



PRIDE OF SERBIA

By Paul Newman
THE INDEPENDENT

Novak Djokovic's Wimbledon triumph last summer capped a series of extraordinary achievements in recent years by Serbian men and women. How can a small country of eight million people, with no great tradition in tennis, produce such a succession of wonderful champions?

Four years ago we hailed Serbia's achievement in producing a world No.1 in Ana Ivanovic. When the 2008 French Open champion was replaced by a compatriot, Jelena Jankovic, we watched in wonder at the tennis triumphs of this comparatively poor country of just eight million people. When Novak Djokovic capped it all with his Wimbledon victory last summer, completing a hat-trick of world singles No.1s from Serbia, we realised this was one of the most remarkable stories in tennis history.

The conveyor belt of Serbian talent, moreover, has not stopped. Janko Tipsarevic broke into the world's top 10 at the end of last year, while Viktor Troicki arrived at the All England Club last summer as the world No.12. Nenad Zimonjic, meanwhile, has regularly held the world No.1 spot in doubles and 20-year-old Bojana Jovanovski, who reached the world's top 50 last summer, has her eyes on emulating the achievements of Ivanovic and Jankovic.

"It helps me tremendously," Tipsarevic said of the path trodden before him by the likes of Djokovic. "This is one of the

things that is pushing me to be better – seeing Nenad also in doubles winning all these Grand Slams, and Novak, and Viktor being No.12. When you see other guys on tour doing that, it looks a little bit distant to you. But when you see these guys who are your out-of-the-court friends, life friends, doing what they're doing, you're watching it from a first-row seat. It really makes you think that if Novak is No.1, I can be top 10."

For all the achievements by Serbian players, none could match Djokovic's victory at the All England Club last year. The 25-year-old described his final against Rafael Nadal as the biggest match of his life. "It's the most prestigious, the most valuable event that you can think of in our sport," he said. "It was always the tournament that I dreamed of winning. I'd reached the semi-finals twice in previous years. Obviously we don't get to play on grass courts that often. Then I managed to come and have the best tournament of my career."

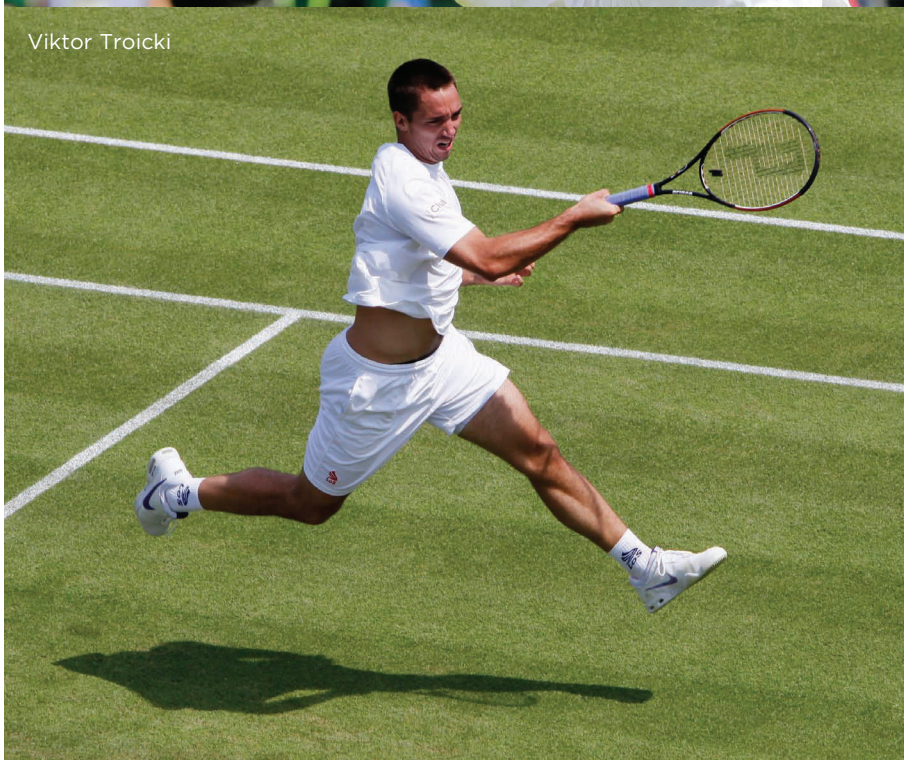
So what is behind the extraordinary feats of these players from a country with no great tennis tradition and one which

Janko Tipsarevic





Ana Ivanovic



Viktor Troicki

is still recovering from the effects of the Balkan wars? If there is one lesson to be drawn it is surely that great champions are not produced by coaching programmes, by swish tennis academies or by national federations rich in resources. The drive that took Djokovic, Ivanovic and Jankovic to the top of the world came from within the three players themselves and their families.

When the three future No.1s were making their first strides in the professional game the Serbian tennis federation, with an annual budget of less than £1m, employed just seven staff who were based in an anonymous residential property in a suburb of Belgrade. The organisation has since moved to bigger premises in the middle of the Serbian capital, but a lack of finance has so far thwarted plans for a national tennis centre. Indoor facilities – crucial in a country which endures severe winters – are improving, but when Ivanovic was learning the game she had to practise in a converted swimming pool, where the walls were so close to the lines that players were told not to hit the ball cross-court.

The irony is that Serbia's lack of a tennis infrastructure was a key factor in the development of their best players. Thanks to sacrifices by their families and the help of sponsors, Djokovic, Ivanovic and Jankovic were all sent abroad to train, where they received top-class coaching. Djokovic went to Niki Pilic's Munich academy at the age of 12, Jankovic was sent at the same age to Nick Bollettieri's Florida training camp (where she remembers watching with horror as American television reported on the bombing of Belgrade) and 14-year-old Ivanovic went to practise in Switzerland. Troicki was another who escaped during the bombing campaign. Leaving his father behind in Belgrade, the 13-year-old went with his mother to Boca Raton in Florida, where he trained for the next three years. ➤



Jelena Jankovic





Nenad Zimonjic

"It's individual," Djokovic said of the Serbs' success. "We don't have a long tradition of this sport in our country. We didn't have the system that helped us to become professional tennis players. So we had to individually have a big desire to succeed and have big support from our families."

According to Ivanovic, Serbs have "quite a combustible character". She added: "Maybe that's good for tennis. Maybe that's something that drives us." Djokovic agrees. "There is something in the mentality that obviously helps us to be successful in what we do," he said. "I think it's also the past and the life story that we have behind us, which is very similar, because we have all experienced the war, we have all experienced the tough times

back home, struggles to have the right conditions to become a professional player. But in the end, those things, when you turn around, make you appreciate life much more."

The achievements of the current crop of Serbian players have made tennis one of the most popular sports in the country and provided impetus for improvements in facilities. The national federation has also been able to increase its support for the best junior players, enabling them to travel to more events overseas. Jovanovski, who has been regarded as the most promising among the next group of young Serbian women players, has been able to keep Belgrade as her base. Like some of her illustrious predecessors, including Djokovic and Ivanovic, she trains at the capital's Partizan club, which has upgraded its facilities. Nevertheless, Jovanovski wonders whether the modest improvements in Serbia's tennis infrastructure will actually help to produce more champions. "Now we have a lot more courts and clubs because tennis has become more popular," she said. "Before, it was difficult. It was so tough at the time when players like Djokovic and Ivanovic were starting. But sometimes it's good when things are tough and difficult for you. Maybe you have more motivation to achieve things, so I think that was good for them. Because if you have everything it's not the same."

RISING SERBIAN STARS

Bojana Jovanovski, 20, broke into the world's top 50 last summer. Won three tournaments on ITF circuit before becoming a regular on main tour.

Aleksandra Krunic, 19, made the world's top 200 with two victories in qualifying for this year's Australian Open. Has competed in Fed Cup.

Dusan Lajovic, 21, trained in Barcelona. Played first match on main tour two years ago and made first attempt to qualify for a Grand Slam tournament in Melbourne this year.

Filip Krajinovic, 20, was an outstanding junior but his subsequent progress has been slowed by injury. Based at Nick Bollettieri's academy in Florida since he was 13.

