

Mirny and Azarenko write names in tennis history

Victoria Azarenko and Max Mirny — Olympic champions

The Belarusian pair defeated the British duo of Andy Murray and Laura Robson on the central court of the All England Lawn Tennis Club, winning the second Olympic medal for Belarusian tennis and making them Belarus' first mixed doubles Olympic champions.

The tennis tournament at this year's Games was rather ambiguous for Belarus, as Alexander Bury (who performed jointly with Max Mirny in the doubles) was knocked out after the first round.

Victoria also approached the mixed finals with uncertainty. On the one hand, she had won a bronze medal in the singles — a result of which most other Belarusian athletes can only dream. On the other, she had hoped to achieve a 'personal' gold. Sadly, Serena Williams managed to defeat her: the only true rival at the Games capable of stopping the world #1 seed rocket to the title of Olympic champion. After two years out of action through injury, Ms. Williams now appears to be making up for lost time and seems almost undefeatable among the world tennis elite.

Azarenko fought to her last drop of 'sweat and blood' in the

singles semi-finals in London, making a few mistakes and having to steel her nerve to continue. Perhaps only Serena was capable of managing this 'hurricane'. Maria Kirilenko, who faced Victoria in the fight for bronze, seemed greatly frustrated and confused at times by the onslaught of her opponent. Azarenko played similarly against Serena Williams.

Triumphantly, this was Belarus' first ever tennis Olympic medal, although Victoria is modest in her victory. By the time she faced the media she had already played three matches that day: the one in which she claimed her singles bronze and two matches in the mixed doubles (taking into account the ¼ final match shifted at the last minute due to rain).

"An Olympic medal means a lot for me," she mused. "I had a crazy desire to win but lacked strength and I didn't know where to take strength. I kept trying to change my strategy. Usually, on losing a match, you are knocked out and your game is finished but, at the Games, I had to again enter the court after being beaten by Serena Williams of the USA. I had to promptly compose myself for my bronze match.



It's very difficult to prepare for such a serious game so quickly; it was a new experience for me. It doesn't matter now though; the most vital thing is that I have a medal!"

Of course, the Belarusian tennis player still had a chance to return with gold from London, partnering Max Mirny (ranked first among world doubles). The regime had also been broken repeatedly, by the British rain. The pair were

just one step from victory, facing British duo Andy Murray and Laura Robson on home ground: no mean feat in the UK's major tennis complex, filled with home fans.

Murray and Robson began strongly, with two tie-breaks occurring almost immediately and the British confidently taking the first set 6:2. However, it was too early to celebrate victory. In the second game of the second set, Mirny claimed a

tie-break with a brilliant cross. The third set was to decide the destiny of the Olympic gold (going to 10 points according to tie-break rules). This was the ultimate test of nerve and determination, with that of the Belarusian athletes proving stronger. The final score was 2:6, 6:3, 10:8.

"Wimbledon's courts added a special taste to the victory," notes Max Mirny. "I came from the Olympic vil-

lage, which took a bit of time, but was worth it. The tournament had a tight schedule and was filled with favourites and season leaders. There were no days off and Victoria had to play three matches in a single day, requiring serious physical effort."

Azarenko's Olympiad has certainly brought a kaleidoscope of emotions, but she couldn't conceal her joy, saying, "My feelings on winning a Grand Slam tournament and the Olympic Games are completely different. It was wonderful to earn bronze yesterday. However, we've now taken gold! There isn't an athlete in the world who doesn't dream of this. It's always pleasant to win but I'm now experiencing utterly unique feelings."

Even before the Olympiad in London, Max Mirny commented that these Games would likely be the last of his career. After claiming his gold, he left a note of ambiguity in the air, saying, "Will I go to Rio? It's difficult to say. More points will be given in Brazil for an Olympic tournament... but why not? It will be an historic event, as the Games have never been organised in South America. The winners will certainly go down in history."

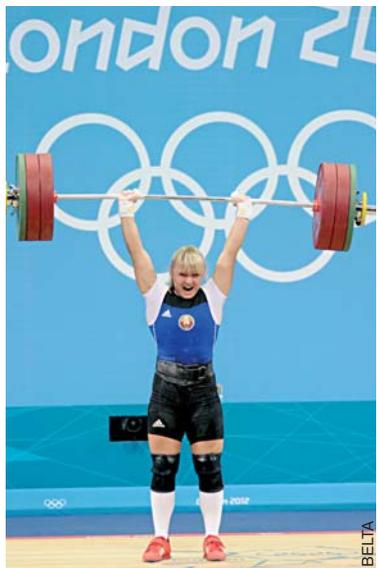
Bronze start of Shkermankova

Alexander Goncharov, the head coach of Belarus' national team, speaks shyly yet with great hopes for our wonderfully strong weightlifters, who may earn a medal in the under 69kg category

Anastasia Novikova's failure has made the head coach even more cautious in his judgments. However, friends Dina Sazonovets and Marina Shkermankova are both favourites and may yet bring home a medal for Belarus. Simultaneously, the two are dark horses, being relatively new to the sport. It is perhaps the only weight category in which Belarus enjoys sharp internal competition and this rivalry between the two friends has been helping them progress.

Before the London Games, Shkermankova, who is from Vitebsk, noted her aim to lift 117kg in the snatch and 147kg in the jerk. At the 2011 World Championship, the winner of the event, Oksana Slivenko of Russia, lifted 266kg (118+148). Dina Sazonovets has also been doing well recently, breaking national records in Belarus on the eve of the Olympic Games — in the jerk and double-event (improving upon the bronze result of the World Championship in Paris).

The snatch is proving a close call, with three athletes finishing the



first exercise with the same points: 115kg. Taking into account the girls' own body weight, Rim Jong Sim of North Korea is in the lead, followed by our Dina Sazonovets and Anna Nurmukhambetova of Kazakhstan. The clean & jerk was filled with dramatic and unexpected twists in the second round, leading Belarusian fans to await the outcome with bated breath, but Belarus finally claimed its first medal in London. Marina Shkermankova's lifting of 256kg (113+143) took her above her teammate by 210g (since Marina's own body weight is 210g lighter than Dina's).

Football European Cups still running their course

By Yuri Bakerenko

There's more to the sporting world than the Olympiad, with football fans attentively following the decisive stages of the qualification matches for European club tournaments

Last week, BATE and Gomel continued their 'European campaign', with Borisov drawing with Hungarian Debrecen (1:1) in its away match and Gomel losing in a tough struggle to English Liverpool (0:1).

The Champions League third qualifying round between BATE and Debrecen was worth seeing for the appearance of Alexander Hleb alone, in the yellow and blue uniform. He began his professional career with Borisov and has now returned to his roots after a long spell abroad. "A task has been set for the club to reach the Champions League Group Stage, so I'll do everything I can to help fulfil this. I'm here because of my love for the club; money plays no role at all," stressed Alexander Hleb, soon after signing his contract with BATE.

Borisov fans clearly appreciate his words, having hung a huge banner reading: 'Welcome!' in their sector before the match against Debrecen.

If only BATE had won! Alas, despite the efforts of Hleb and the other Borisov players, Debrecen was too strong. In fact, BATE would have lost were it not for Victor Goncharenko bringing on Ibrahim Sidibe in extra time; he scored a valuable goal, leading to the draw.

Gomel, wearing green and white, lost nobly to mighty English Liverpool in the Champions League third qualifying round. Oleg Kubarev's team held their heads high and played well yet failed to utilise their opportunities. Playing at home, at Gomel's

Tsentralny Stadium, the squad had more scoring windows than its opponent. Strangely, Liverpool was a pale shadow of itself, perhaps due to having only recently returned from holidays; the players are clearly not on top form. Brendan Rodgers' club has some way to go in preparing itself for the English championship.

The Gomel team could still reach the next round, if it plays well in the return match. Forward Dmitry Platonov assures us that his squad will do everything (possible and impossible) to achieve its goal.

