

Martina pictured with her mum Jana at Wimbledon in 1979. Jana died in 2008 at the age of 75

“I always question authority”

It took a while, but one of Wimbledon’s greatest champions holds a special place in the affection of tennis fans everywhere. By **Simon Evans**

IT IS the afternoon of July 7, 1978 and, on the Centre Court at Wimbledon, the favourite, and world number one, Chris Evert is about to take on 21-year-old Martina Navratilova, a muscular, mousy-haired Czech who, just three years before, had defected to the United States, leaving behind her mother, sister and half-brother. For Martina it is the culmination of a childhood dream, of everything she has worked for, of everything she has sacrificed.

Martina Subertova was born on October 18, 1956 in Prague but, after her parents divorced when she was three and her mother remarried, she took her stepfather’s name of Navatil, adding the female suffix ‘ova’. Her father, a ski instructor, also remarried but took his own life when Martina was eight. Needless to say life was tough in Sixties Prague, especially after a 1968 uprising was brutally suppressed by the Russians, who promptly installed a rigidly authoritarian government.

Young Martina found escape in tennis and from the age of four would spend many hours just hitting a tennis ball against a cement wall, testing her reactions and developing the serve and volley style that would become her trademark.

Tennis was in her blood – Martina’s

grandmother had been a high-ranking tennis player in Czechoslovakia, and Martina soon followed in her footsteps by winning the country’s national tennis championship in 1972, at the age of 15.

A year later she made her debut on the US professional tour, even though she was still technically an amateur, and in 1974 was a member of the Federation Cup-winning Czech team.

But the more Martina played in the West, the more she realised her sporting dreams could not be realised if she stayed in

Czechoslovakia, where opportunities to play were limited and training facilities primitive. Life became increasingly intolerable for the free-spirited teenager, especially when the Czech tennis authorities openly censured her for mixing with Western tennis

players (she was already a close friend of Chris Evert, the pair having roomed together at a tournament in Paris).

So in 1975, despite the pain involved in leaving her family behind, and still aged only 18, Martina applied for political asylum in the United States.

It was not a political decision, she insisted, “I just realised that I would not be able to become the best player in the world if I was not allowed to play the important tournaments.” Martina initially

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Wimbledon 1979: Martina receives the women's singles trophy from the Duchess of Kent

struggled on the highly competitive women's tennis circuit but soon found a friend and mentor in Billie-Jean King, who would later become the first female athlete to be 'outed' as a lesbian.

At this time Martina regarded herself as bisexual, and, emboldened by her friend, told a magazine writer, in confidence, that she had been in a relationship with the American writer and feminist Rita Mae Brown.

The vilification she suffered when the article was published (against her wishes) reinforced Martina's feeling of being an outsider, something that never really left her despite all the success.

"I have always had a disdain for authority and stupid rules that make no sense, and I still do," she told *The Guardian* in 2010. "I always question authority – always have, always will."

Throughout her career Martina suffered the kind of lazy prejudice frequently aimed at the women's game. On the one hand it's said to be dull to watch, not physical enough, not powerful enough, but then when a player like Martina comes along, trading on her physical strength as well as instinctive skills she is condemned for 'not being feminine enough'.

Tennis fans can often be a

conservative bunch, with women still often subjected to the kind of comments about their appearance that would never be directed at men. With her androgynous appearance and ambiguous sexuality Martina perhaps suffered more than most.

"It was tough," she recalled. "If I complained about a line call, ooh they got on my case immediately. It didn't take much. Imagine them booing Federer or Nadal, or any guy really, if they complained? No way."

And so to the Wimbledon final of 1978. Martina and Chris Evert had become

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firm friends four years earlier, confiding in each other about boyfriends and their rivals on the tennis circuit.

"When I was a young girl, a long way from home, Chris and her mother (Colette) were always nice to me," Martina recalled. The two teenagers became doubles partners and won both the French Open and Wimbledon doubles titles until Evert called a halt, fearing that her friend was getting "too good a read" on her game.

Martina still regards that 1978

Wimbledon final as the most important match of her career, and it was a three set thriller. Chris, who had knocked out defending champion Virginia Wade in the semi-finals, cruised to a first set victory 6-2 before Martina triumphed in two closely contested sets, 6-4, 7-5.

That win gave Martina the belief that she could become the world number one and over the next 12 years she would claim another eight Wimbledon singles titles.

The friendship with Evert survived the ending of their doubles partnership and on-court rivalry and, if anything, it deepened over the years. Chris was one of the first to come to Martina's defence when she was outed as a lesbian, and in 1985 would ignore an ankle injury so she could be part of the US Federation Cup team accompanying Martina on her first visit back to Czechoslovakia since defecting, putting a consoling hand round her friend's shoulder as the band in the stadium played *Where Is My Home?*

It was a friendship, and rivalry, that did much to define Martina's life and career.

"We brought out the best in each other," Navratilova once said. "It's almost not right to say who's better. If you tried to make the perfect rivalry, we were it."

It was only as Martina entered the twilight of her career (and also showed herself to be a 'good sport' by famously singing along with Sir Cliff Richard in 1996 during a rain delay) that she was taken to the hearts of the Wimbledon faithful. She was always too much the outsider, too much the maverick to win them over entirely though; there was

never going to be a 'Martina hill'.

"I would have liked to be the 'home team', to have had the support Andy Murray gets, no matter what," she told the *Telegraph*. "I wanted it so badly in the early days, maybe that's why I didn't get it. It was hard. When I first won Wimbledon, I was not a Czech any more. I was not yet an American. I was stateless for six years. I didn't get any homecoming anywhere because I didn't have a country. I had no place to go."

There's also something deep-rooted



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Martina with her spouse Julia Lemigova

in the British psyche that says it's somehow a little too vulgar to win things, or at least show that you want to win. "In the Eighties, when I was winning so much, I was favourite, so people were cheering the underdog. I never got the cream until the Nineties, when I wasn't winning. I won people over eventually, for whatever reason, but it took a long time."

Wimbledon's Centre Court was certainly willing Martina on at the 1994 tournament when, at the age of 37, she was bidding to equal Billie-Jean King's record of 20 Wimbledon titles. She lost in three sets to Conchita Martinez and shortly after retired from the full-time

singles tour. Martina did however claim her 20th title in 2003, winning the mixed doubles with the Indian player Leander Paes. She was back at Wimbledon the following year when, at the age of 47 she was awarded a wild card, and overcame Catalina Castano, 23 years her junior, in the first round of the singles, going out of the tournament in the second round.

Two years later she made an emotional farewell to Wimbledon, just a month short of her 50th birthday. From being the perpetual outsider the Wimbledon faithful now welcomed Martina as if she was a homecoming

Martina Navratilova

queen, which in a sense she was. Widely regarded as perhaps the most outstanding women's tennis player of the past 50 years, Martina chalked up 167 top level singles title wins and 177 doubles titles. According to Chris Evert she was also responsible, through her aggressiveness and athleticism, for single-handedly revolutionizing the women's game. "She brought athleticism to a whole new level with her training techniques — particularly cross-training, the idea that you could go to the gym or play basketball to get in shape for tennis."

Four years after retiring from full-time tennis Martina faced perhaps her greatest test of all, announcing, in April 2010, that she was being treated for breast cancer.

She underwent successful surgery and radiotherapy and by the end of that year was climbing Mount Kilimanjaro

"I didn't have a country. I had no place to go"

to raise money for a children's sports charity. However, even the mighty Martina over-reached herself this time, and she was hospitalised after falling ill during the ascent.

Fully recovered from both health scares Martina proposed to her long-time partner Julia Lemigova, a Russian businesswoman and former model, and the couple were married in December 2014. Martina continues to be active as a tennis commentator and is also a passionate campaigner for charities supporting animal rights, underprivileged children and gay causes.

Perhaps her greatest venom, however, is reserved for communism, and the Soviet Union's iron grip on her homeland during Martina's formative years.

"Whenever people go into politics and they try to say that communism was a good thing, I say, 'Go ahead and live in a communist country then, if you think it's so great.'"