

SERVING FOR GAME, SET AND MATCH

Bradenton, Florida native Sunitha Rao says she is a perfectionist and expects a lot from herself but she can't afford to let herself put down when she makes a mistake, which is normal for a competitive game of tennis.

BY SUNIL SHARMA

I can't remember not playing tennis - says Sunitha Rao, who has been playing tennis since she was four years old. Over the years she has been on a roller coaster ride. She had been called the Indian Promise from USA when she visited Mumbai in 2002 besting the great Indian hope Sania Mirza, 6-3, 6-3. Presently, she is quite far behind Sania, though still ranked 23rd within the USA.

Vijay Amritraj too was once a great Indian hope. In fact his success in the 70's made tennis very popular in India. He is also the reason that Sunitha is playing tennis. Her dad, Manohar Rao, grew up in



Madras and like all sports fans of that time followed Vijay Amritraj. Manohar used to play soccer but had to give it up due to a knee surgery in college. He had dreams of one of his kids becoming an athlete and encouraged Sunitha to become a tennis player like Amritraj.

The journey to WTA tour wasn't without hard work. Tennis players start at a very young age especially the girls. Most girls start playing at the age of 4 or 5. Naturally, the parents very much influence the decisions of these girls. However, sooner or later kids have to embrace the idea themselves as Sunitha says, "You can take the horse to the water but can't make it drink – there is only so far a person will go with some one else's idea." It was her father's idea to start playing tennis at age four but now it is hers.

Born in New Jersey, Sunitha moved to Florida to train at age five. As a junior, she was one of the top ranked players and won a National title and reached the semifinals of the Australian Open Junior Championship. In 2003, she reached the quarterfinals of Wimbledon Juniors event. 2004 was her best year when she had a 42-29 record in singles.

There was a time when there weren't many top ranked Indian women tennis players. Nirupama Mankad, wife of cricketer Ashok Mankad carried the torch for a long time. Later Nirupama Sanjeev

Height	5'7" (1.70 m)
Date of Birth	Sunday October 27, 1985
Birthplace	Jersey City, NJ, USA
Plays	Right Handed (Two-Handed Backhand)
Residence	Bradenton, FL, USA
Turned Pro	2004
Singles W/L	122-108 ((2/13/06)
Doubles W/L	38-47 (2/13/06)
Carcer Winning	\$124,194 (2/13/06)
Agent	ITMS Sports, www.itmssports.com info@itmssports.com
Racquet	Babolat
Clothing	Pony International
Shoes	Pony International

reached a ranking of 134, highest for an Indian woman till date. However the last few years have seen the emergence of many talented Indian girls of high caliber.

These young teenagers and twenty-something are changing the image of women's tennis in India. Sania Mirza's on court exploits and off-court comments have generated tremendous interest in India making tennis very popular again. Apart from Sania and Sunitha other Indian girls doing well on the WTA Tour include 22 year old Shikha Uberoi currently ranked 161 and her sister, 19 year old Neha, ranked 341.

Interestingly Sunitha has beaten all Indian players that she has played in a tournament. She beat Kavitha Krishnamurthy at Mahwah, NJ in 2000, Sania in Mumbai in 2002, Megha Vakaria in Hyderabad in 2003, Shikha in Hobart, Australia in 2005 and Neha in Kolkata in 2005.

Sunitha's mother was brought up in Bangalore and her father was born in Mangalore so naturally she likes to play in India too, though she could not go for the Bangalore Open held in February 2006. The last time she played in India was in the Sunfeast open in Kolkata in September 2005. It was one of the biggest tennis tournaments in India. Prize money of \$175,000 drew eleven of top 100 WTA players including Anastasia Myskina, Sania Mirza and Karolina Sprem.

Five players of Indian origin were in the draw – Sania, Sunitha, Shikha, Neha and Ankita Bhambri. Naturally the spot light was on them. "Talk about pressure", comments Sunitha who played Neha in the first round. Playing Neha in front of an Indian crowd was high-pressure, though she beat Neha. However, the Indians didn't do well. Ankita and Neha lost in the 1st round, Sunitha and 3rd seed Sania lost in the 2nd and Shikha lost in the quarter finals. In doubles unseeded Neha and Shikha lost the finals to the top seed Russians Myskina and Elena Likhovtseva.

Sunitha is an enthusiastic person bubbling with excitement who didn't mind giving an interview standing in freezing temperatures outside Memphis airport late one evening. She was very apologetic for missing the interview at an earlier agreed upon time even though it was because of a twelve hour delay at Ottawa airport due to a snowstorm for the flight to Memphis.

Sunitha's trip to Saguenay, Canada wasn't a happy one. She retired hurt from her first round match with Danielle Brown due to sprained abdomen muscles and had to skip the next tournament in Memphis. Nevertheless she went to Memphis to meet with WTA trainers.

The Sony Ericsson WTA Tour is the top professional tennis circuit for women. More than 1,400 players from 75 nations participate in it. In 2006 it will have 63



events in 35 countries with over \$60 million in prize money. It has some of the best tennis trainers. Since Sunitha could not play in Memphis she decided to make use of her lay-off by getting trainers to evaluate her and give her a strength training program to help her rehab.

Strength training is something that she has been paying extra attention to. One of her objectives is to get bigger and stronger. The women's tennis has become a power game. The girls are hitting the ball harder and deeper and the bar is continuously being raised. Sunitha's game is fast paced too and when she played in Mumbai in 2002, the scribes noted that her fast-paced, hard-hitting game was a notch above other Indian players. However, playing with the top players is still few notches higher, which means she needs to hit the ball harder and become stronger.

"I think I can do a lot better than I have", she says, when asked to comment on her career. There is a strong sense of determination in her voice when she says that. She also has a plan to make it happen. She has made some recent changes that are making her stronger, faster and more positive. She has made mental changes regarding how she approaches the game.

By her own admission, Sunitha is a perfectionist – a breed that typically expects a lot from itself. Perfectionists come down hard on themselves when they make a mistake, but tennis is a game where one does make mistakes. Now her approach to the game is much more realistic. She is also trying to become more aggressive and use her serve as a weapon. She is coming to net more often as she volleys very well and

doesn't lose many points when she does it.

Life on the tour could be hectic too. Sunitha usually travels with some other girls and a coach. She and her doubles partner share the coach with other girls. Coaching, training and traveling to play in tour-

reason that prevented Sunitha from going to Bangalore. Securing sponsorships and endorsements are very important for up and coming players because the talent can take you only so far and then you have pay for the airfare, room and board.



naments involve big expenses too. ITMS, the agency that represents Sunitha puts this cost to be in the neighborhood of \$150,000. Sunitha says that she is in control of her career and does not depend upon her parents, who run a liquor store business in Florida and can't travel much with her. For the records, she says that she is not allowed near those stores.

For most players on the Tour the winnings normally do not always cover all expenses. Shortages of funds sometimes limit where they can play – a

There are better things happening in her career too. In 2004, Pony International, a sports performance brand owned by fellow Indian American Killick Datta, signed up a three year deal with Sunitha and started to outfit her with footwear, apparel and accessories. The deal has helped her in many ways including financial and the fact that now she gets to wear clothes and footwear specially made for her.

In 2003, ITMS Sports, a German sports marketing agency, signed up with

Sunitha. Started by New Yorker George Pascal, ITMS is a sports and event marketing firm that represents athletes and does sports event management. Apart from Sunitha, it represents 22nd ranked Anna-Lena Groenefeld of Germany, 42nd ranked Anna Smashnova of Israel and Aleksandra Wozniak of Canada.

Patrick Fischer of ITMS says that they sign up athletes who have the ability to compete at the highest level and are marketable. Sunitha fits both these criteria. "Sunitha has great looks to go along with her personality and a strong head on her shoulder. This image cuts across all societies and towns, so she can reach out effectively to both the youth and to women", says Pascal.

The competition to sign up Sunitha was stiff and ITMS believes that her appeal to sponsors and advertisers is huge. Racquet maker Babolat recently renewed its contract with Sunitha. She is in company with players like Andy Roddick, Kim Clijsters and Rafael Nadal, who also use Babolat. Her newest sponsor is a non-tennis equipment maker – Ativas Development Group out of Tampa.

All the traveling to different locations, getting sponsorships and endorsements and playing tennis might seem like lot of fun to people, but it is like any other job. After 3 hours of practice in the morning, 2 hours in the afternoon and weight training in the evening, she doesn't have much time to do anything else. As she says, "When I am in training it's an eight-hour day job and by the time I am done I don't have time to do anything else, I cook, I eat and rest. I am quite exhausted. I have no other life." ■