

'This is a new life'

NIRMAL SHEKAR

SHE was the forgotten champion. When she first happened on the scene, Jennifer Capriati was the young girl who would set out to do great things, to author an era of her own. Then, she disappeared from the scene.

And, later, she came to be remembered not so much for her tennis but for what happened off the courts in her life. Not long after that, when she tried to come back to the game but failed to make an impact, hers was a marginal presence and she was indeed the champion the game had almost forgotten...until last fortnight, that is.

At Melbourne, Capriati, who brought up a sensational triumph, was understandably ecstatic after her historic victory. The following are excerpts from an interview with the champion after her stunning success.

Question: Are you still in a state of disbelief? Or has it sunk in?

Answer: State of disbelief, so not quite yet. I haven't had the chance to just have a quiet moment to myself to think about it. I actually still can't believe it.

● When you were young and successful, making

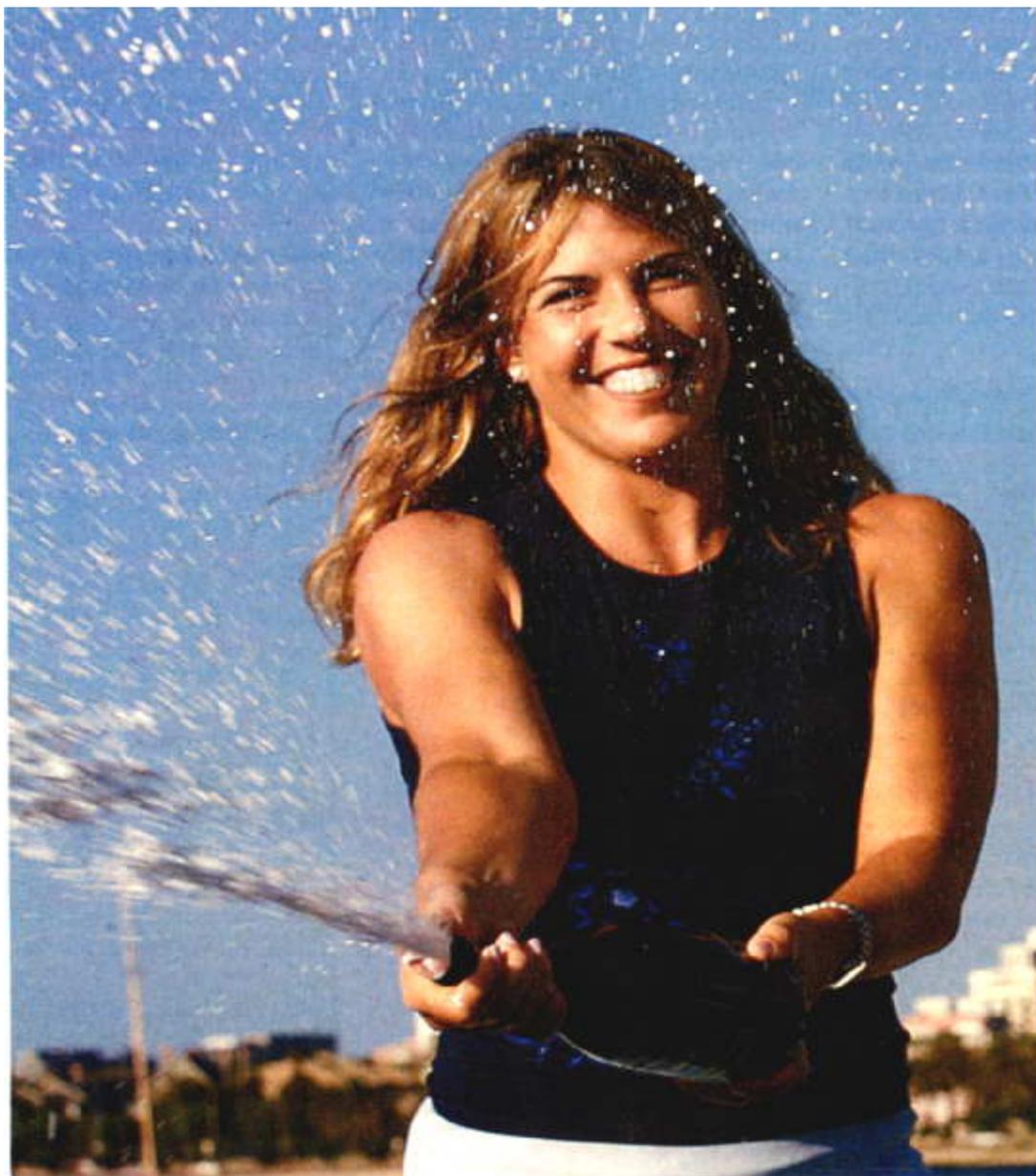
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the semifinals of majors, did you think about actually winning a Grand Slam title?

I think I was too young to really think about it like that. I just took it match by match, that was it. The only time I really thought about it was in the U. S. Open semifinal against Monica Seles. I actually thought, 'Wow, I could win a Grand Slam.' After that, I had no more opportunities.

● It's been a long, long journey to get here. What was your feeling when you hit that backhand return winner at match-point?

It was a winner down the line but it was just the slowest winner. You know, it just kept going. As soon as I saw it was clean, that I had done it, the



reality hit me, 'Oh my God!' I just jumped for joy. I mean, that was it. I couldn't believe it really happened.

● **How do you plan to celebrate?**

I don't know. I just want to be with friends, with family. It is after I get home that I will think about celebrating. Let's see what I am going to do when I get home.

● **Martina Hingis has said you belonged in the Top Five. Do you feel you are one of the best five players in the women's game?**

After what happened here, definitely. You know, I am no longer going to doubt myself in anything. Now I know anything is possible. If I could come home with a Grand Slam, then I know anything is possible.

● **How much more special is it that you have won this after beating the No.2 and No.1 players in the world, which not too many have to do in Grand Slams?**

It's great, it's tremendous. I keep saying I believe it, but then also I can't believe it. From here on, I will always think I have the belief in myself that I can do anything. I will never be afraid in any match that I go in and play.

● **Tennis has seen some great comebacks, do you think yours is one of the greatest?**

It's hard to talk about a comeback because I have been back for a while. Even last year here I was in the semifinals. I've had some good results. So I think I am way past having a comeback at this point.

● **When you were young and successful sponsors queued up to sign you up. Do you anticipate this happening again now that you have won a Grand Slam?**

I have no idea. If it does happen, it does happen. I will just take each moment that comes. I am not going to let anything change me, change who I am or what I do. I am always just going to do what I want. No matter how many companies or whatever comes to me, I will always stick with what makes me comfortable.

● **Looking ahead, do you think it is going to be tough the rest of the year for you? Do you think all the players will be gunning for you as one of the top ones to look out for?**

I have not thought about that. I think it is going to be a great year. I'll just keep doing what I am doing and I'll be ready for any challenge. It has always been like that anyway. Everyone always seems to play their best against me.

● **If some Hollywood producer approached you for the rights to the history of your life, would you agree to sell it?**

That's interesting. If I were to do something like that, I would never sell it for anything. I don't know. For now, no. Who knows, down the road in the future...but only on my terms.

● **Where do you think you have your best chance of winning another Grand Slam?**

I would have to say my game suits all surfaces. I think I can play well on any surface. I won the Olympics on red clay. I always thought that was my worst surface. I came out and won that. I think my chances are as good at any of the Grand Slams.

● **Is it possible to compare this win with the Olympics or is this too far apart?**

I was thinking about that. But I think it's just too far apart. I mean, that actually seems like another life. So this is a new life, a different life. It's actually like winning something for the first time again.

● **Was it the love of playing the game or the thought of a moment like this that brought you back to tennis? What was the motivation?**

Playing the game and trying to play for this moment is what brought me back. Deep down, the motivation was just to live up to my potential, to find what my potential was and

just to be the best player I can be, whatever that is. I guess that I believed my potential was more than just winning a few good matches. I wanted to go for the big ones.

● **What sort of training have you done at the end of last year to get ready for Australia?**

It pretty much started even before the end of the year. I was not noticeable until the last couple of weeks. It's the same thing I've always done, work with the trainers, do off court training, gym work. My trainer's name is Karen Brunette. She mixes a lot of things. Tae-Bo, just gym stuff, running, cycling.

● **Could you explain the importance of your father's input into your career these days?**

He's a tremendous force with my game right now. I have so much confidence in him, he has so much confidence in me. He is the best coach I have ever had. He started me playing tennis. My game is because of what he taught me. He's been travelling around with me more as a coach but because he is my dad it is easier to have that trust. Whatever he says I know is right. ■

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