



Maria Verchenova

A RUSSIAN GIRL'S RISE
AGAINST ALL ODDS

By Paul Prendergast



As refreshing as it is to witness the emergence of an exciting new kid on the block, it's even more pleasing when the player in question has risen from a challenging background or a country where golf is not recognised as a mainstream sport.

2011 Bob Hope Classic winner, Jhonattan 'Jonny' Vegas, is the latest in this category and has burst to prominence from what you might term an 'emerging' golf nation: Venezuela.

With all due respect, however, who knew there was golf in Venezuela before this? Perhaps only fellow Venezuelans and some astute golf scouts, having seen Vegas in the college system in Texas since his arrival in 2002. There could be a chance a lot of his countrymen knew little about golf, but I'm sure they do now.

Vegas' undoubted potential to become a superstar of the game may see a new generation dedicate themselves to the sport in his country, if not across South America. He follows many others who have gone before him, playing a lone hand representing their countries at the highest echelons of professional golf. Carlos Franco from Paraguay burst to prominence over a decade ago, Chinese Taipei's Yani Tseng is doing brilliantly now on the LPGA Tour as the new world No.1 at the time of writing, Camilo Villegas from Columbia ...lets' go all the way back

to Chi Chi Rodriguez from Puerto Rico.

It only takes one to lead the way and a spark can be lit. Witness the steamroller that is Korean women's golf, on the back of Se Ri Pak's dominance from 1998 through 2003. We will watch for the emergence of home grown golfing pioneers from Vietnam, Turkey, Dubai and Malaysia in time too, for surely, they will come. Commencing her fifth season on the Ladies European Tour is perhaps, the most unlikely of these pioneers, Russia's Maria Verchenova. Her emergence is an unlikely story in terms of the cruel realities of weather in her homeland which renders golf unplayable for six months of the year. Compounding this and perhaps more critically, is a lack of the most basic of resources (golf courses) at her disposal, the scarcity of coaching and the level and depth of competition at any age group when she was learning the game.

While it's slowly getting better, golf in Russia by all accounts is akin to American Football in Australia. If you look hard enough, you can find it being played somewhere by a few diehards. By no means is it part of popular culture or accepted as a grassroots sport. Kids don't play it because their parents did, for example, as is the case with golf in many of the 'developed' golf nations of the world.



But 24-year-old Verchenova had none of this support network and a golf culture to nurture her when she stumbled across the game at age 12 on holidays. Her parents stopped for coffee at a golf club in the Czech Republic and after being interested in what she saw, Verchenova was brought back down the next day for a chance to hit some shots and was hooked.

Given these barriers, her progress in the 12 years that have elapsed has been remarkable. Getting to a level of proficiency to qualify for a major tour like the LET, and staying on it for four years and counting, is an achievement in itself. Even the thought processes that lead her to the Qualifying School were unusual in comparison to others, where progress through an amateur pathway would lead to an inevitable attempt at a career as a professional. Verchenova had virtually decided to quit the game completely should she not succeed at her first attempt.

"I was sick of competing almost against myself only as an amateur and wanted to get better, so I decided to try to qualify for the tour," Verchenova said.

"Just about everyone at home was against it, telling me I needed to get more experience but I went ahead and gave it a go. I got through the first stage with my mum caddying for me and told her I'd give up the game if I didn't get through (the final qualifying stage). I went to the second stage and got my card. I couldn't work out why everyone was so against it."

Verchenova has kept her card through the first four years of her LET career, playing over 50 tournaments with a few top 10 finishes already to her name. She is hell-bent on making her name based on her achievements with her golf clubs and not just for her fabled good looks.

From her rookie year onwards, she has been dubbed the 'Maria Sharapova' of Russian golf from the media, which was something she understood but it still irked.

"I don't blame them because I had a good second year and being the only Russian player, it was probably convenient to compare me to her," Verchenova said.

Being the product of good genes has been helpful however, with her good looks and golf game being recognised in the corporate world. Verchenova is thrilled to have Italian fashion labels, CHERVO clothing and Duca Del Cosma shoes, linking with her for the coming season. "It's exciting to represent some new brands and they've made me feel like part of a family," she said.

"I've been really welcomed and they do a lot for me. Their clothes combine fashion but also comfort as well which is important for me."

Rounding out these new partnerships is her recent signing with Wilson Golf to play their Wilson Staff FG Tour irons.

At the ANZ RACV Ladies Masters on the Gold Coast earlier this year, I had the opportunity to witness at close quarters how Verchenova is progressing towards her goal

of being recognised for her golf game. After originally arranging to simply interview Maria, the opportunity to caddy for her came up on the Monday afternoon. After some swift rearranging of my schedule, I was on the bag for the tournament.

We got the formalities of the interview out of the way after nine holes on Tuesday, where Maria told me with a laugh about one of the first-year lessons she learned on Tour: 'never trust a journo!'

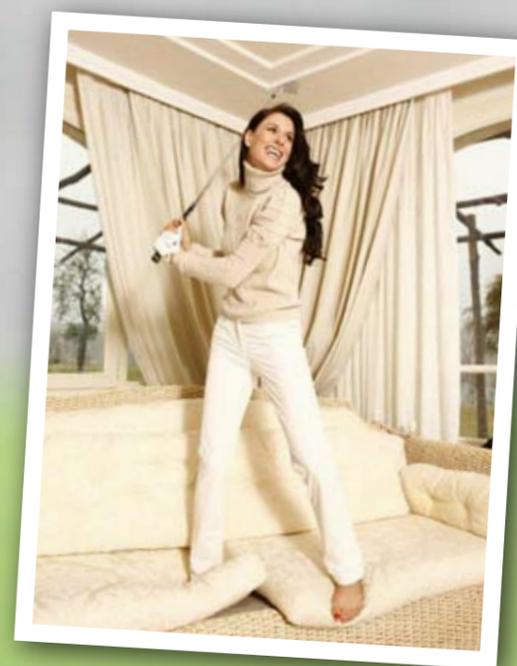
Verchenova has made a significant professional and lifestyle decision by deciding to move from her native Russia to Munich, Germany a little over 12 months ago. "It's very tough to practice back in Moscow, the weather only allows me to practice from around the end of March for around five months a year only," Verchenova said. "I have a new coach (Ken Williams), my management company Nietro Sports and friends now in Munich which makes it a lot easier for me."

The evidence that she has the game to succeed on the LET is certainly there. Her ball striking in the practice rounds and pro-am was impressive and she is a surprisingly long hitter for such a litte build. She had managed to straighten out her long game from the previous week where she missed the cut at the Australian Open, but it was her putting that was to let her down in the first round.

She regularly left putts short on the grainy, Bermuda greens at the Royal Pines course – 36 putts in the first round, including three-putts on each of the last two holes, contrasted with co-leader Karrie Webb's 25 in a round of 66. Playing in the afternoon wind, Maria hit more greens in regulation than the LPGA Hall of Famer did in the calm morning conditions. Not bad for someone who only learned that golf could be played professionally six years ago!

A morning tee time in the second round was filled with promise of a fightback with the leaders to face the afternoon conditions. For the first nine holes, it was much of the same stuff from Maria – good ball striking and a lot of missed opportunities on the greens. However, after nine straight pars, a 10-footer dropped on 10 and further birdies on 16 and 18 gave her a round of 69 and even par for 36 holes. Alas, the afternoon groups enjoyed calm conditions instead of the blustering winds her half of the draw had faced the previous afternoon. A record low four-under cut for the tournament saw Verchenova miss the weekend but with brighter prospects for the next week in New Zealand.

However, this is not a story of what could have been in one tournament. From what I have seen up close of other LET winners over the last five years at this event, Verchenova's game compares favourably and she has the long game to contend for a win on the LET if the stars align in any given week. Her dedication to her game, work ethic and desire is up there with any of her peers on



Tour. By her own admission, the short game and putting is where improvement in her game will be best realised. Verchenova is over a back injury and illness which hampered her at various stages in 2010, although she lost approximately seven kilograms as a result which she is struggling to regain. She intends to hit the gym on her return home to build more muscle and some lost distance.

Her rehab from injury last year provided her with a poignant reminder of the challenge ahead for the game in her home country. While waiting in a physiotherapist's waiting room, she responded to a fellow patient's question on why she was there and how she suffered the injury:

"Tennis, basketball?" she was asked.

When the reply was 'golf', the retort was prompt:

"Golf...that's not a real sport!" along with other derisive comments about golfers only riding about in carts.

In a country where according to Verchenova, Tiger Woods could walk down the main street of Moscow unrecognised and Roger Federer mobbed, golf in Russia has a long way to go to be accepted into mainstream culture let alone considered a 'sport' or a meaningful pastime. Verchenova realises that through her exploits she can shine a light for young Russian kids to follow in her path.

"I'm just like every other girl out here, practicing to get better, doing my own thing almost by myself," she said.

" Hopefully I'll be the one that brings golf to the next level (at home) and the kids will point to and want to be like. I'd like to do a kid's golf school or academy at some stage in the future so that the next generation can really pick up the game and get interest up in golf, get it on TV in Russia so that everyone can see that it's not something unusual for us.

"Maybe in 10 years, we can be a bit like China is becoming.

"We have nice golf courses outside of Moscow but it's a way to travel to get to them. It's hard with the weather but it would be great to see golf grow more. Sochi, in the south of Russia, would be a really good place for golf because the weather is good there most of the year.

"One of the main things we don't have in Russia is golf coaches. We don't have that many and a lot of them are people I used to play against in teams growing up. If I were to have kids who wanted to play golf, I would have to put them in an American university because you get to compete every week against other strong kids, which I couldn't do when I was growing up."

It's clear Verchenova's game is on the up and that her desire to be accepted for her golf deeds are on track and any success she has will do more for Russian golf than anything she can do off the course.

At 24, she has time on her hands and seems to be well

placed to maximise her opportunities from her new home base, close to quality coaching and facilities.

It will be interesting to look back in five years time at her progress in the game and how far the game in Russia has grown with her. There is no doubt the profile of the sport in her homeland and their next generations of golfers will be linked to the pioneering steps she is taking now. With a robust golf game, an engaging personality and a cheery disposition as part of her arsenal, Russia couldn't ask for a better ambassador to lead the way.

