

# Victoria Azarenko — world tennis player number one!

The name of Victoria Azarenko has been inscribed in history. Without exaggeration, we can say that she is a world leader. Fans have long been delighted by her worthy victories but, after defeating Russian Maria Sharapova in the final of the Australian Open Championships, she has taken her first Grand Slam trophy. She now tops the rankings, for the first time in her career and in the history of Belarus.

By Denis Komarov

It's difficult to imagine a more 'Belarusian' variant of the Australian Open final, as the country's best tennis player, Victoria Azarenko, faced Maria Sharapova (originating from Gomel but having a Russian citizenship). Maria's family moved to Russia escaping the consequences of the Chernobyl catastrophe but her grandmother still resides in Belarus. Sharapova is even coached by Vladimir Volchokov — a Davis Cup 'Belarusian wonder'. The thrilling tournament also saw legends Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal battle for victory.

This was the first final of the Grand Slam for Azarenko and a principal match-return for Sharapova. It was the strongest final, with both tennis players showing amazing power, constantly on the attack. Known for their loud vocalisation during play, both women gave full vent to their

voices during the match — almost in defiance of those who complain of the 'problem of shrieking' on court.

A year ago, the situation was drastically different, with Azarenko admitting that she was thinking of retiring from professional tennis. Despite her local successes, she lacked consistency, which resulted in some stunning defeats and much disappointment. At that time, she was suffering torture on court; this time, she was flying.

The match began as a challenge for Azarenko. 22 year old Vika was noticeably nervous, serving weakly and inaccurately. In the first game, she made two double faults, allowing her opponent to break her serve. The eighth game was a turning point, with Azarenko able to equalise and then take the lead — 5:3.

Sharapova seemed to be disheartened by Vika's 'come-back', while the Belarusian athlete was spurred on to win



the second set. When the umpire announced 'game, set, match — Azarenko', she fell to her knees, hiding her face. Her childhood dreams had at last come true. She had won the Grand Slam tournament and become the world's number one. Moreover, she has been awarded the Fatherland Order of the Third Degree by the President of the country.

"What emotions do I feel? I don't even know. I have the whole palette of feelings. Im-

mediately after the match, I couldn't believe that the tournament was over. The road has been so long... I haven't completely taken on board that everything has finished and what I've achieved," noted Azarenko.

On the eve of the 2012 Australian Open Tennis Championships, Victoria Azarenko was asked which achievement would most delight her: victory at the Grand Slam tournament or being

seeded first. It is a question asked endlessly and, sometimes, even 'automatically' over the last three years. Victoria responded again that she would love to combine the two, not realising that Kim Clijsters would sensationally knock out Azarenko's friend Caroline Wozniacki (seeded first) in the quarter-finals. Moreover, Czech Petra Kvitová (seeded second) would be unexpectedly beaten by Maria Sharapova in the semi-

finals. The latter admitted later that she considered reaching the final success in itself, which perhaps explains her lack of dynamism at the fateful moment — when all hung in the balance, driven by her desire to win.

"Of course, I don't want to rest on my laurels," notes Azarenko, hardly able to restrain her emotions. "After this victory, I believe in myself even more; I can do this again and feel no limits on my career!"