ACCOMPANIED by a great whooshing sound and a blast of frigid rocky mountain air, Monica Seles swirled through the revolving doors of the Marriott City Center Hotel in Denver and came in from the night. The blond highlights in her hair gleamed in the bright lights of the warm lobby and her customarily pale face was ruddy. She was dressed in a top the color of desert sand with matching ultra-suede slacks in a warm earth tone. Her shoes were stylish but sensible mauve flats. She had just come from a cocktail party preceding an exhibition match she would play the following day. It was odd to see Seles, the 29-year-old winner of nine Grand Slam titles and almost $15 million in prize money, with her hair down.

For years she has resolutely put it up on court in some tightly wound variation of an all-business bun. Here, though, Seles’ curly, shoulder-length brown and blond locks framed her oval face, giving her a Pre-Raphaelite look. But instead of tranquillity, she projected a much more contemporary — distinctly Monica-esque — sense of urgency.

This has always been a woman in a hurry, a run-on sentence fleeing the...
inevitable period. Soon I was pushing back the door to the Marriott’s Homestead conference room, which had been reserved for us.

Regarding the long mahogany table and leather executive armchairs, Seles joked, “We can sit at far ends like two big shots.” We had barely pulled the chairs close, and Seles hadn’t yet opened the first of the four bottles of water she would drink, when she declared what the first item on the agenda in our 90-minute conversation would be: “The retirement thing.” Then, in her signature stream-of-consciousness style, she made an impassioned plea for why we should avoid a subject that people recently seemed fixated on. “I don’t have a timetable to stop playing, and I don’t put conditions on it. I still love playing, and I’ll keep playing as long as that’s true.” I assured Seles that we hadn’t come to bury her, but to honour her — to make her the subject of the TENNIS Interview in the year that will mark the 10th anniversary of that chilly, sombre day, April 30, 1993, when a lunatic plunged a knife into her back while she sat through a changeover during a match in Hamburg, Germany.

At that point, Seles was still a teenager. She had won eight Grand Slam events and more titles at a younger age than any woman in history. And while she has won only one more major since returning to the tour in the summer of 1995, she has become one of the most compelling and sympathetic figures in sports.

Here then is her story, in her words, told in the manner we’ve come to recognise: guarded, breathless, wonder-filled, private, ebullient, cautious, philosophical, sincere, and ever so slightly insecure. Perhaps you would be, too, in her shoes.

Ten years ago, you were stabbed on a tennis court in Hamburg, Germany. The knife left a small scar on your back — where else did it leave a mark?

On my record, because it took away some of the best years of my tennis career, that’s for sure. I don’t think it left many others. To tell the truth, it’s still very strange to me. I’m the only person in sports that this ever happened to.

But I don’t want to revisit Hamburg in my head. It was not a happy thing, nor was it a happy time. And then, just a year before I came back, my father (Karolj) was diagnosed with prostate cancer, then stomach cancer (he died of the disease in 1998).

The attack also seemed to make me more sympathetic to the public. The incident reached a lot of people who never cared about tennis. During my comeback, it was like, “This is that poor girl who got stabbed and now she’s coming back — how wonderful is that?” But I have no idea what nerve I hit or why I hit it. And it’s not something I like to think about or influence.

I just want people to like me for who I am, for the qualities that my parents (Seles’ mother, Ester, now lives with Monica in Sarasota, Florida) instilled in me. I’m very proud of that, very proud of them. Hopefully, when I get married I can pass those qualities on to my kids. That’s what really matters to me, and beyond that I don’t want to do anything to make people like me more or less.
But the other thing is, I really love the game. I mean, I really love tennis. And that’s helped me through all of the struggles, it saved me from being forever sad.

At first glance, you’re right out of that cliché of prodigy, a la Jennifer Capriati or Venus Williams — groomed from birth for greatness by ambitious parents. Is that accurate?

In some ways it was very scary for me how well my parents handled it all. My dad wasn’t even thinking about me being a player. He always took things one step at a time and that aspect of his personality rubbed off on me.

My great stroke of luck was finding tennis as early as I did, and it really was by pure luck because my brother, Zoltan (now 37), was the player, the talent in the family. And I’m totally not kidding about that. He was an extremely promising junior, part of the same generation as Boris (Becker) and Stefan (Edberg). My dad wanted Zoltan to be the player, so when I bothered them to go to the courts my father just shrugged, “Oh sure, you can come on along with us.”

But if Zoltan had the talent, I had the work ethic. The experience taught me that if I ever had a child to coach, in the long term I would take the one with the work ethic over the one with talent. I saw firsthand in Zoltan that talent will take you only so far. But you can’t force it — Zoltan made his choice. Now he lives quietly and I respect his privacy. He doesn’t want to be known as my brother. He doesn’t want to be in my limelight.

Was it unusual for you, a girl, to be so interested?

Well, I was growing up in Yugoslavia at a time when there was no female athletes to look up to, except Mima (Jausovec). But also, tennis was the sport where you dressed in whites, the wealthy sport. In my hometown (Novi Sad) we had four tennis courts and zero indoor courts. I didn’t even set foot on a real tennis court until I was 7. I grew up playing in a parking lot, right by the house.

Describe those circumstances — how did you get started?
We lived in an apartment complex. My father was a professional cartoonist. Our family was close, and sports were important. My father had been a triple-jump track athlete, and he had a lifelong interest in sports.

I started tennis just hitting at the wall of the apartment house from the parking lot. Every day, from 6-45 a.m. until 7-15 and school time, I hit on that wall. I was always thankful that the people living in the apartment on the other side of that wall never complained. I mean that.

When we built our home in Florida much later, the only thing I really cared about was that it have a huge wall to hit against. To this day, at tournaments I’m most happy if there’s a back-board wall. People make fun of me about that — you can ask (US Fed Cup captain) Billie Jean King. Now, when we select a site, she always asks, “Is there a wall there for Monica?”

For me, the wall is the safety net. I started playing on one. It’s still the tennis time that I love the most. I’m by myself and I can put on my music. You can’t do that in a tournament. Plus, the ball always comes back. And no one else is talking at the other end, distracting you. The wall is the best.

- Surely, though, there are other components in your success besides the work ethic?
  
  Who knows what they are? Certain stuff is just given. I know I didn’t “work” on things in my mind or my personality. I don’t overanalyse things. I just go with how it is. I’m the same way in tennis — I do the best I can, and I do things the same way in a match as I do in practice. I wouldn’t get too psychological. I went with my dad and Zoltan because I loved tennis.

Still it was great to be with Dad because he would draw cartoon characters on the balls and put out targets to hit. He knew how to make tennis fun. But my interest in the game definitely created some conflicts and disagreements in my family. My mom didn’t think I should be a tennis player. We would go shopping and she would tell me that I should be doing more girl stuff, hanging out with my friends, things like that. My dad would say, “Well, if Monica wants to be there practicing for four or five hours a day, that’s her choice.”

Ultimately, my parents let me decide. In fact, I’m very thankful that they let me decide on just about everything, including hitting with two hands on both sides. I can’t even remember how many people wanted my dad to change that, and at all stages in my career, too, right until I became number one. But even when I was very young, he always just said, “If Monica wants to change it, she will. It’s her choice.”

- Are families more alike than different, or do they operate in really mysterious, unpredictable ways?
  
  I think they’re really different and I think I really lucked out with my parents. Everyone always had individual freedom to decide. My parents always gave me information and advice, but I always decided for myself. I learned some things the hard way, but I appreciate it because I have no regrets. I never ask, “What if?” I don’t have issues with my family at all, unlike a lot of my friends.

- Your father was in the limelight with you: what’s your mother like behind the pleasant visage she has at tournaments?
  
  She’s always been the backbone of the family. I seem to be a mix — very outgoing at times like my father, also quiet like my mother. In the beginning, Mom was the worried, specifically about the pressure. She’d say, “All this travel, all this competition. You’re just a little girl, what’s this thing going to do to you?”

She still comes to the U.S. Open and the California tournaments, but she’s tired of hanging around locker rooms, waiting for me. She’s done it for so long. So she does her own life now. She stays behind the scenes, with her animals. We have a mini-kennel at home. My mom baby-sits two other dogs and pampers them just like our own, Ariel (a Yorkshire terrier). I mean, she boils chicken for Ariel! It’s just non-stop love. So when we heard that Lindsay (Davenport) named one of her rottweilers Zoltan, we got a kick out of that.

- You grew up as part of an ethnic minority in Yugoslavia, a nation that no longer exists, and at various times you’ve had to travel under assumed names, fearing politically motivated violence. What is your “official” identity?
  
  I wouldn’t want to revisit the problems caused by ethnic issues. My background is that I’m Hungarian — it’s the language I speak with my mom and brother.

But really, I see myself as international. I still have friends I speak Yugoslavian (sic) with, and I have my entire American life. So I guess I’m a combination of those three things.

It was very difficult coming to America, leaving behind my friends. And then to see everything that happened in the next few years (the breakup of Yugoslavia and ensuing wars) — it all left an imprint on me that will stay, but I don’t like to talk about it.

I’ve been back to the place I grew up and still have friends and family there. I’ll spend much more time there once I stop playing, when it’ll be easier.

- Do you believe in fate?
  
  I don’t want to answer that. Let’s say it goes too much into how I think, and I don’t like the reader knowing that. I’m a private person and I’ve gone to extensive lengths to keep it that way. And I don’t have to answer, right? That’s one of the
things that’s so great about America.

- Coming to the U.S., to the Bolletieri Academy, represented an entirely different way of life. Was it a difficult transition?

Anytime you leave home at that young stage is very, very hard. You’re being shaped as a person, and all of a sudden everything changes — language is a nightmare, the school system is entirely different... On the other hand, you see the opportunity. For me, it was simple: the chance to play tennis in the winter. Imagine that!

Zoltan and I came out on kind of a trial, for six months, when I was 12. That was really hard because we had never been away from our parents that long. It was one of the worst times in my life because every night I just wanted to go home. (Seles’ parents settled in Florida when Monica was 13.)

We stayed in town, just outside the Academy, in a rented apartment. We had no adult supervision, no curfew, no nothing. Actually, I have zero memories about it except that I was learning so much in school (the Bradenton Academy) and playing tennis so much that I was dead tired all the time.

We would hit in the morning, go to school from 1-00 p.m. until 3-00, hit again, study, maybe do the gym or something. I remember I couldn’t wait until it was Sunday.

- Some of Nick’s protégés, including Jim Courier and Andre Agassi, have gone through ups and downs with Nick. What was your relationship with him like?

Andre had a different relationship with Nick than I did because by then Andre was doing great and Nick spent a lot of time travelling with him. Nick spent time on the court with me, but that was it. Things got confusion because people kept saying Nick was my coach, but the only person who gets that credit — maybe I’m being biased here — is my dad.

When I first went to the Academy, my game went down. I was losing matches 6-0, 6-0 to girls like Carrie Cunningham who I had beaten before. Nick was there on court a lot, but the one who really understood my game, and who I had the rapport with, was my dad. Nick and his staff took good care of me. Nick loves this game, he’s given his life to it. And that’s wonderful.

- What were your father’s great technical assets as a coach?

He studied the game. I hate to watch tapes, but he would just drag me. It was great when I got to be good, I could just say, “I don’t have to watch any more tapes!” My father would study my opponents, study me, and he liked using video. He didn’t play very well, but he could feed (balls) great, and his work ethic was amazing.

To this day, whenever I have a tough day or long workout I think, “Shoot, dad was 55 or 60 and he would outlast me on the court.” Sometimes, after hitting 100 serves, you’re like, “Oh, my shoulder’s sore, that’s enough.” Not him. He would hit 500 balls.

He taught me all about the angles — I shouldn’t really go into this while I’m still playing — and he would teach me all kinds of strategy. He also was into working on physical fitness and I should have listened more through my career. I really did not want to do fitness.

I argued with him about that, and other things, too. We argued a lot. But we cooled off fast because we had similar personalities. We would come in and my mother would say, “You just had this big argument, you were both like ‘Arrrrggghh’ and now you’re just fine?” And we were. That’s what was cool, and unusual.

Maybe that’s why to this day I don’t stay mad that long. Even if someone really screws me up, after a little while I’m like, “Yeah, whatever.”

- Even by accelerated “prodigy” standards, you rocketed to the top and were virtually unbeatable by 1992. What was the tennis player of that era like, and what was it like to have that aura?

You know, I don’t like to look back too much, not while I’m playing, anyway. It’s too scary. But the consistency I had — to lose just one or two matches in a whole year — that was pretty cool. But I worked very hard for it, and I was totally focused. Winning tennis matches was my life, and to be honest everything fell just the right way for me in that period. It was my life.

But this idea out there that I didn’t think I could lose, that I just walked out there full of confidence, that’s inaccurate. I had the same mental stuff then I have now. I thought before every match: I’m going to lose. It was even worse when I went a few months just winning and then lost a match. It was like, “Oh my God! What’s going to happen now?”

I’ve always said that I don’t really enjoy the competing part. I always found it very difficult to go out and really want to kill that other person. In that sense, my persona on the court is probably the opposite of how I am in life. Off the court, I’m not competitive at all — you can ask anyone. Games, celebrity tennis, I couldn’t care less. It’s only on the court, in an official match, that the competitor comes out.

- Who do you really admire in tennis, male or female?

I always said this: Suzanne Len-
Seles with a kid inflicted by cancer. — Pic. GAMMA

glen and Maureen Connolly. Each one did very different things for the game. But the big influence on me were Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova. I had a poster of Martina over my bed as a little girl. Of course, my choices were limited because we could only get one magazine, and we had to get it from Italy. Billie Jean I only came to know through Fed Cup as my captain since 1996, and now I realise the magnitude of what that woman has done.

Are there signature Monica Seles’ tennis performances in your memory bank?

You know, in Rome, 1990. I beat Martina (Navratilova) like one and one. That was one of my best matches ever, in that I couldn’t miss a ball. The five-set final in the Virginia Slams Championships against Gabby (Gabriela Sabatini) at Madison Square Garden, that stands out. And for sure when I beat Steffi (Graf) to win my first Grand Slam. But only because it was my first major.

When I came back, at Toronto in 1995, that first match against Kim Po was tough. I hadn’t played in a long time, the tour was different, I was so nervous. I remember that dogfight I had with Jennifer (Capriati) at the ’91 U.S. Open. There were times in that match when even I just closed my eyes for a moment and thought, “Wow, this is cool. OK, back to it.”

You can’t afford to do that, to enjoy it, as a player. The game goes too fast. You have to banish everything else from your mind. But at times, you can’t help it.

What were the pluses and minuses of growing up in the public eye?

The big plus is that you get experiences and meet people like most people don’t. The minus is that you can get a big head if you’re not careful. You can get caught up in how wonderful you are, all that stuff. It’s hard sometimes in that situation to know who your friends are, who you can trust.

So you need to know what you want because tennis is a tough industry, a non-stop industry. You don’t get to pause, rest, or reflect too much. But the way of life can give you great discipline, and that’s the key to whatever you do. Tennis taught me that when I give my word, it’s a real commitment and I have to keep it.

At the height of your power, before the incident in Hamburg, you were variously described as a “Madonna wannabe” and a capricious “mystery girl” wrapping tennis around her finger. Was the perception accurate?

A few things happened all at once, it was weird.

I skipped that Wimbledon (in ’91, Seles pulled out expectedly without explaining that she had shin splints). The press made a huge issue out of it, and for the first time I experienced their power. It was a huge controversy and the rumours and accusations were flying. They said I thought I was bigger than the game. I wanted to be a starlet and not a tennis player, my hitting partner had made me pregnant. Some of that was really hurtful.

When I made my comeback (at an exhibition in Mahwah, New Jersey) a few weeks later, I was totally unprepared for the circus-like atmosphere. My mom always said I lacked self-confidence, maybe she’s right. It was a little naïve of me, for sure, not to see that coming. It made me realise how big I was in the public eye.

In perspective, I was a 16-year-old on top of the tennis world. I liked fashion and I was outgoing, it was quite a mixture. Also, I would say stuff like, “I’m going to get a Lamborghini.” You know, it was kind of fantasy. I never really wanted one, I just maybe saw one and thought it’d be cool to have one so I said it.

Also, my tennis was so good but there was no crazy father, no controversial boyfriend.

Everything was very smooth, very private. The only thing out there was that I was colouring my hair, and I wanted a Lamborghini. The only other player I’ve seen going through anything like that has been Anna (Kournikova), and she’s different from me.

I never got into playing that game or doing things for the press. But I did enjoy some of it. If I was in Milan and I happened to say I wanted to go to a fashion show, boom, the next thing they’d call up Armani and you’re at the fashion show. As a kid, you think, “Oh wow!”

It’s crazy, you meet people and they give you their telephone number right away and say they’ll do anything for you. When you’re that young and impressionable, everything goes fast. Everybody wants you. And it’s fun. Why not?

So at times when I regret not having been a “normal” teenager who went to the prom, I remind myself that at that age I could go to any concert and meet the musicians afterward. And that was just because I was Monica Seles.

What role does music play in your life?

It’s huge, I love music. My favourite is Motown, all the songs that came out of Detroit. I would have loved to be a singer — if only I had a voice.

What did it tell you about your occupation and your peers when, after the stabbing, Gabriela Sabatini was the only player who voted to...
freeze and hold your top ranking?

It made me realise tennis is a business. You have no friends. The other players, they’re just waiting to take away your number-one spot, in any way, shape, or form they can. That’s what they did. But I’m not bitter.

What Gabby did affected me so much. Everything comes and goes, there’s always going to be a new number one, or someone making more in a new contract. But what you are at you core, the most important thing about you, that doesn’t change. Gabby was someone who forgot fame, career, money, everything else, and just cared about me as a person. It took strength and character for her to do what she did. It couldn’t have been easy.

● It was a deranged fan of Steffi Graf who stabbed you, yet you felt Graf was somewhat callous to the situation. Have you forgiven her?

I don’t want to go back into that. Her tennis career has been amazing. What can I say there? We’re always going to be linked together because of that incident. Her career changed because of it, and mine changed because of it. We went on different paths since that date. But the relationship didn’t really end in ruins. When I see her, we speak, even if we don’t talk that deep. I’m happy to see her happy with Andre and their baby.

● What world figures, artistic or otherwise, would you most like to know?

Nelson Mandela and, before she passed away, Mother Teresa… also Audrey Hepburn. U2. I have a lot of respect for the band because they truly give back. Athletes, musicians, we’re so lucky. We make so much, yet so many people in important jobs are struggling. It’s just a really weird system.

● How important is the money, both as motivator and as something to have?

At this stage, money’s not that important. But in the beginning, I always worried about financial security. We had a nice upper-middleclass life in Yugoslavia. Then, coming to America, it was a night and day difference. The currency, the standard of living, it was so much more expensive. I just wanted to make sure that after risking everything to come here my parents wouldn’t have to worry about money.

The hardship motivates. Your want to make sure you’re safe. You hear stories like my grandparents told, about having everything taken away, and you can get paranoid. Nobody is going to come take it away here, although I guess you never know for sure.

I was never the person to spend what I earned. I do some of my own investments. I take a small percentage of my assets and manage them, learning. But mostly, my managers (IMG) do it.

Ideally, if you ever have children you want them not to have to worry about the money, but I don’t believe in giving anyone a silver spoon. At a certain level, money can ruin things. I’m just very happy not thinking about it too much. I have the same friends, the same house, even the same car. I still drive a 1992 Ford Explorer. See what I mean when I say I never really wanted the Lamborghini?

● For all of your longevity, you never quite got back to the form of 1993. Why not?

I’ve thought about that more than once. The toughest thing for me was that I did very well coming back in 1995 and in the beginning of ’96. For someone to put down the racquet for two and a half years — I didn’t do a thing, not one hit, not one run — and in just one month return to the top, that was great. But it also was an invitation to injury.

After I won the Australian Open in ’96, I had a pretty serious shoulder injury. I didn’t even start practicing until just two weeks before Roland Garros, and I had probably my worst French Open (Seles lost in the quarterfinals to Jana Novotna). Later in the year I lost in the final of the U.S. Open, and then I injured a foot. I did it running, because, I was trying to lose weight. Then, on Christmas Day, my father was diagnosed with cancer of the stomach.

The next two years were very hard, on my mind, not on tennis. What we went through as a family was tough enough and who knows…. I’m not saying that if my dad were alive today. I’d be number one, but he was the glue to my tennis. I know I would have had a better career if he were there the whole time.

The thing is, he was just 64 when he died. And yeah, he was my dad. But he was my best friend, too, and my coach. We had an extremely close relationship, but separate lives. He filled so many roles in my life that when I look back I’m amazed at how well I did when he was ill. And I’m just proud that I’ve come out of it. It didn’t put me into heavy depression or stuff like that.

The thing is, you need that one person. You look at Jennifer, Venus and Serena. Martina (Hingis). All of
them have that one person who just is there, and it doesn’t have to be the greatest person on earth as long as you know they want what’s best for you. And you can’t buy that kind of trust, not from the most talented coach.

For me, that person, my father, was taken at a very young age for both of us.

What’s been the hardest part of keeping up your standard of play?

My coaching situation. My dad died when I was 24, with a lot of years left. I don’t really measure anyone else against my father, that wouldn’t be fair to the other coach. But I miss the continuity and the work ethic. It’s just different with someone you’ve had from the beginning. I’ve told Martina (Hingis), “You’re so lucky to have your mom, that’s special.” Right now I don’t even have a coach and I’m not sure I need one. But I do need someone to hit with.

Where were you on 9/11 and how did it affect you?

I was in Brazil Gosh. Thank God I didn’t have to play, I don’t think I could have. We were in Bahia, the most removed place in the world. All we had on TV was CNN in Portuguese. After the plane went in, they showed footage of people jumping, everything. But it didn’t change the way I live. I learned a long time ago that you have to stay in the moment because there’s no guarantee you’ll be here tomorrow. That’s why it’s so important that if you’re unhappy doing something and really want to do something else, try for it no matter how hard it is. It’s hard advice and I don’t always follow it myself, but in the ideal world....

You’ve mentioned babies a number of times in this conversation, so I feel I can bring up the subject. Do you want them?

Oh, almost all my friends have kids now. There’s a lot of them around, it’s pretty advance. But I don’t feel I need to be married or have a family to be complete. I see it as a natural transition that, if it happens for me one day, great. If not, I’ll be godmother to a lot of kids. That’s good too.

What do you consider your greatest achievement in tennis?

I don’t feel I had one. Seriously. I played the game, I loved the game. I really, truly, don’t care about history. I don’t care about the titles. I feel so fortunate to play a game that I loved that also got me money and fame, the chance to see the world. But what would be in my obituary? I have no idea.

The one thing I hope, though, is that the kids get a sense that I love the game. And please get the message out to kids. The only reason to play is because you love to. It’s not because you want to make a million dollars. Not because you want to be on the cover of a magazine. You should play because the first thing you want to do in the morning is go out and hit that ball. I don’t know if that comes through when I’m playing a match, because maybe I’m grunting or making faces. But I’m loving what I’m doing, and that’s just why I’m there.

Even though, by 10, I already was number one in the under-18s, I never felt, “Oh, one day I’m going to be number one.” I just loved to play. I wasn’t, as they say, “groomed to be a champion,” at least not until we moved to Bradenton, by which time I already was a champion.

Tennis today is changing and reaching a different audience. A lot of people see the glamour girls in the game and it’s fine wanting to look like that. But few people were born to be really skinny or to have a beautiful face. Others see the money and want to get rich. But few people get rich from tennis. In the end, if you’re going to play, you’d better love the game.

Also, I believe I play fair. You have to play the game fair. Be mindful of how you treat an opponent, don’t weasel around trying to manipulate any given situation, or the rules.

What was the most important thing tennis gave you, and the most important thing it took away?

Tennis gave me freedom to do whatever I wanted. If I stopped after I was stabbed, I would have been fine for the rest of my life. What it took away was some of my childhood. Maybe I had to grow up a little too fast.

Are you as passionate about anything else in life as tennis?

That will be the challenge for me in the future. But I love horses, I love water, I love kids and working with them. I’ll need to do something. I can’t just go home and go shopping with my friends. I love having a schedule, and for most of my life. I’ve had a hectic one. I can’t function without one.

When I first came on the tour, I loved being the star. I loved the buzz, I loved meeting the celebrities. But one day you’re not the star anymore, and my ego can deal with that.

That’s not on my list of things to worry about, but this is, this is the scary one. What is going to be the thing I love to do as much a as tennis?

Is life fair?

I don’t go into that stuff. I don’t want to go into the past. I’m just happy to be in the moment, to live in the present. Life is simplified. I may have problems, but I’m dealing with them better. If I was going to go any deeper into that question, I’d need to be drinking a glass of wine, and I don’t drink at this altitude.”

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