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Perfect timing

Martina Hingis reached the top in tennis at a young age, experienced the lows of a doping scandal and eventually rose again. Now she has hung up her racket.

ANDREAS W. SCHMID

Martina Hingis spent another four years jetting around the world. Switzerland's most famous female sports star once again revelled in the tennis circus and all the luxuries, success and applause that go with it but made the surprise decision to call time on her career at the end of October. It is not the first time she has retired but there is no doubt that it is for good this time and there will be no more comebacks.



"It had to happen at some point," she reflected, which sounds understandable. During her career, the 37-year-old has experienced all the highs and lows that fate held in store for her and has come through them. She recently returned to the number 1 spot in the world rankings in the doubles game. That brought things full circle. Hingis entered the big stage as a teenager wearing braces in 1994 and got off to a brilliant start. And 23 years on she has reached the pinnacle of the game again, now as the grande dame on the tennis circuit. That is how great sportspeople end their careers. "It's the perfect time," Hingis herself remarked.

The youngest number 1 at the age of 16

When she retired the first time around in 2003, it was too early. From a young age, she and her mother and trainer Melanie Molitor had completely dedicated her life to the global sport. While there were indications at an early stage that an extremely rare talent was emerging in the Rhine Valley, her breakthrough at the top level was certainly no matter of course. Would she crumble under the tremendous expectations placed on her shoulders? Not Hingis. She became the youngest world number 1 at the age of just 16. Over the following years she played in many matches which have gone down in tennis history. There was the unforgettable moment in the final of the French Open in 1999 when she impudently breached tennis etiquette by marching onto Steffi Graf's side of the court to check whether the ball had really

gone out. After the defeat and whistling from the crowd, she was devastated but can laugh about it today: "At that age you do things that you shouldn't."

Despite not being as athletic as the exponents of power tennis, Hingis remained at the very top for years thanks to her clever game and sublime touch, but then suddenly wanted to pack it all in at the age of just 22. Nobody really understood why and perhaps not even Hingis herself. However, it was not long before Hingis was back on the tour. Her comeback was going extremely well, she won three tournaments and got back into the top 10 of the world rankings. But she then retired from tennis again, this time not by choice. She was found guilty of taking cocaine after a drug test at Wimbledon and was banned for two years. The media made cruel jibes about how she had gone from being a cheeky young player to being embroiled in a cocaine scandal. Her public image hit a low even though it did not really feel like that to her, as she recalls today: "I was well liked by the people around me."

Hingis went to ground and only hit the headlines due to relationship problems. She enjoyed little success in her role as a coach on the tennis scene. However, the word from the players she trained with was that she could still compete with the best.

Another comeback and her third retirement

She wanted to find out if she really could perform at the top level, which proved the best decision of her career. In 2013, Hingis returned to the tour again but this time only as a doubles and mixed doubles specialist. Things were now going well for Hingis, not just on the court but also as far as her image was concerned. She appeared more relaxed than ever before both on and off the tennis court. Whereas before it seemed as though she got no enjoyment from the game but was instead simply unquestioningly putting into practice what her mother demanded, this no longer applied as she was now in her thirties. The one-time prodigy had now turned into a mature woman who was at peace with the world and herself, finally winning widespread acclaim and admitted to the Hall of Fame. On top of all this, she also enjoyed considerable sporting success.

After 23 years and 25 Grand Slam titles, she is now hanging up her racket. But that doesn't mean she is planning on drawing her pension: "Hey, life goes on," quips Martina Hingis. She plans to look after her horses, make the occasional appearance at her mother's tennis centre but above all "take life easier", as she puts it. What about starting a family? She already has a partner, doctor Harry Leemann. "I would like to have children," reveals Hingis.

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