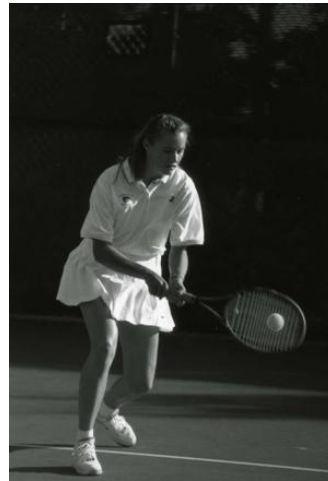


Playing Close to the Net with Wildcat Legend Yana Dorodnova by Jeff Chapman



As a long time K-State fan I had been convinced by Coach Steve Bietau in 1996 to start coming to watch tennis. I had seen some matches while in college, but wasn't paying too close attention, so that didn't really count. I remember my first match. Steve said I should be sure to watch the match "with our Russian player" and so I did. I don't think I have ever seen a more competitive individual in all of athletics, so focused in and determined. She had the eyes of a tiger and a killer instinct on the court. I was an instant fan and I quickly circled all of the Yana Dorodnova matches on the schedule and put them on my calendar. I was an instant fan. Since then, I have had the honor of being great lifetime friends with Yana and her family.

Chapman: Yana, how did you get started playing tennis as a kid and why?

Dorodnova: I started playing when I started first grade, because my parents thought that 'I should do a sport'. I was doing some figure skating prior to that, as it was and continues to be a very popular sport in Russia. However, it clearly wasn't a great fit for me.

My parents liked playing volleyball on weekends. One day, we went on a family outing to watch a volleyball tournament. While getting tickets at the ticket office, my mother noticed a small ad in the cashier's window about upcoming tennis try-outs for girls my age.

My future coach took an initiative to post this ad herself to attract some kids to try-outs, as tennis wasn't a popular sport in Russia at that time. Given that my parents were looking for 'sport for me', and try-outs fit their schedule, they took me in. I passed the try-outs and joined the tennis group. Then, it just worked out from there.

One could call it a coincidence...

Chapman: I had to laugh when you said figure skating. Knowing you, I can't imagine you as a figure skater.

Dorodnova: Yes, looking back, I think it's was probably pretty comical for my parents to watch. I definitely wasn't the most graceful figure skater. However, I do remember it was fun.

Chapman: What made you decide to pursue a college degree in the USA?

Dorodnova: The fall of the empire. USSR fell apart. Everything was crashing around me in the '90s. No opportunities, no jobs, no future. The offer to come play tennis in the US was a very appealing opportunity relative to the option to stay.

Chapman: Avoiding politics at all costs, but the USA and Russia certainly have an interesting relationship today. Does that ever bother you when your home country is receiving negative publicity in the media?

Dorodnova: Yes, it's unfortunate that the two countries are often portrayed as adversaries now. Being able to read both, Russian news sources and American news stories, I can detect a certain amount of bias on both sides, and naturally, the truth is always somewhere in the middle. I see a good in peoples' intentions in both countries, and I hope that we can find a common ground to have productive relationships on many levels. In the end, I see that that people want to have essentially the same things: safe and prosperous life for the people they care about.

Chapman: How did you find your way to Manhattan, Kansas?

Dorodnova: Another tennis player from the former USSR, Armenia, joined the K-State tennis team a year prior to me joining. Her Dad was a tennis coach, and he helped spread the word among the tennis community, that there was this American college opportunity open for the girls my age. One of the Soviet coaches he talked to, was a woman from Kiev, Ukraine. She thought of me, even though I was in Moscow, Russia at that time. It was a really nice cross cultural tennis community that we had in the '90s. This coach from Ukraine, passed along my contact info to K-State. I am forever grateful to her. One could call it another coincidental chain of events...

Chapman: What was your experience like at K-State?

Dorodnova: It was a totally different experience from the life I was used to up to that point. Everything was different: culture, language, customs, relationships, food, language. That made it a very transformative life experience. It certainly was a positive one overall and I am very grateful to have been given that by the stroke of fate.

Chapman: Do you still follow Wildcat Tennis?

Dorodnova: Not a lot. Occasionally I check in on the K-State team news. Sounds like there were a lot of changes since I left and I am excited for the program to keep on going.

Chapman: Do you think that your experience would have been better if you had the new courts they play on today?

Dorodnova: Yes, I think it would.

Chapman: What was worse? The old Cottonwood indoor with no lights or Ahearn on the portable plastic floor? (haha)

Dorodnova:

I remember that Cottonwood was a special treat when we played there. I have fond memories of this nice club. It was a luxury occurrence when we played there. The portable plastic floor in Ahearn was a challenge as we have to share it with our excellent K-State Track and Field team. We literally had a world-class athletes practicing all around us: Olympians in decathlon, and pentathlon, world-class high-jumpers and triple-jumpers, US team sprinters. I remember watching them in awe, which made it for a very distracting experience for a tennis practice. Going outside to practice was definitely a better path to our tennis game improvement.

Chapman: Congratulations on being Colorado Female Player of the Year in 2017! Are you a better player today than in college?

Dorodnova: I don't think I am. Tennis is a sport of fitness, even more so nowadays. Losing a half a step and endurance with age makes a huge difference in the level of performance. Additionally, tennis is a sport of consistency. Statistically, it is not the player who makes the most winners who wins matches. Rather, it's the player who makes the least amount of unforced errors. Thus, to be on par with the college level, I'd have to invest a lot more time and effort into both: physical conditioning and reps on the court. It's as straightforward as that - a high level of performance requires investment of time and effort. At this stage in my life, it is no longer a priority.

Chapman: You chose to remain in the US, get a career, married and raise a family here. What helped make that decision?

Dorodnova: By the time I graduated, I felt like I belonged in the US. I loved it here and I still do. Life in the US is not for every foreigner. I've known many who simply couldn't fathom staying due to cultural differences. For me, it's a great fit. I'm happy here!

Chapman: How often do you return to Moscow?

Dorodnova: There was a period of time in my life after college when I didn't go for many years. My family came a few times to visit me instead. Last few years, the situation in my family changed and it's on me now to go visit them. So, I try to go once a year for a week.

Chapman: Did you ever get homesick being away for so long?

Dorodnova: Yes, though I was truly 'home sick' for my 'family home', rather than the 'country home'. I truly believe that it's our mindset that we chose, which drives our relationship with the

world around us and the situations that we find ourselves in. There are a lot of books I'm seeing on this subject now, many years later. I wish I knew it then. I instinctively chose the mindset that "it's better here and this is my new home". Thus, I checked my reactions relative to this decision. This mental decision made the transition much easier.

Chapman: How does the school system for your children differ from Russia as it was for you?

Dorodnova: I have to re-frame the question slightly here to give an answer. I don't know how the school system is like in Russia nowadays, as I hear it's changed quite a bit since I left. Relative to the school system in the former USSR, I think the academic aspect is my easier in the US. Whereas the social and athletic engagement of the kids here in the US is far beyond what I have experienced growing up. In short, I think kids have more activities here and get a much more diverse education and skills while the academic part may not be as rigorous.

Dorodnova: Do either of your kids play tennis?

They do, recreationally. My son is starting high school this year and is hoping to make a high school team. My daughter is in middle school and soccer is her first love, as for many girls nowadays in the US. She does play tennis in the summers and enjoys it quite a bit.

Chapman: I won't mention his name for privacy, but I remember when your son was about to be born and you called for name ideas. You wanted a name that sounded both Russian and American. I won't take credit for naming him, but my suggestion won!

Dorodnova: Ha! I don't remember! I'm glad it worked out 'in your favor'!

Yes, we are happy we could find some names for our kids that both, my family in Russia and my husband's family in the US can easily relate to. It's important for the kids to know their heritage and, at the same time, feel like they fit in with the country and culture they grow up in. Having an easily relatable name definitely helps.

Chapman: What do you wish you could bring from Russia with you to the US? as in either political or services or culturally...

Dorodnova: I thought about it after you asked me this question. I thought it was a really insightful and useful question. The answer I came up with is... "Russian ingenuity", an out of the box thinking of sorts. Russians call it "smekalka". What it means, roughly, is to find a surprisingly effective low-cost solution, that solves a problem well, with an unexpected, an often funny, answer. As an added benefit, it also stimulates a very unique sense of humor, which helps people go about their life. Though, it maybe be hard to transplant, I admit, as it's a cultural element. You did ask it as a hypothetical, 'anything goes', question, right? ☺

Chapman: Do you miss anything about Manhattan?

Dorodnova: I miss the college town atmosphere. The strong college spirit throughout the town. Big games, celebrations, events, in the name of the Wildcat. There is something pure about it, outwardly almost.

Chapman: As a young college girl coming into a foreign country, what advice would you give today's student athletes in similar circumstances?

Dorodnova: There is a tough period first 6-9 months - hang in there it's worth it!
It's absolutely a gift, treasure every moment, it goes fast.
Work your butt off and don't forget to enjoy and make life-long friends.

Chapman: Who was your toughest competition in college? Do you still play her?

Dorodnova: I don't think I had that 'one person' to think of. I played against many very good players, both on my own team as well as from other teams.
I was fortunate to become close friends with and play tournaments together with another player from the Big 12 Conference, whom I played every year while in college. She was then also a bridesmaid at my wedding. (don't know if she wants me to name her. I prefer to preserve anonymity for her and rest of the folks)

Chapman: Do you keep in touch with anyone from your college days? Besides me?!?

Dorodnova: Yes, facebook friends with most of my teammates. It's nice to see them and their families growing through life.

A couple of friends from other college teams we played, Oklahoma and Tulsa, also became my friends for life, with one being a bridesmaid at my wedding.

Chapman: Have you played against any more well known or famous players?

Dorodnova: yes, Anastasia Myskina, Elena Dementieva, and Anna Kurnikova, while I was a junior, before I joined K-State. None to think of afterwards.

Chapman: Does your husband Kurt play tennis? If so I assume you beat him?

Dorodnova: He doesn't. He prefers to excel in other sports and take our competition elsewhere.

Chapman: What do you like about living in Colorado?

Dorodnova: Its fantastic active lifestyle. It's a very sports-oriented culture. Hiking, skiing, tennis, biking, water-skiing, running, baseball, football, basketball, lacrosse, every sport known to man, practically - it's here. The mountains are gorgeous and the weather is pretty good as well. It's not too huge as a major city and big enough to have most things: jobs, entertainment, recreation, travel proximity.

