raw-food diet. "Nutrition is more important than fitness. If you don't eat right, no matter how you train you're going to run out of gas in a match." Like all professional athletes, Martina has to worry about every morsel she puts in her mouth, due to random drug testing. "Even when I go to the health food store for a milkshake, I don't get any of those protein powders – I have no idea what's in that stuff. You have to be really careful. I took a sleeping pill my mum gave me a couple of months ago, because I got three hours of sleep in three nights. So my mum gave me one, I took half, and it was great, I slept like a baby. The next night I took a quarter and slept like a baby. The next morning I woke up and thought, what have I done!"

"It was just before the 2004 Olympics and I was in a total panic. When I went there, I told them exactly what I took. We lost in the quarter-finals and I wasn't tested, but there could be a masking agent in the pill and I could have been out [of the Games]. It's very frightening."

After taking some time off since the US Open, she's starting to train hard again. "Either weights or fitness, quickness, long-distance stuff, as well as stretching and Pilates," she says. "I'm committed to play doubles next year and see if the results can be better than last year. We

lost only to good teams, but didn't win a big one. So it was frustrating. Because it didn't work out as well as I wanted, I want to keep going."

She's writing a fitness book called *The Shape of Your Life*, to be out in 2006. "It's going to be a more philosophical self-help book, to get people to get healthy and stay that way for good," Martina explains. "Not just about how to lose 10kg and then put it on six months later."

One thing that hasn't been on the agenda is the possibility of having a baby, like her good friend, former tennis great Pam Shriver, now a mother at 42, using IVF technology and a donor egg. "I don't want to talk about it, as anything I say will get blown out of proportion, but yes, there's still time for it, although right now it's not on the cards. When I quit playing for good and stay put, we'll see."

When Martina retired from singles tennis in 1994, she continued to play doubles and exhibition matches. She also got a pilot's licence, co-wrote three mystery novels, travelled extensively in Africa and learned Swahili, played in an Aspen ice hockey team, often visited her parents and sister in the Czech Republic and worked as a tennis commentator, a job she loves and plans to continue.

She also threw herself into charity work, notably for PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), the Ms.

Foundation, the Sierra Club, Planned Parenthood and Save the Rhinos. She is one of the creators of the Rainbow card, a Visa credit card program targeted at the lesbian and gay community.

When Martina announced that she was returning to professional doubles in 2000, critics scoffed. When she became the oldest Wimbledon champ, at 46, in 2003, they cheered. They had stopped carping in January 2003, when she won the Australian Open mixed doubles with Leander Paes, and became only the third woman to win singles, doubles and mixed-doubles titles at all four Grand Slam tournaments – plus she was also the oldest person ever to win a Grand Slam title.

"When people ask me what my greatest accomplishment has been, I say: *life*," she says. "Leading by example. Standing up for what you feel is right and what you feel is fair. I think it's making a positive difference in people's lives. And that's a measure of a human being at the end of the day. Did you make a positive difference in the people around you? And to yourself, as well? I've been able to do it even for people I don't know, obviously because of my sexual orientation."

"But it goes beyond me being gay, and it goes beyond tennis," she adds. "I've transcended the sport and sexuality, and I'm able to touch people's – and animals' – lives in a positive way."