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Insight



David Minton reports from the Balkans, where a production line is producing tennis stars in great numbers despite a lack of basic infrastructure

A Serb and volley game

The shock waves from the explosion made everyone jump, and our thoughts immediately turned to the unstable nature of the region. On the news that evening we heard the epicentre of the blast was around 80 miles away and rescue teams had been dispatched to Gerdec, near the Albanian capital Tirana. Hundreds had been injured and many killed at the ammunition dump stockpiled during the communist past.

It was the weekend before Easter and I was on a hillside overlooking Skopje, capital of Macedonia, which is one of four countries I visited in the former Yugoslavia. Macedonia, like Kosovo, Croatia and Serbia, are all interested in expanding all forms of sports tourism (see *Leisure Report* December 2007) and taking advantage of their low-cost economy compared to the relatively expensive Euro zone.

Some of these countries are sending shock waves through the sporting world, and none more so than their tennis players. Serbia has a total population of just 10 million, yet its tennis players, at the time of writing, are ranked numbers 2 and 3 in the WTA Tour singles ranking (for women) and number 3 in the ATP rankings for men. So how come this off-the-radar country has emerged as a superpower on the tennis circuit?

During the horrors of the ethnic cleansing and civil war that tore up Serbia in the 1990's, and while the NATO bombs were landing on Belgrade, these three champions along with lots of other youngsters, were learning the game. It was against this backdrop and the harsh reality of training in a country where facilities were, and still are, meagre, that creative thinking created something from nothing. The Belgrade Athletics Club at this time could not afford to heat the water for the Olympic-size swimming pool, or repair the leak, so officials decided to have it drained and to lay a carpet. That was where the current world number two, Ana Ivanovic, got her first taste for indoor tennis. Practising there made her game lethal as the walls of the pool were just 18 inches from the sidelines of the court on the one side and inches away from the second court on the other. So when you see her at Wimbledon playing the now famous down-the-line shot you'll know where it comes from: a disused swimming pool where cross court play was impossible.

At Wimbledon last year Ana had reached the single-year 50-win mark faster than any woman since Chris Evert in 1974. At the same time, the current

number three, Jelena Jankovic went on to win the mixed doubles with Jamie Murray. Could Ana and Jelena give us an all-Serbian Wimbledon women's final this year? These 'Vitches' as they are known on the circuit, are not the only tennis exports to defy demographic and statistical gravity.

Serbia produces more top 1,000 women tennis players per total population than any country except one: its neighbour, Croatia, which generates twice as many players. Serbia, with a total population of 10m, currently has 12 women in the top 1,000, while its neighbour Croatia, with only 5m total population, has 24 women in the top 1,000. If the Lawn Tennis Association (LTA) could produce women tennis players at the same rate as Croatia we would have 283 in the top 1000, instead of 30.

With so many good players already in the top 1,000 and lots more coming up through the ranks it's no wonder these two countries win tournaments. Croatia won the Davis Cup in 2005, when 134 nations entered the competition, and in the current ITF rankings Croatia are ranked five, Serbia are 18th and GB are 21st.

The sacrifices both Serbian and Croatian families make for their children's tennis lessons verge on the fanatical, with stories of homes being sold to finance the coaching, as many parents see tennis as a way out of poverty. It's true that some parents have seen a payback on their 'investment' in under five years and for the few, in less than two years, but for many of the impoverished Serbs it's not so easy. The average salaries are around US\$700 (£350) a month while tennis lessons cost \$20-30 a time and membership of a sports club with good tennis facilities can be as much as \$50-60 a month. The Serbian Tennis Federation (STF) hired a psychologist to write a paper which is now photocopied and handed out to all, which warns parents that not every child will become a tennis superstar and not every child can be a winner.

Yet tennis is now challenging football, basketball and water polo as the top sport in the country and the STF keep seeing a year-on-year increase in participation of around 40%, with similar take up levels experienced in Croatia. The Belgrade Arena, which finally opened in 2004, now sells out to a capacity audience of 20,000 to watch matches in the Davis Cup. On the back of all this interest the STF have persuaded the politicians to invest. A new national tennis centre is planned and tennis will be introduced in schools for the first time. All of this

will help establish an infrastructure to grow the sport that in turn boosts the country's image around the world.

Compare the attitude I found in the Balkans to that found in the British press on my return. *'The world's worst tennis pro finally wins a match'* was the headline generated by the British tennis pro Robert Dee who took two years, playing 108 sets in 54 tournaments, before winning a match. Should the LTA send Dee to the Newcastle Road Baths, now drained and closed, for re-skilling? Marcus Willis, a 17-year-old spoilt brat who had everything to play for should definitely be sent to Newcastle. Willis was sent home from the Australian Open in January this year for missing the bus, disappearing for a few hours, turning up late for training and leaving his rackets behind. I don't know if his parents gave him a bollocking but Roger Draper did.

Draper, the LTA chief executive, has had enough of bad attitudes, and turned ruthless. The once cosseted, cash-rich and spoilt among the most promising of the LTA players are being jettisoned, in favour of the up and coming more focused, more dedicated talented youngsters who really want to play and win. British tennis now has a proper system of support in place to make the most of their talents. The LTA have 20 full time 'professional' tennis players aged between nine and 14 years living at the National Tennis Centre. Identified from the Talent ID Programme the LTA are particularly excited about the 14 year olds and under. At 6ft 2in, George Morgan has some physical advantages for a 14 year old that he used to great effect in winning the Orange Bowl in Florida. This is the unofficial world championship for juniors. It was a tremendous achievement by Morgan who as the 17th seed was not regarded as one of the favourites. In 2005 some of our young girls performed well too, like Jennifer Ren, then only 13 years old, who came third at the Orange Bowl. Ren was also named as Female Junior Player of the Year in 2007.

Following the move to the impressive LTA National Tennis Centre, Draper has now put some of the greatest coaching talent and experienced mentors to work, nurturing this potential. Draper will remain ruthless until he delivers, and with a glint in his eye he shows me a list of the 30 plus swimming pools that closed in GB over 2007/08, just in case.

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