

The rise and rise of British tennis star Laura Robson

By Paul Newman *Saturday, 11 October 2008*

¹ It was hard to say who was the more self-conscious – the two boys asking for the autograph or the young tennis player signing her name. Laura Robson *obliged* with the seriousness of a teenager using her first chequebook before returning to the table where she had been joshing with her friends.

² Off the court – away from the autograph-hunters at least – Robson might be any other 14-year-old. On the court, however, she is *anything but*. Three months after *captivating* the nation with her victory in the Wimbledon junior final, she has been taking her first steps in the senior game – and making a big impression.

³ This week Robson played at the Barnstaple Open in Devon, where she was as much *in demand* among the handful of signature-seekers as the four top 100 players in the field. Next week she will be listed for the first time in the senior world rankings, at around No 560.

⁴ In the following week she will play in her first event on the main Women's Tennis Association circuit after receiving a wild card for the Fortis Championships in Luxembourg. Her potential

opponents include Elena Dementieva, the world No 4 and Olympic champion, and two former Grand Slam title holders, Amelie Mauresmo and Lindsay Davenport.

⁵ Having already won four matches since making her senior debut last month, Robson is taking it all *in her stride*. Her ability to handle the big occasion was evident at Wimbledon, where she became the first British winner of the girls' event for 24 years. In the immediate aftermath members of the public would notice her in the street, but she is grateful that attention has since dipped. 'After Wimbledon I went to Amsterdam and at the airport it was really embarrassing because they made an announcement on my flight and the whole plane was looking at me,' she said.

⁶ Now the biggest problem on flights is the books she has to take with her to keep up with her home education. 'You have to travel a lot and it's hard to take your school books everywhere,' she said. 'They weigh about six kilos and you have restrictions with the airlines. You end up carrying lots of them in your hand luggage and it's pretty tiring.'

This year Robson is concentrating on English, Maths and Science. Next year it will be French, Geography, History and English Literature. 'Schoolwork makes me nervous because I'm not very good at it,' she laughed. 'I'm not good at Maths, but my Dad helps me. I like English, because there's no right or wrong answer and you can write what you like. I studied last night and will go back home tonight. I'll have one or two days off and then catch up.' Nerves are no problem on court. Robson's victims in the last month include Poland's Urszula Radwanska and Israel's Tzipora Obziler, ranked No 121 and 158 in the world respectively. Both were beaten at Shrewsbury, where Robson lost in the semi-finals to Estonia's Maret Ani, the world No 100.

⁷ This week Robson went out in the first round, but her performance in a 6-7, 6-4, 6-2 defeat by Germany's Angelique Kerber was arguably her best yet. Kerber, 20, the world No 143, was in the top 70 last year and knows all about teenage prodigies. In her first senior tournament at 15 she beat Marion Bartoli, the 2007 Wimbledon finalist.

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⁸ Although Kerber was the stronger player physically, it was her opponent who *made the running* for the first set and a half. An attacking baseliner, Robson went for her shots, punished anything short and constructed rallies with the maturity of a seasoned professional.

‘She’s very aggressive and makes almost no mistakes’

⁹ Nevertheless, Kerber’s dogged consistency in returning shots that would have been sure-fire winners against junior opponents eventually wore Robson down. The German said afterwards that Robson was already playing at the standard of a top 150 player and expected her to be in the top 100 within a year. ‘She’s very aggressive and makes almost no mistakes, which is unusual for such a young player,’ Kerber said. ‘She has a very good return. I couldn’t make some points with my second serve because she always got the ball back and I didn’t know what to do. She’s very concentrated on every point.’ Robson, who believes her game has improved even in the last fortnight, admitted feeling tired by the end. ‘Seniors are definitely stronger, so it will always be tough for me. They hit the ball harder and it’s a lot more physical. In the juniors it’s tough in a different way. You still have to play hard because they *play smart*.’

¹⁰ Nigel Sears, the British women’s head coach, was among the 46 spectators at the Tarka Tennis Centre. ‘The match was a very good standard and another very valuable experience for Laura,’ he said. ‘She played some great tennis in the matches she won in Shrewsbury against Radwanska and Obziler, but she rather steamrollered them. It was one-way traffic. In terms of the opposition and the quality of the rallies, I thought the match here was a higher level. Laura will have learned a great deal, because to win consistently at this level can be very tough. She met a player who was very capable in her defence and very solid.’

¹¹ ‘If Laura had managed to come up with some of her very best shots at the right time in the second set she could have won. In the third set it became quite a physical battle. We have to remember she’s only 14, though she’s improving all the time physically as well. She was playing against an opponent who was very strong physically. Laura can take away a lot of positives.’

¹² What did Sears see as Robson’s strengths? ‘She’s a very exciting player who has wonderful timing and a great deal of class. That says it all. She’s a left-hander, which is also a great asset, and a wonderful shotmaker. She’s very competent in all areas already and she’s only going to refine her game from here onwards.’ After Luxembourg Robson will return to junior competition. She will spend Christmas with her grandparents

Down Under – she was born in Melbourne before coming to Britain with her family at six – and will play junior tournaments through to the Australian Open.

‘teenage “burn-out” is not the problem it used to be’

¹³ Anne Keothavong, the 24-year-old British No 1, who topped the field in Barnstaple, pointed out that when she was Robson’s age she was playing tennis only three times a week, after school. ‘It wasn’t until I was 15 that I won a national title,’ Keothavong said. ‘Before that I didn’t do anything. These days everyone’s playing full-time tennis from the age of seven.’

¹⁴ If 14 seems early to throw a young girl into the lionesses’ den of international tennis, more and more youngsters are making their mark. Martina Hingis and Maria Sharapova were Wimbledon champions at 16 and 17 respectively, while two current teenagers, Nicole Pietrangeli and Tamira Paszek, won their first senior titles at 15. Hingis and Mauresmo were Wimbledon junior champions, though such success is by no means a guarantee of future glory. For example, the 2002 and 2003 winners at the All England Club, Vera Dushevina and Kirsten Flipkens, have both struggled to make their mark.

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¹⁵ At least teenage ‘burn-out’ is not the problem it used to be. Jennifer Capriati, who at Robson’s age was in the world’s top 10, left the tour at 17 and rapidly moved from the sports section to the news pages, pursued by headlines about shoplifting and marijuana possession, although she later returned to win two Grand Slam titles. Andrea Jaeger, who became world No 2 but never realised her full potential, quit at 18 to devote her life to charity and eventually became a nun.

¹⁶ *In the wake of* those high-profile cases restrictions were imposed on the number of tournaments girls can play. They may start at 14 but can play no more than eight senior tournaments on the International Tennis Federation circuit and only two at WTA level. After her 15th birthday in January Robson will be allowed to play up to 10 professional events over the next year. ‘The blend [of junior and senior tournaments] is perfect for Laura at the moment,’ Sears said. ‘She’s already shown that she’s

accomplished enough to play quite competently at this level. It’s not as if she’s been *swept aside*. She hasn’t been at all.’ In an age when many young players find it hard to control their emotions on court, Robson’s behaviour in Barnstaple was also exemplary. ‘Hopefully I’m a good role model and won’t bang my rackets too much,’ she smiled. If you’re good enough you’re old enough.