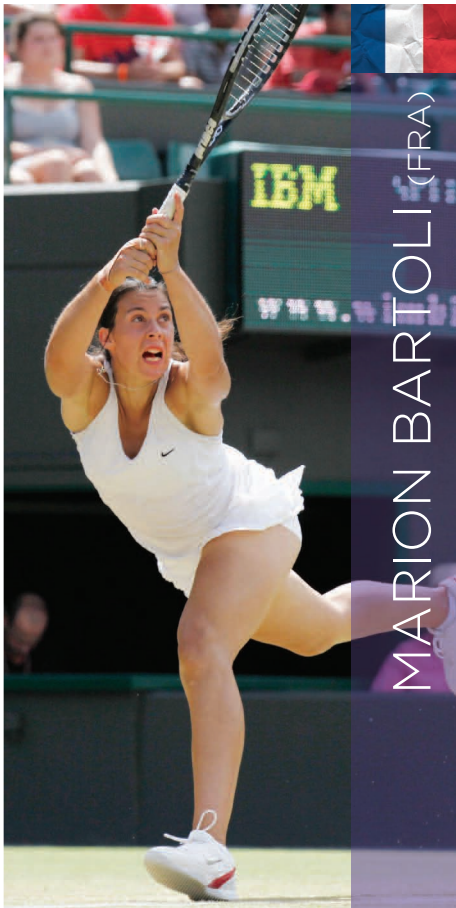


VICTORIA AZARENKA (BLR)

Age 22 (31.07.1989)
Born Minsk, Belarus
Lives Monte Carlo, Monaco
Height 6'0"
Weight 145lbs
Career-high ranking 1
Career titles 12
Plays Right-handed
Best Wimbledon SF 2011

It had been building up inside of her for oh, I don't know how long. Victoria Azarenka's Grand Slam breakthrough came slowly but surely – she had been a top 10 player for the past three years – and the magic moment happened at the Australian Open in January when she won the singles in a most emphatic manner, winning the last 12 games to defeat Maria Sharapova in straight sets. With that success, Azarenka also became the world No.1 for the first time and partied the night away at one of the city's high-class venues. Not bad for a girl who had questioned after a defeat in Dubai in 2010, whether she was quite cut out for this line of work. A stern word or two from her grandmother put her back on the straight and narrow. Having been a quarter-finalist at Roland Garros and reaching the semis of The Championships last year where she fell to Petra Kvitová, the manner of her victory in Australia was a testament to the rediscovery of the enjoyment of the sport and a desire not to waste a single moment of her career from here on in. She went on a 26-game, four-tournament unbeaten run at the start of the year until she was beaten in the quarter-finals of the Sony Ericsson Open in Miami by Marion Bartoli.



MARION BARTOLI (FRA)

Age 27 (02.10.1984)
Born Le Puy en Velay, France
Lives Geneva, Switzerland
Height 5'7"
Weight 139lbs
Career-high ranking 7
Career titles 7
Plays Right-handed
Best Wimbledon RU 2007

The 2007 Wimbledon finalist – the year she first entered the world's top 20 where she has remained ever since – enjoyed an extremely productive 2011, reaching the semi-finals or better at no less than eight events and winning in both Eastbourne and Osaka (which sums up the amazing diversity of the game) and a semi-final appearance at her home major, becoming the first French semi-finalist in Paris since Mary Pierce seven years ago. There is no more interesting player to watch, for she never seems to relax, leaping on the spot, blowing out her cheeks, taking huge great swings into thin air (and causing ball kids and linespeople to duck and dive) in a kind of remarkable display of service action shadow boxing. You can understand why she lists Monica Seles as her favourite player of all time, as they both took idiosyncrasy to new levels. Like Monica, she is coached by her father, in this case, Walter, whom she sent packing from the stands at Wimbledon last year because she couldn't concentrate with him there. They are an incredible partnership to the extent that they have forfeited their place in the Olympic Games this year because the French Federation will not accept Walter being on the squad as her individual coach.



SARA ERRANI (ITA)

Age 25 (29.04.1987)
Born Bologna, Italy
Lives Bologna, Italy
Height 5'4"
Weight 132lbs
Career-high ranking 10
Career titles 5
Plays Right-handed
Best Wimbledon 3R 2010

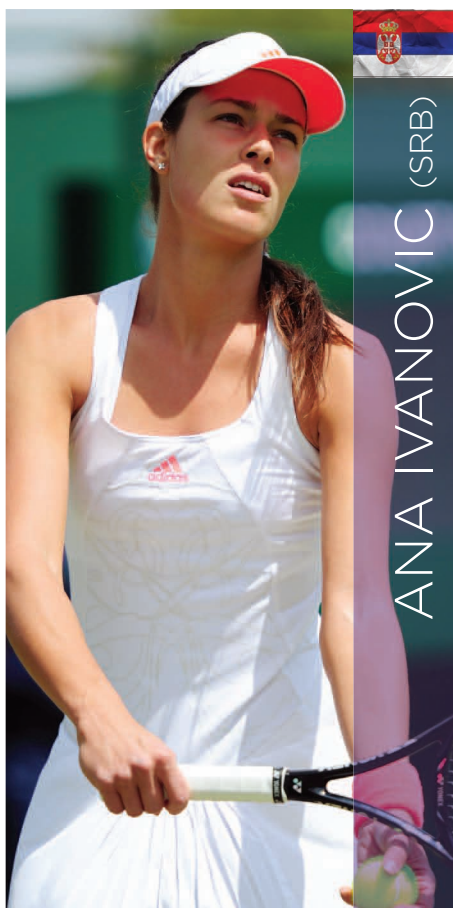
Celebrating a place in the top ten for the first time, Errani came of age at Roland Garros this month, reaching her inaugural Grand Slam singles final with performances of enormous courage and willpower. Starting the event ranked No.24 and as the Italian No.4, she defeated three Grand Slam champions, Ana Ivanovic, Svetlana Kuznetsova and Sam Stosur en route to a meeting with Maria Sharapova and though she once more fought doggedly, it was not enough. Her consolation was that she is now the Italian No.1. Remarkable, though that five years ago, she was ranked No.171 and now finds herself among the pick of the women's game. She was also the first player since Kim Clijsters in 2003 at the French to reach both the final of the singles and doubles, finishing exactly the same as the Belgian, a losing singles finalist and doubles champion. Errani was told as a youngster by her nation's federation that she probably would not make it and so, on the advice of former player Raffaella Reggi, she went to the Nick Bollettieri academy in Florida, got homesick, and came home where she met Pablo Lorenzo, a Spanish coach who persuaded her to join the club in Valencia where Marat Safin and Juan Carlos Ferrero trained. It was a career-changing decision. Watch for her feisty manner, solid defences and clever use of angles and drop shots. ➤



JULIA GOERGES (GER)

Age 23 (02.11.1988)
Born Bad Oldesloe, Germany
Lives Hanover, Germany
Height 5'11"
Weight 154lbs
Career-high ranking 15
Career titles 2
Plays Right-handed
Best Wimbledon 3R 2011

This blossoming right-hander won her first WTA Premier title in Stuttgart in 2011 – never a bad thing to break your duck in front of your adoring fans – defeating the then world No.1 Wozniacki in the final to become only the second German to win the event and showed it was no flash in the pan by scoring her second such win at Madrid two weeks later. Julia reached the fourth round at a Grand Slam for the first time in January at the Australian Open and also finished as runner-up to Agnieszka Radwanska in Dubai, which allowed her to achieve her career-high ranking of No.15 – then one of four Germans in the top 20. She has improved her year-end ranking for each of the past six successive years. As for a piece of Wimbledon trivia, when she defeated Katarina Srebotnik in the first round at the Club in 2008, 4-6, 7-6, 16-14, the match took three hours and 41 minutes – the joint second-longest recorded women's match on the grass at the time. Coached by Sascha Nensel, Goerges, who began playing tennis as a six-year-old in her hometown of Bad Oldesloe, admits she has been most inspired by Martina Hingis, and so it is hardly surprising that she lists grass as one of her favourite surfaces. She will thus have high hopes of making it into the second week in 2012.



ANA IVANOVIC (SRB)

Age 24 (06.11.1987)
Born Belgrade, Serbia
Lives Basel, Switzerland
Height 6'1"
Weight 150lbs
Career-high ranking 1
Career titles 11
Plays Right-handed
Best Wimbledon SF 2007

When, at last year's Wimbledon, Ana Ivanovic decreed that she wanted another new sense of direction in her game, she turned to the then LTA head coach of the women's game, Nigel Sears. She had struck at just the right time for having been bogged down with the minutiae of trying to run a department, it was not difficult to persuade Sears to go back out on the road again. The 2008 French Open champion ended last year by taking the Bali title, the silver salver, so to speak, of the tour year, and has opened 2012 looking a more complete player. Her serve is much more than the liability of old, she is striking through her forehand and is playing as if she really means business. It is a pleasure to see. Ivanovic, the second Serb behind Monica Seles to become a Grand Slam queen, had dropped to as low as No.65 on the WTA on the computer in the middle of 2010, beset by a collection of niggling injuries and feeling the need to change direction or coach what seemed to be every other month. She is a very classy player who has responded to the right words at the right time and ought to improve upon her lone semi-final at The Championships in 2007 and make the most of her strengths on a surface she professes to love.



JELENA JANKOVIC (SRB)

Age 27 (28.02.1985)
Born Belgrade, Serbia
Lives Dubai, UAE
Height 5'10"
Weight 130lbs
Career-high ranking 1
Career titles 12
Plays Right-handed
Best Wimbledon R16 2006, 07, 08, 10

Has entered into Wimbledon folklore – and will always have a place in Scottish hearts – for teaming up with Jamie Murray to win the mixed doubles five years ago, since when she has been the world No.1 on the WTA and, well, taken a bit of a nosedive if truth be told. There are few more puzzling conundrums on the women's game than Jelena Jankovic. Never more than a couple of paces behind Jelena is her mum, Snezana, who keeps a very firm control on what happens in her daughter's career; sometimes perhaps, she becomes a little too stifling a presence. Jankovic did advance to back-to-back semi-finals in Dubai and Kuala Lumpur this year, but it is in the biggest events where she has failed to make a mark, having reached just the one Grand Slam singles final despite being a former No.1 in the world. She fell out of the top 10 in May last year having been in that elite bracket for 220 consecutive weeks from February 2007 which is no mean feat given her uneven temperament. If tennis does not deliver precisely what she wants, she has a business degree from the Megatrend University in Belgrade to fall back on and, like the Williams sisters, has proved a bit of a dab hand in the fashion business. ➤



ANGELIQUE KERBER (GER)

Age 24 (18.01.1988)
Born Bremen, Germany
Lives Kiel, Germany
Height 5'8"
Weight 150lbs
Career-high ranking 9
Career titles 2
Plays Left-handed
Best Wimbledon 3R 2010

After Angelique Kerber's loss to Britain's Laura Robson in the opening round of Wimbledon last year it is surprising that, a year later, she is seeded for this year's Championships. That is not to disrespect Robson who played with great gallantry that evening and fully merited her three-set victory. From that moment, Kerber decided she had to get fit, or, quite possibly, get out. She dropped out of the top 100 in August 2011 and seven months later, she was in the top 15. What a transformation occurred as she enjoyed a stretch of reaching the semi-finals or better at seven of 12 WTA events (during which time she captured her first tour title at the Paris Indoors) including the last four at the US Open where she was beaten in three tight sets by the eventual champion, Samantha Stosur. It was a great shame for her because of the weather that weekend, the match was shunted on to the Grandstand (the third show court at Flushing Meadows) so she was denied a semi-final on the grand stage of Arthur Ashe Stadium. Her family is of Polish descent (like Wozniacki) and her maternal grandparents own the Centrum Tennisowe Angie, a facility with four indoor courts and two outdoors in the town of Puszczykowo. Kerber made her WTA debut at Hasselt in October 2006.



SABINE LISICKI (GER)

Age 22 (22.09.1989)
Born Troisdorf, Germany
Live Bradenton, Florida
Height 5'10"
Weight 154lbs
Career-high ranking 12
Career titles 3
Plays Right-handed
Best Wimbledon SF 2011

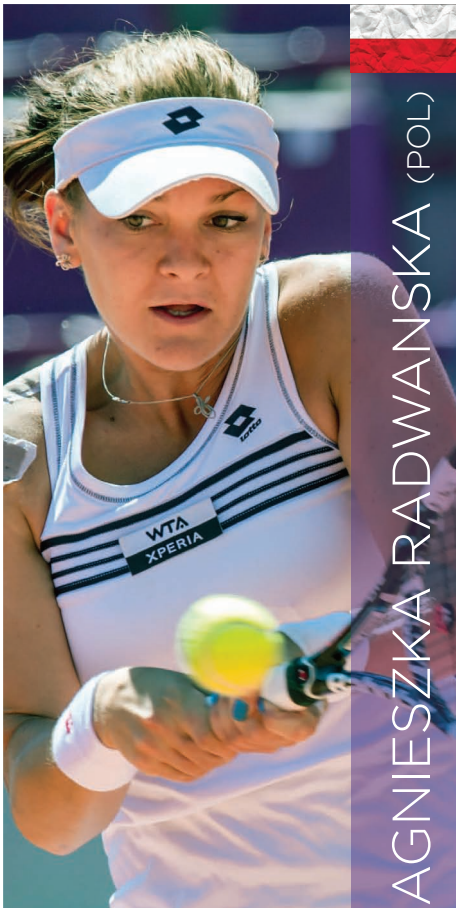
One of the most resplendent images from The Championships last year was that of Sabine Lisicki dropping to her knees on Centre Court after victory over Marion Bartoli in the quarter-finals cemented her place in her first Grand Slam semi. This was a remarkable testament to the powers of recovery of this extremely likeable German who missed five months of 2010 with a knee injury, which precipitated a drop down to No.179 in the rankings. She has gradually worked her way back up, calling on redoubtable powers and an excellent all-court game, and inspired by her father Richard, her coach. This year has also been tough, as an abdominal strain forced her retirement from her first tournament, to withdraw from the second and thus she was underprepared for the Australian Open. She has since fallen victim to a viral illness which sapped her of a lot of strength. She is seen as the shining light of the vast improvement in German women's tennis and with blonde hair and a powerful forehand, those who might wish they are seeing the reincarnation of Steffi Graf, are heaping extra doses of pressure on the shoulders of the 22-year-old. Hopefully, she can cope.



LI NA (CHN)

Age 30 (26.02.1982)
Born Wuhan, China
Lives Wuhan, China
Height 5'8"
Weight 143lbs
Career-high ranking 4
Career titles 5
Plays Right-handed
Best Wimbledon QF 2006, 10

She started playing badminton in her home city of Wuhan at the age of seven before deciding to take up tennis a couple of years later and now at the age of 30, she has become an iconic figure in her home nation. The only concern in China is that her victory in the French Open in 2011 was simply a flash in the pan. Best remembered for that success, her wonderfully pleasing personality and the stories she told about her husband/coach whose snoring kept her awake at night, Li Na is another who has discovered the riches of success late in her career and has had trouble building upon it. She also decided soon afterwards to split with the Dane Michael Mortensen who had coached her to Paris success, explaining: "It's like person in love. If you feel it's not right, not proper, you just separate. Only a person who's in it will be able to tell." Li became an icon of Chinese sport that day, the sponsorship deals piled in, her endorsement value soared and, as she is represented by the same man who manages Maria Sharapova, the deals were successfully concluded. Since winning that title at Roland Garros, her best result has been as the runner-up to Victoria Azarenka in Sydney this year. She also improved on first round losses at Indian Wells and Miami in 2010 and 2011 by reaching the quarter-finals of both. ➤



AGNIESZKA RADWANSKA (POL)

Age 23 (06.03.1989)
Born Krakow, Poland
Lives Krakow, Poland
Height 5'8"
Weight 123lbs
Career-high ranking 3
Career titles 10
Plays Right-handed
Best Wimbledon QF 2008, 09

It may be said to sum up Agnieszka Radwanska's search for recognition that she is perhaps best known for the head of her racket flying off in the quarter-finals of the 2011 Australian Open, which was replayed quite a few times on YouTube. Maybe we don't appreciate Radwanska's talent as much as we should, perhaps it is because her first name is one of the most difficult in the world to type properly the first time around that she does not get the publicity her ultra solid game deserves. Those comparisons to Martina Hingis may not have helped that much either. Radwanska, who passed 300 career singles wins in March en route to the title in Dubai, followed that up with success in the Sony Ericsson Open in Miami lifting her to a career-high No.4. She is tremendously powerful from the back of the court, but does not possess the one piece of devil that sets her apart from the rest, which may be why she has only been able to reach the quarter-final stage of the majors. However, she is surely Poland's best opportunity of producing a women's Grand Slam champion if she can just add a little magic to her game.



MARIA SHARAPOVA (RUS)

Age 25 (19.04.1987)
Born Nyugen, Russia
Lives Bradenton, Florida
Height 6'2"
Weight 130lbs
Career-high ranking 1
Career titles 27
Plays Right-handed
Best Wimbledon W 2004

Something akin to Andre Agassi's remarkable ranking recovery over a decade earlier, Maria Sharapova has spent the past three years building back her career from the rotator cuff surgery that might have seriously undermined the prospects of a less doughty competitor. Imagine having to piece together a service action once again and wonder how firmly a shoulder will hold up against the power hitting that is the bedrock of the women's game these days. Those who have questioned whether she would ever regain the Grand Slam winning knack – the US Open in 2006 and the Australian title in 2008 were the follow-ups to her remarkable breakthrough on the grass as a 17-year-old against Serena Williams – have seen her play three subsequent finals but she was unable quite to rise to these grandest occasions. She is still putting herself on the line, though, when she could quite easily depart the scene and live very happily on her fortune, thank you very much. The Russian marked herself out as a true legend of the game by becoming only the 11th woman to complete the quartet of major titles with her stunning passage to her first French Open title at Roland Garros last month, and with it, reclaim the world No.1 ranking.



SAMANTHA STOSUR (AUS)

Age 28 (30.03.1984)
Born Brisbane, Australia
Lives Gold Coast, Australia
Height 5'8"
Weight 143lbs
Career-high ranking 4
Career titles 3
Plays Right-handed
Best Wimbledon 3R, 2009

Who could possibly forget that wonderful night in New York when a shy girl from the Golf Coast became a Grand Slam champion for the first time? All muscular power and feverish intent, Stosur stayed strong as Serena Williams, her opponent, dissolved into a rage for being called for 'hindrance' and delivered a succession of stunning strokes to absolutely merit her breakthrough victory. As many others have found, it is a little easier to win your first Grand Slam title at the home of one of the other three Grand Slam nations. A former world No.1 doubles player, we should not forget that her career was almost over before it had really flowered, as a serious case of Lyme's disease kept her out of the game for seven months between 2008 and 2009 during which time her ranking tumbled to No.154. But she kept on plugging away and Flushing Meadows was the ultimate reward, especially as she had come so close in Paris in the spring of 2010. Unfortunately for Sam, she found it all too much on her home patch, going down in the first round in Brisbane and Sydney before the Australian Open for which she was the poster girl but was beaten on day one by Sorana Cristea of Romania. Never did a girl look quite as lost. She'll bounce back.



SERENA WILLIAMS (USA)

Age 30 (26.09.1981)
Born Saginaw, USA
Lives Palm Beach Gardens, USA
Height 5'9"
Weight 155lbs
Career-high ranking 1
Career titles 41
Plays Right-handed
Best Wimbledon W 2002, 03, 09, 10

As the Grand Slams are now the be-all-and-end-all of sustaining Serena Williams's interest in the sport of tennis, how she does at the All England Club this year (both for The Championships and Olympic Games) will likely determine how much longer she remains on the tour. Serena is 30 years old now, difficult to comprehend, I know, for she has been the most dominant personality in the sport over the past decade and strides on to the court as if she is the No.1, even if she may not attain that ranking level again. Because she has done so much, it is impossible to write Serena off. Her recent meltdowns in the US Open, over foot faults and hindrance calls have only served to enhance her very striking personality. That she has returned to a powerful position in the sport after undergoing life-saving surgery for a pulmonary embolism in 2011, merely adds to the Serena mystique. Reaching only the round of 16 at the Australian Open and the quarter-finals of this year's Sony Ericsson Open in Miami were not good enough for a player of her qualities, though, and you get the impression they have merely stiffened her resolve. "I just want to play the game I'm used to because that's what I do best," she said after the loss to Caroline Wozniacki in Miami. If she can, she is still to be feared.



CAROLINE WOZNIACKI (DEN)

Age 22 (11.07.1990)
Born Odense, Denmark
Lives Monte Carlo, Monaco
Height 5'10"
Weight 128lbs
Career-high ranking 1
Career titles 18
Plays Right-handed
Best Wimbledon R16 2009, 10, 11

With her defeat in the fourth round of the Australian Open in January, it was 20 Grand Slam tournaments without a title for the perennially delightful and apparently upbeat young girl from Denmark. This is not an easy situation with which to live, especially when you have been the world ranked No.1 player on the back of winning more than 60 matches on the tour for each of the past three years. No one can deny that Wozniacki is an excellent tennis player, it is trickier to persuade the shrewder judges that she can make the most significant breakthrough of her career. Her game is competent enough, based on a formidable double-handed backhand and an ability to wear down opponents by the sheer consistent level and depth of her ground-strokes. The forehand is a little less solid, which has compromised her opportunities on more than one occasion. Her one Grand Slam final appearance was at the 2009 US Open when she was cast in the role of party pooper, but was caught in the glare of Kim Clijsters' remarkable 'first' comeback. The driving force in her playing career is Piotr, her father who chose to go Dutch with Spaniard Ricardo Sanchez late last year, a team that lasted all of three months. She is the current girlfriend of the Northern Ireland champion golfer, Rory McIlroy.



VERA ZVONAREVA (RUS)

Age 27 (07.09.1984)
Born Moscow, Russia
Lives Moscow, Russia
Height 5'8"
Weight 132lbs
Career-high ranking 2
Career titles 12
Plays Right-handed
Best Wimbledon RU 2010

The second of Russia's top 10 duo - Vera Zvonareva would never contend to being quite as charismatic as Maria Sharapova - had been a bit of a no-hoper in the Grand Slam tournaments until 2010 came around. Then, from almost out of nowhere, she made it to both the Wimbledon and US Open finals. Despite enduring heavy losses to Serena Williams and Kim Clijsters respectively, which might have been shattering blows to her confidence, for the most part, she kept it all together for the rest of the year. Her 2011 was a confidence sapper, winning only two titles in the relative outposts of Doha and Baku. This year has, so far, been a terrible disappointment. She lost in the first round of Sydney to Svetlana Kuznetsova, the third round of the Australian Open to Ekaterina Makarova and then developed problems with her left hip, which forced her to retire in consecutive tournaments in Pattaya City and Doha and not even step up to the mark in Dubai. Worse was to come as, in her opening match in Miami in March, she lost to the Spanish qualifier, Garbine Muguruza Blanco, ranked No.208 in the world at the time. It is going to take something decidedly special for Vera to gather her forces and challenge at the very top of the game again.