

From Russia to love

**If you think that
Elena Dementieva
looks good on
sand, you should
see her on grass**



**JUST BEFORE HER 16TH BIRTHDAY, RUSSIAN TENNIS
PLAYER ELENA DEMENTIEVA FLEW TO ISTANBUL**

to compete in one of her first professional tournaments. She played well, beating several respected players and getting through to the semi-finals. Then her mother dropped some surprising news. "She told me that we

only had one-way tickets, that her money had run out, and that if I didn't win the competition we couldn't get back to Moscow," says Elena, who seems to see the funny side of the story now. "So you might say that I was under a bit of pressure. But luckily I won the singles and the doubles tournaments, and we had enough money for the flights home - and for the next tournament too."

It's a story that highlights many aspects of the winningly ambitious and attractively stellar career of the 23-year-old. Not only does it show the dedication of her parents - Elena's family background was modest, and her mother gave up her job as a teacher to concentrate on her daughter's career - but also the skill, determination and character that was forged at an early age within the ruthlessly competitive Russian tennis system.

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Backhand smasher: Elena Dementieva photographed on Miami Beach on 3 April 2005 and, *inset*, in action in Australia in January

In the intervening years, her driving forehand, devastating two-handed backhand and stinging attacking approach to the game have helped her soar up the rankings, reaching number four in the world last year. Having already triumphed at four events on the women's tour and won a silver medal at the 2000 Olympics, she was runner-up in both the French and US Opens last year.

Unafraid to show her emotions on court, Elena is equally engaging in conversation. She is spirited, confident, talented (she speaks fluent English and French), fiercely proud of her country (despite lucrative coaching offers abroad, she is almost alone among her peers in continuing to live and train in Russia), and fun. In the post-Anna Kournikova marketing era, tall, blonde, blue-eyed, coquettishly ponytailed Elena knows how to play the game away from the baseline as well. When you pay her the compliment that she could be mistaken for Claudia Schiffer, she falls silent for a moment. "I think I look better," she replies, flashing a smile.

You can judge for yourself this month at Wimbledon, though it has not been, it must be said, her most successful tournament. She has never progressed past the first week, and last year crashed out in the first round.

"It's strange that I haven't done better there because the fast courts suit my game," she says. "But I've improved a lot in the past year and I certainly believe I can win Wimbledon. That's the only reason I am playing: to be Number One." **3**

The Wimbledon Championships run 20 June-3 July

