

HAPPY AT LAST

Monica Seles reveals in a new memoir her secret weight struggle and how she's finally found peace

BY ELIZABETH McNEIL

It should have been Monica Seles' moment of triumph. It had been more than two years since she retired from tennis after being stabbed during a match, and here the onetime prodigy had just won the 1996 Australian Open, the first major tournament of her comeback. Yet as Seles held her trophy aloft amidst the roaring cheers, her thoughts quickly turned from her victory to her perceived failing: the 20 lbs. she'd put on during her time away. "I was more worried about sucking in my stomach in front of the photographers so they couldn't see my love handles," Seles recalls.

Today you'd never guess she ever had such fears. The 35-year-old stunner has dropped the weight and is so confident in her body that she showed it off on *Dancing with the Stars* last



Seles says abc's "worked hard not to think about" being stabbed (in 1993)

"There's more to life than numbing myself with food," says Seles (in Florida). "There is a beautiful life out there."

Seles (with dancing partner Jonathan Roberts) says DWTS "was a little out of my comfort zone."



Seles (at a wedding in 2000) says, "The bigger I got, the smaller I felt inside."

“I’m happy I went through a fat period. It helped me discover myself” —MONICA SELES

season. It was a struggle, however, to get there. In her new book *Getting a Grip on My Body, My Mind, My Self*, the former champ, who retired from tennis last year, lays bare her nine-year battle with binge eating, the long-term effects of the stabbing and how she finally found peace. "It's amazing that she can share and be so open to show the world how vulnerable she was at one point," says tennis great and good friend Martina Navratilova.

A tennis phenomenon from the former Yugoslavia, Seles burst onto the tennis scene in 1988 with a ferocious will and two-handed forehand. She moved to Florida at 13 to train, leaving behind family and friends, despite speaking only little English. "There was loneliness and the extreme pressure of winning every day," she says. Still, she thrived, winning her first Grand Slam at 16, soon displacing Steffi Graf as the world's top player.

Then on April 30, 1993, Günter Parche, a crazed Graf fan, stabbed Seles in the shoulder with a nine-inch boning knife during a tournament in Germany (see box). "My life changed forever," she says. (Parche never served a jail sentence after a

judge found him "mentally diminished.") Just weeks later Seles was still recovering mentally and physically when she received devastating news: Her father, Karol Seles, was diagnosed with prostate cancer. "It was a double whammy," she says. "My father was dying. What can I do?"

Seles stopped playing and sank into depression. She found comfort vegging in front of the TV and inhaling ice cream and big bags of potato chips. "Food was my coping mechanism," she says. After her father died in 1998, she realized, "I wasn't happy in any part of my life. I had great control with tennis. But not with this. This was so much stronger. It was the one thing I couldn't control."

In 1995 she returned to tennis. At 165 lbs., the 5'10" Seles tried to hide her weight under baggy clothes. Nights of 4,000-calorie snacks were followed by grueling six-hour workouts: a cycle she couldn't stop. Tabloids called her "fatsa" and compared her unfavorably to such younger players as Anna Kournikova. "I just wanted to feel attractive," Seles says.

In 2003 she gave up strict dieting and punishing trips to the gym and adopted a gentler approach, with

more walking and eating in moderation. Over two years she eventually shed 35 lbs. (from her top weight of 178 lbs.) and friends say she's finally learned to relax. "She is easier on herself and allows herself to enjoy her life now," says tennis commentator Mary Joe Fernandez. Since she stopped playing, Seles spends much of her time taking pictures (her favorite hobby) and volunteering with the North Shore Animal League America and youth groups that encourage girls to play sports. For now, she says, "I'm at a very happy place in my life."

SELES REFLECTS ON BEING STABBED

"My whole life was in front of me. . . . And then in an instant, it was all taken away. . . . Although the physical scars healed, the emotional damage cut much deeper, and I was plunged into a fog of darkness and depression that I couldn't see my way out of. I retreated into my own head and numbed myself with self-sabotaging behavior. . . . I felt paralyzed."

MONICA SELES

