

# NEW ORDER

By Donald McRae  
THE GUARDIAN

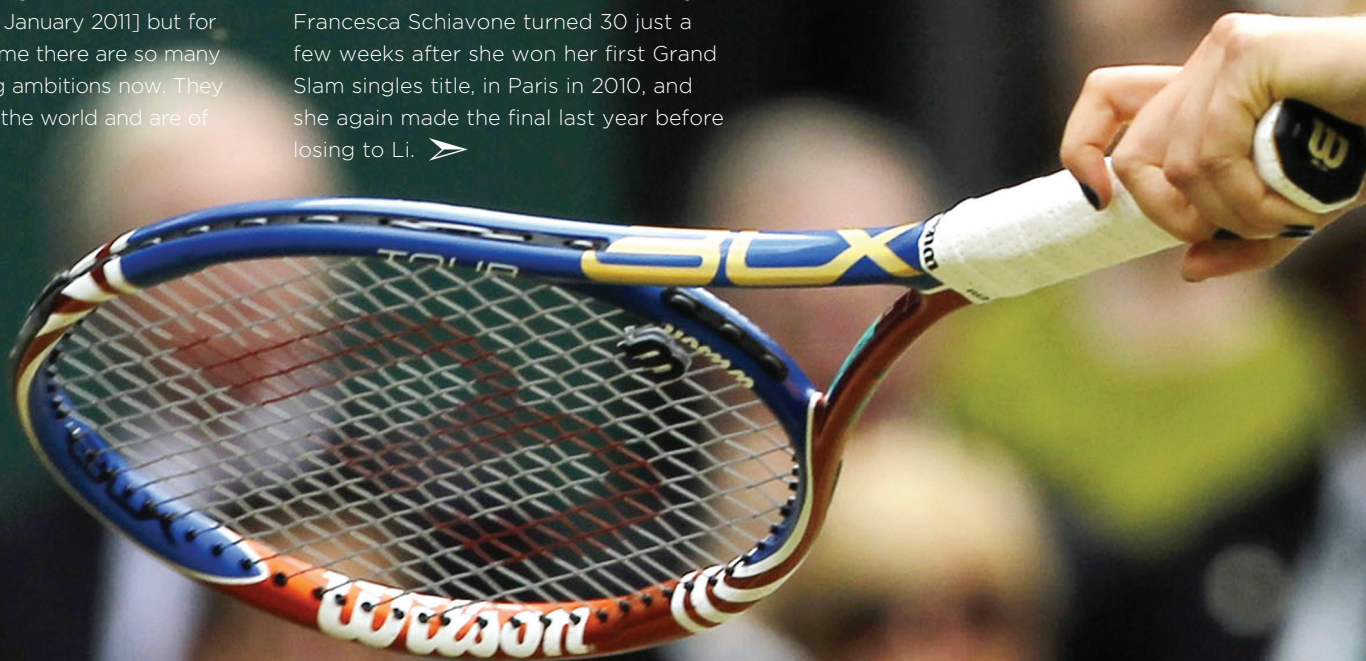
**Women's tennis now offers an intriguing mix of different champions from diverse countries. Before last month's French Open, the preceding five Grand Slam tournaments had been won by five different players – from former journeywomen to compelling new stars. We talked to both famous and unexpected Grand Slam winners who believe their unpredictable rivalry is good for the game.**

"They're chasing us very hard," Kim Clijsters said to me with a wry smile as, a couple of weeks before last year's Wimbledon, she looked over her shoulder at the group of players pursuing the Grand Slam tournaments that once were the domain of established winners like the Belgian, her compatriot Justine Henin and Serena and Venus Williams. That quartet, representing a contrasting combination of Belgians and a single American family, had won 31 Grand Slam singles titles between them – with Clijsters having begun the year by securing the 2011 Australian Open.


Clijsters, however, voiced the gathering sense that women's tennis was on the brink of seismic change. "Justine has retired for good [in January 2011] but for Serena, Venus and me there are so many challengers with big ambitions now. They come from all over the world and are of different ages."

In an emotional final, Clijsters won her first Australian title by defeating Li Na who, in recent years, has transformed herself from a journeywoman into a top 10 player and one of the most amusing characters on tour. It took Li a decade to achieve sustained recognition and she followed her defeat in Melbourne by winning her first Grand Slam title five months later, at the French Open.

16 months younger than Li, Clijsters has been at the peak of women's tennis for so long, despite having retired once to start a family, so it's understandable that she should empathise with the unlikely success of women who would once have been dismissed as veterans. Italy's Francesca Schiavone turned 30 just a few weeks after she won her first Grand Slam singles title, in Paris in 2010, and she again made the final last year before losing to Li. ➤







Petra Kvitová

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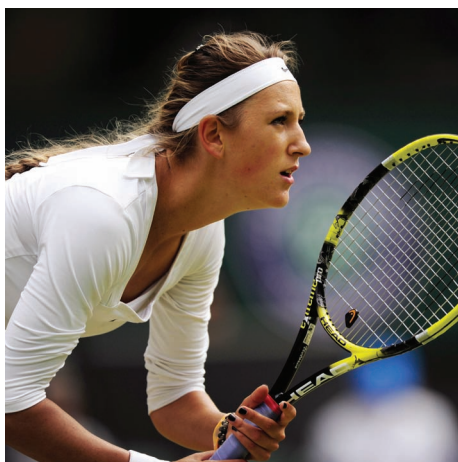
**Martina Navratilova on Petra Kvitová**





Kim Clijsters

Victoria Azarenka, Caroline Wozniacki and Maria Sharapova



Yet Clijsters knows that the real threat to her and the Williams sisters lay in their own increased fragility and, especially, in the emergence of compelling young players. "There are a lot of them," Clijsters said, "but Petra Kvitova, Victoria Azarenka and Caroline Wozniacki are the most obvious."

Clijsters was stricken with injury last summer and, in that time, two more divergent Grand Slam champions emerged. At Wimbledon, the 21-year-old Kvitova fulfilled her outstanding promise by winning the first, surely, of numerous major titles. Kvitova has since received this tribute from arguably the greatest-ever female player, Martina Navratilova: "I'm glad I'm not on the other side of the net against her," Navratilova said of Kvitova, her fellow Czech.

"Petra has power; and great variety. You can see that on her serve, which she mixes up really well. She's got the flat serve down the 'T' in the ad court and the big one out wide in the deuce court. She's got the kick serve, and the slice, and she keeps you guessing. Her attitude really impresses me. It's fantastic now. I think she's the real No.1."

Kvitova had been expected to dominate but, instead, at the next Slam, the 2011 US Open, she lost in the first round to an obscure Romanian, Alexandra Dulgheru. It looked as if the old order was about to be restored. Clijsters, who had won the two previous US Opens, was still missing but Serena Williams powered into the final. Rather than recording a routine 14th Grand Slam victory, she lost her temper, and the match, against another reinvented journeywoman, 27-year-old Sam Stosur.

When I interviewed her, Stosur remembered how she had played her first professional tournament at 15. "It's been a long grind to get here," the Australian said. "I made the French final last year but lost to Schiavone. I was the most disappointed I've ever been because I wondered if that was the only chance I'd have to win a Grand Slam. I felt real dejection as I knew that the younger girls, like Kvitova and Azarenka, were coming."

Stosur's elation after winning at Flushing Meadows turned to amazement when she arrived for her obligatory television interviews with the American networks the following morning. "I got out at Times Square. Cameras were flashing

and following me and I could see myself on the big screen. It was then I said, 'Oh my God, this really did happen!' It was almost an overnight feeling."

Yet, echoing Kvitova's failure in New York, Stosur lost to another Romanian, Sorana Cirstea, in the first round of the Australian Open. Clijsters, at least, was back again and she made the semi-finals – alongside Azarenka, Kvitova and another famous name in women's tennis, Maria Sharapova. Kvitova and Sharapova replayed last year's Wimbledon final but this time the regal Russian won a tight encounter. In the second semi-final an epic battle between Clijsters and Azarenka finally swung in the favour of the 22-year-old Belarusian.

In swatting aside Sharapova in the final, 6-3, 6-0, Azarenka also became the new world No.1. She might have started nervously but then, with imperious confidence allied to her trademark high-pitched screaming, Azarenka crushed her experienced opponent. "Before," she said later, "you thought I was a mental case. But I was just young and emotional."

Azarenka enjoyed "a few champagne showers – we have some videos of that". Later, in a sober mood, she admitted her first Grand Slam title, "will give a big test as to how I balance everything. It's going to be a bit difficult".

Her thoughts had already turned to Wimbledon. "I love Wimbledon," Azarenka said. "The Centre Court is so beautiful. It's very special, the whole place, with the tradition. You can never pass anywhere without your badge. If you forget, you're so screwed."

The young champion could laugh but, just like Clijsters, Kvitova and Stosur before her, she will feel the heat of the chase. "Azarenka's really good," Clijsters said, "but everyone's on her heels. It's not easy at the top."

After the Australian Open, 11 different nationalities featured in the world's top 12 – with only the Russians, Sharapova and Vera Zvonareva, sharing a nationality. There were comparative veterans, bright young guns and a recently deposed No.1, Wozniacki, who has still to win a Grand Slam title. It makes an intriguing mix – which can be used to question or celebrate the current status of women tennis.

"When one player dominates it gets boring and everyone complains," Stosur said. "Yet when it's this way everyone complains there's no standout player. This is just the phase we're in – and it proves how competitive our game is. No one can confidently pick the next Grand Slam champion. I think that's pretty fascinating."

