

Small WO

With her parents by her side, this second-grader is making a name for herself on the tennis court.

BY STACY BOOTH

Sasha Inchauste's earliest memory of playing tennis fittingly includes her father, Ron. "I was beating my dad and I was making him run like a rabbit," she says. Ron is her mentor and coach, and well qualified for the position. He played tennis throughout his college career and also played on the pro circuits. After graduating, Ron was the head tennis pro at Four Lakes Tennis Club near Chicago. "I started Sasha when she was about 2, 2½," Ron says. Working first on her hand/eye coordination, Sasha quickly moved onto the court and started hitting balls. "I was able to see, from my years of coaching experience, she had the ability to do well. We took it from there, little by little without pushing too hard."

At 7 years old, Sasha has already competed in multiple tournaments, often playing against kids up to five years older. To get ready for tournaments, Sasha says she plays with her dad a lot and also warms up before matches. Sasha plays tennis six days a week, both with her dad and at the Club, and her hard work is paying off.

In May, Sasha won the Pacific Northwest sectional championship for 8-year-olds in the Little Mo national championship. Her win at that tournament secured a spot in the West Regional tournament in San Diego, which took place in September.

The Little Mo tennis tournament is unique in that unlike U.S. Tennis Association tournaments, this competition divides tournaments into younger age groups. At the Little Mo tournaments, kids can participate in 8 and under, 9 and under, 10 and under or 11 and under boys' or girls' divisions. Most USTA tournaments have divisions every two years, with the youngest participants at age 10 and under. The tournament is organized by the Maureen Connolly Brinker Tennis Foundation, which is dedicated to furthering tennis and junior tennis programs. Maureen Connolly Brinker, a Grand Slam winner at 18, whose tennis career was cut short the following year by a horseback-



LEFT Ron and Olga Inchauste are concentrating on Sasha's education and keeping tennis fun.

OPPOSITE TOP Sasha enjoys playing tennis with her family and at the Club.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM Sasha won the Pacific Northwest sectional championship for 8-year-olds in the Little Mo national championship in May.

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riding incident, formed the foundation. Maureen died of cancer at 34, and her friend Nancy Jeffett heads the foundation today. Some now-famous tennis players have competed in the tournament as children, most notably Andy Roddick.

For the first time this year, there will be a Little Mo International tournament, happening in Texas in December. Ron says he doesn't know if Sasha will compete in that tournament yet—"We have to do San Diego first," he says.

The advantage to playing in the Little Mo tournament, besides having an opportunity to compete against children from around the country who are the same age, is the exposure it gives the young tennis players. Often coaches will attend matches and watch the budding athletes, and getting spotted at a tournament can mean gaining a scholarship to a tennis academy.

Even with all of the Little Mo excitement, the Inchaustes are concentrating on Sasha's education and keeping tennis fun. For now, Ron says most of the tournaments they participate in are local.

In addition to practices at the Club and tournaments, Sasha plays tennis with her parents and older brother, Adrian. Ron and Olga, Sasha's mom, enjoy playing mixed doubles at the Club and Olga also does aerobics daily.

Ron jokes that not only does Sasha have his tennis-playing genes, she also has Russian-athlete genes—Olga grew up in Moscow. Though she didn't play tennis as a child, Olga says she did participate in figure skating from age 6 to age 12. "I was very active," she says about her childhood, "so I support my daughter's tennis interests and her coaching by dad."

Sasha's parents are happy their daughter has found something she likes so much that will also teach her many important life lessons. "I think with sports," says Olga, "it helps to organize her schedule and (teach) discipline." Sasha knows to do homework right after school because she has to play tennis later. Tennis is also helping her with people-skills. "She needs to learn to relate to kids of all ages, and that is something that the kids her age sometimes are not exposed to," says Olga. Ron adds that Sasha is not scared or threatened when she has to play against someone much larger, and tennis is teaching her to relate to adults. Sasha is also learning about sportsmanship, an experience she gets from taking



tennis lessons at the Club. The coaches, says Ron, are "always pushing for them to be good sports, be fair, be competitive." He says Sasha enjoys her time with the coaches here, especially Trent Neugerbauer, Dave Lombardi and Brian Nash, and she also likes playing with the other kids. "She's made so many friends of different ages, boys and girls, at the Club," Ron says. "Those are friendships I think are going to endure through time."

As long as Sasha still enjoys playing tennis, Ron and Olga say they'll continue to encourage her. For now, Ron says it's a good after-school activity, and they are taking it slowly to see where it will lead her. Sasha, however, already has her mind set. When asked what she wants to be when she grows up, without hesitation she says, "a tennis star."



NOMINATE

INTERESTING, NOTABLE, TALENTED,
ANY EXTRAORDINARY, FUN OR JUST
ALL-AROUND TERRIFIC

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