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THE SPORTING SCENE

TITLE IX BABIES

The golf-playing Lendl girls are part of a revolution in the sport.

BY DAVID OWEN

Dayna Ohotnicky is one of the top female golfers at the Torrington Country Club, in northwestern Connecticut. Her parents were both good amateur players, and she learned the game as a child, in the late nineteen-fifties and early sixties. In 2004, she made it to the final match in the women's club championship, a tournament she had won twice in the past. On the seventeenth hole, a long par three, her opponent hit a soaring five-wood shot, which ended up a few inches from the cup. "That shot just blew me off the course," Ohotnicky told me recently. She lost the match, one down.

Ohotnicky's opponent was Daniela Lendl, who was eleven years old and was playing with scaled-down golf clubs, manufactured by a company called U.S. Kids. Daniela is the second youngest of the five daughters of Ivan Lendl, the former tennis star, who owns a ten-bedroom house on several hundred acres not far from the club. She prefers to be called Crash, a nickname that she acquired as a young child because she was always charging into things, and she's a little like Ramona, the engagingly self-possessed heroine of the series of children's books by Beverly Cleary. When Crash was eight, she told her father that she wanted to play ice hockey, and he let her stay up one night to watch a televised women's game, in the Olympics. Early in the first period, two players were pressed against the boards, trying to control the puck, and Crash asked, "Why didn't she just smash her into the glass?" Ivan said, "There's no checking in women's hockey," and Crash said, "You're kidding." She watched for a few more minutes, then, disgusted, went up to bed.

Crash—who recently set the women's course record, 68, at Shingle Creek Golf Club, in Orlando, Florida—isn't the only gifted golfer in the Lendl family. Marika, who just turned sixteen and is the eldest of the sisters, and Isabelle, who is fourteen, are both ranked well ahead of her,

nationally, and have both won important junior tournaments. Marika and Isabelle have also played in adult events, including the Connecticut Women's Open. Marika played well in a tournament on the Futures Tour, which is the Ladies Professional Golf Association's equivalent of the minor leagues, and in 2004 Isabelle was the youngest player, at thirteen, to qualify for match play in the U.S. Women's Amateur. The youngest sister, Nikola, known as Nikki, is eight years old and is just beginning to play. The only non-golfer among the girls is Caroline, who is Isabelle's fraternal twin; like her mother, she rides horses, and she hopes to compete in the Olympics someday.

The golf-playing Lendl girls are part of a major revolution in their sport which, over the next few years, will transform the L.P.G.A. Tour. Annika Sorenstam, who is thirty-five years old and has been the No. 1 player on the tour for the past five years, is probably the best female player of all time, the women's counterpart of Jack Nicklaus or Tiger Woods, but after her and a group of other top players the level of play drops off considerably. Heather Daly-Donofrio, who has won two L.P.G.A. events, told me that when she joined the tour, in 1998 (she graduated from Yale in 1991 with a degree in history and turned pro two years later), it was unusual to find more than a few other women on a driving range, and lifting weights was unheard-of. The new young players have more in common, athletically, with Babe Didrikson Zaharias, who dominated women's golf in the late nineteen-forties and early fifties and was a co-founder of the L.P.G.A., in 1950. Zaharias was unafraid to compete against men, and played with an intensity and power that, in her time, were viewed as sinisterly masculine. Ron Sirak, the executive editor of Golf World, told me, "These kids are the first generation of Title IX babies. Their mothers were the first beneficiaries of that legislation, which said that colleges had to give equal money to women's sports, and they grew up in families where it was O.K. to play games. It wasn't like in my generation, where athletic girls were viewed as sort of odd." Stina Sternberg, a senior editor at *Golf for Women*, said, "There are many L.P.G.A. tour veterans who are not going to do well in tourna-

is Michelle Wie—who was born in 1989, has played respectably in several events on the (men's) P.G.A. Tour, and earned ten million dollars or so from endorsements last year, making her, at sixteen, the fifteenth-highest-paid golfer in the world, male or female—but there are many others. The No. 2 player on the women's money list last year, after So-

after the round—a confrontation that, on both sides, appeared to consist mainly of Oedipal subtext.

These talented young women, the Lendl sisters among them, are the direct descendants of Tiger Woods. When he began to dominate the P.G.A. Tour, a decade ago, almost immediately after he joined it, he changed virtually every-



The former tennis champion Ivan Lendl with his daughters Isabelle, Crash, and Marika. Photograph by Martin Schoeller.

ments anymore, and they're going to retire, because no matter how good they are it's going to be tough for them to keep up, week after week, with seventeen-year-old girls who can smash the ball three hundred yards." In addition, the L.P.G.A.'s new stars are cute. On the Web site of Natalie Gulbis, who is twenty-three years old and earned a million dollars on tour last year, there is an advertisement for a wall calendar that features photographs of her modelling bikinis from a line of swimwear that she endorses. (The television audience for women's golf, like the television audience for most sports, consists mainly of men, although the number of young women is growing.)

The most visible young female player

renstam, was Paula Creamer, who graduated from high school in the middle of the season and is now just nineteen. A co-runner-up at the 2005 U.S. Women's Open, and the winner of the 2005 U.S. Women's Amateur, was Morgan Pressel, who is now, at seventeen, the youngest member of the women's tour. (The tour has a minimum age of eighteen, but Pressel—a niece of Aaron Krickstein, who was a teen-age tennis star in the eighties—got a waiver.) The new stars are determined not to be intimidated by Sorenstam's record. In the first round of the A.D.T. Championship, in West Palm Beach, last November, Creamer challenged Sorenstam on a rules interpretation, and didn't back down, either on the course or at a press conference

thing about the sport, including old attitudes about practice and physical conditioning. Nowadays, even high-school players hit range balls as doggedly as Ben Hogan did, and the world's top pros work out almost every day, go to bed early, and spend as much time talking with sports psychologists as Arnold Palmer and Lee Trevino used to spend hanging around in bars. Woods, in the minds of many young athletes, turned golf into a primary sport, and Sorenstam proved that the Woods model applied to women as well: she works out as much as he does, and physical training has been a major factor in her domination of the L.P.G.A.

The Lendl girls, like many athletic prodigies, share something else with

Tiger Woods: an extraordinarily dedicated, involved, and ambitious father. (Woods's father, Earl, died last week.) During his playing days, Ivan Lendl seemed so methodical and unemotional that many tennis fans never warmed to him-in 1986, after the second of his three consecutive U.S. Open victories, Sports Illustrated ran a cover story called "The Champion That Nobody Cares About"-but he was a remarkable athlete. He was ranked No. 1 in the world for two hundred and seventy weeks, roughly a third of his career, and he was far ahead of his time in his emphasis on physical training, nutrition, mental discipline, and strict routines. He retired from tennis in 1994, at the age of thirty-four, because of a permanent injury to the connective tissue in his spine (caused by years of hard running on tennis courts), and transferred most of his athletic work ethic and competitive intensity to golf.

Lendl, unlike many former athletes, doesn't live in his past, and he has told his daughters very little about his career. "The person who won the tennis tournaments seems like somebody else," he told me. "Who cares what I did fifteen or twenty years ago? I'm much more interested in how to lose five pounds, and

how to improve my golf game, and how to help the girls play better." But his past has shaped who he is and how he thinks about sports, and has therefore heavily influenced the girls, whose development he has directed since they were toddlers. (The girls started off playing tennis, but Marika, Isabelle, and Crash had all switched to golf by the age of eleven.) "Can you create athletes, or do they just happen?" he asked me not long ago. "I think you can create them, and I think that Tiger Woods's father proved that. People will sometimes ask me, 'How much talent did you have in tennis?' I say, 'Well, how do you measure talent?' Yeah, sure, McEnroe had more feel for the ball. But I knew how to work, and I worked harder than he did. Is that a talent in itself? I think it is."

The Lendls belong to lots of golf clubs, among them the one that I belong to, a nine-hole course in Washington, Connecticut, about a half-hour from the Torrington Country Club. The pro, Fran Hoxie, was the girls' first teacher, and Marika, Isabelle, and Crash have spent a lot of time on the premises. They are polite, respectful, well behaved, and pleasant to talk to. Crash, who has dark, wavy

hair, is more outgoing than her older sisters; of the three, she is the most likely to decide that she would rather help Hoxie hose off golf carts than continue to work on her chipping. Marika and Isabelle are tanned from the many hours they have spent on the driving range and on the course, and both have long, light-brown hair. Marika tends to wear pink laces in her golf shoes, and she has decorated most of her golf clubs with pink paint. Isabelle is a year younger but a couple of inches taller, and she is strong. Her father told me, "You try to arm wrestle with Isabelle, and you're going to lose. I'm not the weakest guy, but if I took her on I would have my hands full."

The club has a waiting list for adults but not for juniors, so the girls got to join several years before their father, who was allowed to play as their guest once a month. The girls did not necessarily look forward to those outings. Lendl is still a pitiless competitor, and he holds nothing back when he plays with children. When he was growing up, in Ostrava, Czechoslovakia, he told me, one of his first athletic ambitions was to beat his mother, who was the No. 2 female tennis player in the country. He did so at thirteen, and began competing in international junior tournaments not long afterward. "I have told the girls since they were little babies that if they ever beat me they will know they earned it, because I will never give them anything," he said. "If Nikki wants to race me from here to there, I won't let her win—she has to beat me." When Ivan does win, he is not above gloating, and the girls have learned to gloat back. After beating Marika once, when she was twelve or thirteen, he was rubbing it in a little, and Marika, furious, said, "Yeah, but I have a better swing." Recently, she beat him for the first time playing from the men's tees—at Carmel Country Club, in Charlotte, North Carolina, where the U.S. Girls' Junior Championship will be held this summer-and she let him know it. "I was happy she played well," Ivan told me, "but I hate to lose, even to my kids."

Ivan and his wife, Samantha, were married in 1989, when he was twentynine and she was twenty-one. Samantha is tall and lovely, with dark-brown hair that she wears almost to her shoulders, and her features run through the faces of



"I still enjoy running my winery, but these days my real passion is the meth lab."

all her daughters. "When Isabelle and Caroline were crawling," Samantha told me recently, "Ivan would say, 'Who can get to the top of the stairs first?' and Marika would throw her sisters out of the way so she could beat them. I would say, 'Ivan, you're going to kill them. Relax a little,' and he would say, 'No, no, no, this is good—it's how you teach them to compete.'"

ate last November, during Thanksgiving week, I went to Sea Island Golf Club, on St. Simons Island, Georgia, to watch Marika and Isabelle compete in the Polo Golf Junior Classic, a major event for young players and the American Junior Golf Association's final tournament of 2005. (Tiger Woods won the boys' title in 1991, when he was fifteen. In 2004, Marika, at fourteen, finished second in the girls' division, after Morgan Pressel.) Ivan accompanied the girls—Samantha isn't a golfer herself, and stays away unless Ivan is busy elsewhereand supervised them closely during the relatively few hours when they weren't practicing or playing. He isn't one for cozy pep talks. As Marika, whose hair was looking a little windblown, walked toward the first tee on Sea Island's Seaside Course, for the first round of the qualifier, he said, "Fix your hair or you don't start." Pause. "Good luck." He carries a folding chair at tournaments—his back injury makes it difficult for him to stand for long periods—and he plants the chair in conspicuous positions (beside a fairway, behind a green) and watches his daughters closely, sometimes through binoculars. Both girls dislike being scrutinized like this, and each feels more comfortable playing when her father is watching the other. Ivan's attitude is that he's the least of their problems, and that they might as well get used to the binoculars. He doesn't become upset if the girls miss a putt or hit a poor drive, the way some parents of junior players do, but if one of the girls makes what he considers an easily avoidable mental error he sometimes has trouble containing his frustration, and will move to another hole.

In his own athletic career, Lendl succeeded in part by capitalizing on the psychological weaknesses of his opponents. He studied them on videotape, and, using colored markers and diagrams, charted where they hit their serves in cer-

tain situations, so that he could anticipate those shots. He also worked tirelessly to control as many elements of his own game as he could. His racquets were always made from the same mold, and they were always strung on the same machine by the same man, Warren Bosworth. One of Bosworth's assistants broke in each racquet before Lendl received it (by playing with it on a tennis court for a total of four hours, with a restringing following each hour of playing time), because brand-new racquets felt too stiff to him. He then used each racquet for just a single ball change, perhaps forty minutes or an hour. When he travelled to a major tournament, he often carried four dozen. His feel was so exquisitely sensitive, he says, that he could tell the difference in spin between a ball hit with a racquet on which the logo had been stencilled in red paint and one hit with a racquet on which the logo had been stencilled in black, because the pigments had different coefficients of friction. "When you want to be at the top, you can't leave anything to chance," he told me. "That's what I'm trying to explain to my kids. They don't understand

At Sea Island, Marika and Isabelle both easily qualified for match play-Marika after shooting even par in the first qualifying round, and Isabelle after shooting one over in the second, on an extremely windy day, when no girl broke par. Both sisters then won their first two matches, and faced each other in the quarter-finals. Isabelle ended up beating Marika, one up, despite being three holes down at one point. Isabelle told me, "I tried to pretend that she was just another opponent, but that was hard, and our match was really tense, because we've had this ongoing battle at practice. When I was three down, I was thinking, Don't give up, just keep playing, keep calmalthough I knew it wasn't going to be a fun car ride home either way."

Earlier, I had asked Ivan if it was hard for him to watch the girls compete against each other—Samantha can't stand it—and he said that it was not. He said that he sometimes secretly roots for one or the other, depending on which one he feels would be helped the most, psychologically, by a victory, or by a defeat. When Marika was a rising junior tennis player, Ivan asked her teacher,

Kenyon Clark, to pair her not with a talented boy her own age but with the boy's older brother, who was an even better player. Clark asked why, and Ivan said. "Because I want her to lose."

All five Lendl sisters used to attend the Washington Montessori School, Il five Lendl sisters used to attend in Connecticut, during the fall. (Their mother, who is a certified Montessori instructor, also taught there part time.) Every winter, the family would move to a house they own in Vero Beach, Florida, where golf courses and driving ranges weren't buried under snow, and when they were in Florida the girls were home-schooled by Samantha. Two years ago, Marika enrolled in the David Leadbetter Golf Academy, at I.M.G. Academies, in Bradenton, Florida, in the hope of lifting her game to the next level, and the family bought a condominium in an on-campus development intended for the families of students. (Their condo is the largest in the development, with three bedrooms upstairs, plus a room on the ground floor which they use as a fourth bedroom, and the seven Lendls, their three large dogs, and their huge collection of sports equipment fill it up.) Isabelle and Crash started full time at Leadbetter the following year. At the academy, roughly half of each weekday is devoted to schoolwork and half to golf and intensive physical training. Isabelle begins her day at six-forty-five, with a ninetyminute workout at I.M.G.'s International Performance Institute. (She and her classmates pause at seven-thirty to drink a "shake" made from Gatorade and whey powder.) Marika's schedule is similar, although her daily workout is in the evening. Nikki and Caroline attend a private day school elsewhere in town.

I visited the Lendls in Bradenton last December. There was a huge international junior tennis tournament taking place on the campus at the time, and Ivan and I spent part of an afternoon wandering among the courts, occasionally watching the tennis but mainly chatting with people he knew from his tennis days. One of them was a scout from an equipment company, an old friend of his, who was evaluating professional prospects among the fourteen-and-unders. The scout told me, "At this level, to find the best players you look for the craziest

fathers." A little earlier, in a parking lot, Lendl and I had run into one of the craziest tennis fathers of all time: Jim Pierce, whose daughter, Mary, turned pro at fourteen, won two Grand Slam singles titles, and was at one point ranked No. 3 in the world. Jim Pierce, who inspired the so-called Jim Pierce Rule, which prohibits an extensive menu of thuggish courtside acts, once screamed, "Mary, kill the bitch!" from the stands during a tournament, and was later banned from women's tennis events for five years following disruptive behavior at the 1993 French Open. In the I.M.G. parking lot, Pierce opened the trunk of his car, found a heavily highlighted copy of a tennis instruction book that Lendl wrote twenty years ago, and asked Lendl to sign it.

Later, I asked Lendl where he placed himself in the universe of famous sports dads. He said, "Behind every successful athlete there is a strong person who helped them early on. Mostly, it's fathers, but for Martina Navratilova it was her stepfather, for Martina Hingis it was her mother, and so on and so on." In the beginning, he said, all young athletes play to please that adult, but, eventually, if they are to advance they must assume responsibility for their own ambitions. "There is a time—which is a very hard time to pinpoint, I think-when the parent must step back. I'm trying to make sure that I'm not too early, so that the girls are not lost, and not too late, so that I'm not in the way. I think that when Earl Woods stepped back a little bit was when Tiger really took off as a golfer. It's a delicate balance."

endl has a classic jock's sense of practical-joke-and-trash-talk end of the comedy spectrum. He once went bike riding near his home in Connecticut with a good friend, a golf pro, and one hill was so steep that the pro had to get off his bike and walk. A week or so later, Lendl had Warren Bosworth call the pro, pretending to be a reporter from a golf publication. Bosworth said that he was working on an article about physical conditioning, and then asked questions about things like diet and stretching and exercise. Eventually, the discussion came around to bicycling, and Bosworth said, "Tell me. When you come to a steep hill, do you ride your bike or push it?" There

A FEW FACTS

The chiming clock. The girl at her desk sneezing. The hiss of traffic after rain has sleeked the street. The chime sounding off the silent library air. Outside, a kind of monumental, after-icy-rain relenting, something loosening and the ground going soft, glistening, the water on it taking in the world, the sycamore drawing water up its roots, the huge trunk sopping it. In the room the vase of Cremona daisies: yellow, white, and flaming orange. Shoes and books, a lit figure bent to her work, lifting her shoulders slowly up and looking out, letting a breath go. Smiling when the child comes in with a question. Outside, the spreading yellow maple shedding branches. A cairn of bulky logs. Birds from dawn to dusk at the feeder: black flashings across the blank window. The cats dazzled, feeling the old hunger. Now the child is shaping an arabesque by the stove; now she is wrapped up in a rug, reading; now she's sitting up in bed, a duchess demanding her cardigan, grinning at the laden tray—its porridge, milk, tea, striped napkin in its ring—at light seeping through blue curtains.

—Eamon Grennan

was a long silence. Then the pro said, "Tell Ivan to go fuck himself."

At home, Lendl's sense of humor often produces a comparable reaction. Lendl has always loved German shepherds, which—unlike the human members of his household—he can train to be unfailingly obedient and loyal. When he bought his current shepherd, Gunner, he told Nikki that he now knew he would never forget her birthday, since Gunner had been born on the same day. Nikki, rather than being offended or hurt, brushed off the remark as typical. At one point during my visit, Ivan was hollering up the stairs about homework, and Nikki grinned at me and mouthed, "Don't pay any attention." In a household where the female-to-male ratio is six to one, Ivan sometimes seems like a dictator and sometimes like a minor functionary with purely ceremonial duties. He himself was a tightly disciplined only child, so the hubbub of a herd of willful girls is a new experience for him. Samantha told me, "All the girls sort of gang up on him, and I have to say I feel sorry for him. He and the girls have an ongoing battle about control: they're trying to take it, and he's

trying to maintain it." Shortly before dinner one evening, Ivan asked Isabelle to ask Caroline to come downstairs, and Isabelle asked Crash to hand her her laptop so that she could instant-message her—and this was almost too much for Ivan, who was momentarily transformed into a sputtering sitcom dad. The girls have their moments with each other, too, and family meals are often preceded by brusque declarations of what they won't eat, or whom they won't sit between.

For the most part, though, they get along well. The Lendl girls are rivalswhen I asked Crash what it's like to play against her sisters, she said, "Annoying"-but they have practiced together for years, and they support one another, to some extent, when they aren't in direct competition. They also usually play with real enthusiasm. One day a few summers ago, Ivan told Crash that he had to go out of town on Sunday and that if she wanted a game that day she'd better find someone else to play with. When he got up to go to the airport, he found Crash in the bathroom with a club directory open on her lap and a cordless phone in her hand. "It was six o'clock in the morning,"

Ivan told me, "and she was already up to the H's." One of the people she had called was a woman she had played with in the past. The woman had been to a party with her husband the night before and hadn't got to bed until 3 A.M., and was not interested in golf. "What about your husband?" Crash asked. The woman said that he was asleep. Crash said, "Well, wake him up and ask him."

The ability to maintain that kind of passion through adolescence and into adulthood is not a given, however, especially considering how exhaustively the girls have trained and how young they were when they began. Ivan is properly disdainful of the directionless hedonism of the average, unfocussed American teen-ager, but directionless hedonism and lack of focus are powerful forces, and you never know.

Samantha wants all the girls to go to college, while Ivan tends to think of college primarily as an optional golfseasoning program. (He himself refused to go, and viewed any schooling beyond high school as an impediment to his progress as an athlete.) College is a looming issue for most of the talented young women who are almost old enough to join the L.P.G.A. Tour. Stina Sternberg, the Golf for Women editor, told me, "Even five years ago, nobody got out on the L.P.G.A. Tour before they graduated from college, but this trend of the players turning pro right out of high school, or even before they graduate, is not going to go away." The professional golfer Tom Watson graduated in 1967 from the same high school, in Kansas City, that I did six years later. I remember his reputation as a teen-age golfer, but I also remember him as the quarterback (and leading rusher) on the varsity football team, which won the conference championship when he was a senior, and as a shooting guard in basketball. He would put away his golf clubs every August, when football practice started, and not take them out again until spring. He went to Stanford without a scholarship, walked on to the golf team, and didn't make his decision to try the P.G.A. Tour until he was close to graduation. Today, good young athletes usually specialize in a single sport in early childhood, and no genuine golf prospect would risk a career-ending injury by running quarterback keepers on

half-frozen Midwestern football fields. (The Lendl girls are not allowed to ski.) When I described Watson's career path to Ivan Lendl, he said, "The world has changed."

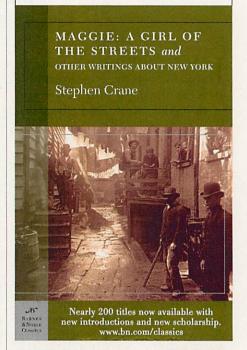
Six years ago, at a youth golf clinic in Oklahoma sponsored by the Tiger Woods Foundation, a participant asked Woods if he knew of any young Tigers coming along, and Woods said that one of the best prospects, in his opinion, was his own niece, Cheyenne Woods, who is Marika's age and who learned to play golf the way Tiger himself did, by watching Earl Woods hitting golf balls in a garage. Chevenne has played in many of the same tournaments that the Lendl sisters have, and she and Isabelle and Marika are separated by just a few positions among the top players in Golfweek's junior rankings. Recently, I asked Woods whether Cheyenne was planning to go to college, and he said, "I certainly will want her to go, and to get her degree. You have no guarantee, as an athlete, that you will succeed once you make the decision to turn pro and try to do it for a living, and you can get hurt at any time." Woods left Stanford after two years, partly because remaining in school any longer would have been financially irresponsible, but he views those two years as the best of his life.

Several years ago, Isabelle and I played a nine-hole match. It was just before her game took off, at probably the last moment when a not-completelyterrible middle-aged guy could still beat her. She praised my decent shots and graciously conceded short putts, and we spent a very enjoyable hour and a half together. She said that her twin sister, Caroline, was attending a birthday party that afternoon, and we agreed that that was a waste of a nice summer day. I said the thing about golf that grownups always say to kids, that it's a game for a lifetime, and I also said that no matter what Isabelle and her sisters ended up doing with their lives I was certain that golf would always be part of it. I told her about my brother, who was the captain of his golf team in high school and in college and now works as an advertising executive in New York City and sometimes gets to play with clients.

"No," Isabelle said firmly, as we walked up the fifth fairway. "I'm going to play on tour." •



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