

INSIDE OUT

POLAND

Talented players from Poland have been making headlines recently, converting their country's once modest tennis success into strong results in individual and team competitions. As part of *ITFWorld's* occasional series on emerging tennis nations, *Jeff Kavanagh* discovers how this is being achieved.



Agnieszka Radwanska was Poland's flagbearer at London 2012



Urszula Radwanska celebrates with her teammates after sending Poland back to Fed Cup by BNP Paribas World Group II for 2014

This year's Wimbledon, the 127th edition, will stick long in the memory for the series of firsts it produced. The men's champion, Andy Murray, was the first British man in 77 years to win Wimbledon. The Frenchwoman Marion Bartoli won her first major, and retired soon afterwards. And for the first time ever, a Polish man competed in the semifinal of a Grand Slam tournament.

This last achievement was made more remarkable by the fact Jerzy Janowicz faced compatriot Lukasz Kubot in the quarterfinals. The only other Polish man to progress this far in a Grand Slam previously was Wojtek Fibak more than 30 years earlier, when Poland was still firmly ensconced behind the Iron Curtain and neither of 2013's quarterfinalists had been born.

Not that the accomplishments of Polish players at Wimbledon were exclusively male. Current world No. 4 Agnieszka Radwanska, the first Polish woman to win a WTA title in Stockholm in 2007, and no stranger to ground-breaking feats, followed up her 2012 Wimbledon final appearance with a semifinal berth of her own.

Although both Radwanska and Janowicz would lose their semis, against the German Sabine Lisicki and Murray respectively, there was no doubting that their performances at Wimbledon underlined Poland's emergence as a major tennis force.

The significance of what they had achieved wasn't lost on the players. Janowicz described the tournament as "magical" while Kubot explained one of the reasons behind his football-style shirt swap with Janowicz after their match was to "make our tennis more famous, more popular and show that Poland tennis is in the map of tennis."

Much was then expected of the Polish contingent at the US Open in August. Unfortunately for the men the clouds were about to roll in on their golden summer. Janowicz, Kubot, Davis Cup by PNB Paribas teammate Michal Przysiezny, and the doubles pairing of Marcin Matkowski and Mariusz Fyrstenberg, runners-up in 2011, all limped out in the opening round — almost literally in the case of then world No. 14 Janowicz, who had injured his back in the lead-up to the tournament. ►

Jerzy Janowicz became the first Polish man in history to reach the semifinals of a Grand Slam tournament after winning the first all-Polish Grand Slam quarterfinal at Wimbledon this year. He defeated Lukasz Kubot, left in inset photo below



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Agnieszka Radwanska on her way to her runner-up finish at Wimbledon in 2012, where she lost the final to Serena Williams



Magdalena Rejniak-Romer, General Secretary of the Polish Tennis Federation



Grand Slam doubles finalists Marcin Matkowski and Mariusz Fyrstenberg in Davis Cup action



Children taking part in a Tennis10s session in Lodz during a Davis Cup tie

Tennis10s in Poland

Around 35,000 Polish children currently take part in the ITF's Tennis10s programme.

The number of clubs involved has nearly tripled in two years.

July 2011
68 clubs

July 2012
123 clubs

July 2013
202 clubs

► Radwanska fared somewhat better, making it to the US Open last 16 before falling to Russian Ekaterina Makarova in straight sets. After the elation of the “Polish Wimbledon”, this was a hefty return to earth.

“Polish men’s tennis is somewhere between the heaven of Wimbledon and the hell of the US Open,” says Artur Rolak, a journalist for the Warsaw-based magazine *Tenisklub*. “You shouldn’t always expect bright days. Black Tuesday, as Polish media called the day when Janowicz, Kubot and Przysiezny were eliminated from US Open, will happen from time to time.”

Summer may have come to a close some distance from heaven with Janowicz still injured and a 4-1 Davis Cup World Group play-off defeat to Australia in Warsaw in September, but despite the disappointments of August and September, plenty of reasons for optimism remain.

The men may not have won their tie, but by virtue of getting to a World Group play-off, accomplished something no other Polish Davis Cup team had before. The Fed Cup by BNP Paribas team, meanwhile, fought their way back to World Group II for the first time since 2010 with a strong 4-1 victory in Belgium in April.

Unsurprisingly, given the highs Polish tennis has hit in recent times, interest in the sport has never been greater. “Last year was great for Polish tennis,” says Magdalena Rejniak-Romer, the General Secretary of the Polish Tennis Federation and the woman responsible for the development of youth and amateur tennis in the country. “Agnieszka in Wimbledon, when she got to the final, all the news, television, everybody, they were just talking about tennis.”

But that was nothing compared to the hype surrounding Janowicz’s final against David Ferrer at the BNP Paribas Masters in Paris in 2012, she says, when an estimated 1.4 million Poles tuned in to watch the match. “It was unbelievable.”

Before the emergence of Radwanska, who won the junior Wimbledon title in 2005, Janowicz, and the rest of the current crop of Polish talent, you have to go back to Fibak’s run of three Grand Slam quarterfinals in 1980 for the last time the sport generated anything like the interest in Poland it does now. Previous to Fibak, the only other Polish player of real significance was Jadwiga Jedrzejowska, who reached three Grand Slam finals in the 1930s.

Wojtek Andrzejewski, Director of Sport at the Federation, says the contemporary success of Polish tennis can be traced back to 2003. It was then that Ryszard Krauze, a wealthy local entrepreneur and tennis

enthusiast, who had been involved with the Federation since 1999, decided to invest further in young talent.

Over the next few years, the Federation, aided by Krauze, signed approximately 40 agreements with players, including with Kubot, Radwanska and her younger sister Urszula, and Janowicz.

“We spent for this programme about 18 million zlotys (US\$5.75 million). I think it’s not such a big budget, but you see the results,” says Andrzejewski. “Our juniors (Blazej Koniusz and Grzegorz Panfil) won the Australian Open doubles, Agnieszka won Wimbledon, Urszula won Wimbledon, Janowicz was in the US Open final, so many good results which were not before.”

Three years ago, however, Krauze decided to withdraw his support for business reasons, says Andrzejewski. Since that time, Polish tennis has had to face a number of financial challenges. Janowicz famously couldn’t afford new shoes at the US Open in 2011 and was unable to compete in Australian Open qualifying the next year because he couldn’t afford the trip.

The Federation itself currently receives around 3.5m zlotys (US\$1.1m) a year from the Ministry of Sport and Tourism (MSiT). By way of comparison, Great Britain’s Lawn Tennis Association received approximately ten times that amount from Sport England this year.

“If you have the ranking of sports in Poland in budget terms, tennis is outside of the top ten,” says Andrzejewski. “It’s because of the history. The priority during communism was Olympic medals. Olympic medals meant you were the best in the world. In Poland for many years tennis was [ranked] about 35 or 40.” Communism in Poland ended in 1989, one year after tennis returned to the Olympics as a full medal sport in Seoul.

Another hangover from the country’s communist past is the way sport continues to be perceived by many of its citizens. “Tennis was always seen as a very elite sport, only for a small group who can afford it,” says Rejniak-Romer.

In order to alter these perceptions, the Federation is working with MSiT and local governments to provide nets and equipment for multipurpose sports fields in 2,000 locations throughout the country. “That’s what we do to show people that you can play tennis everywhere, that you don’t need a tennis court, that it’s fun, that it’s not expensive,” says Rejniak-Romer.

“And we can really see the changing [of perceptions], step by step.”

To further encourage children and amateur players to join the quarter of a million Poles that already play the sport, the Federation is also working with local governments to implement the ITF Play & Stay programme’s Tennis10s in schools, and with clubs to run Tennis10s and the ITF’s initiative Tennis Xpress.

Getting parents involved in tennis through programmes such as Tennis Xpress is important for the development of the sport in Poland as well, says Rejniak-Romer. “We want to target the parents coming with the kids to the tennis programmes, so then after six weeks of workshops they can play together.” It was watching his father, a former professional volleyball player, playing amateur tennis, Janowicz says, that first piqued his interest in the sport as a youngster. ►

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Wojtek Fibak reached the quarterfinals at Roland Garros, Wimbledon and the US Open in 1980, and before that at Roland Garros in 1977

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► Encouraged by the success of Wimbledon, the Ministry has also pledged funds to the building of 16 new indoor tennis facilities, each containing three to four courts, welcome news for players in a country where winter temperatures frequently fall below freezing.

A further positive development, says Rejniak-Romer, was the appointment of a new Polish Tennis Federation board and a new president, Krzysztof Suski, in July this year. "Now we have a new board, a new president and everything combines to give us a chance to attract sponsors for tennis to make these programmes bigger, because you need people, you need tools to develop the programmes," she says. Sponsors such as Davis Cup team sponsor, Polish firm KGHM, a large copper mining company and a partner the Federation hopes will continue to support the sport.

Beyond the social and financial challenges of developing tennis in Poland, there's little question that the country has the talent to achieve further honours, thereby attracting more sponsors and players to the game.

Radwanska and Janowicz, at 24 and 22 years old respectively, have many good years still ahead of them, while Urszula Radwanska is ranked in the world's top 40, and the promising 17-year-old Kamil Majchrzak salvaged some national pride at the US Open this year, winning the boys doubles with American Martin Redlicki.

Nor do these players want for ambition. Agnieszka Radwanska recently notched up her 13th WTA title, the Korean Open, and Janowicz, asked what his aspirations are, immediately replies: "To win a Grand Slam."

Given his potential, he could well be the first Pole to do so; assuming Radwanska hasn't already got there. 🎾



Sixteen-year-old Kamil Majchrzak won the US Open boys' doubles title in September



Poland won the Junior Fed Cup by BNP Paribas title for the first time in 2005. The under-16 team featured the Radwanska sisters and Maksymiliana Wandel



Tennis Xpress courses for adults have just started in Poland

POLISH FACTFILE

Around 250,000 people play tennis in Poland

In 2012 there were 1,834 licensed players, 2,330 licensed children in Tennis10s programmes and 994 licensed amateur players

There are more than 5,000 courts

302 tennis clubs are affiliated to the Polish Tennis Federation

535 tournaments for men, women and juniors were organised in Poland in 2012, plus 300 Tennis10s tournaments and 500 amateur tournaments

There are 444 certified tennis coaches and 2,593 certified tennis instructors according to the Polish Ministry of Sport

Polish juniors have won 8 Grand Slam titles

10 Polish players finished 2012 in the WTA and ATP Top 100 in singles and doubles