



SHARAPOVA BOMBS OUT

There's nothing like an opening day stunner at a Grand Slam. Like then-unknown Ivo Karlovic whacking Lleyton Hewitt at Wimbledon or career nobody Gilles Muller dousing Andy Roddick at the U.S. Open.

And on a rainy Day 1 of the Aussie Open, we were treated to another as Maria Sharapova played her worst first-round match at a major since 2003 and will fly home with only herself to blame for this 7-6 (4), 3-6, 6-4 loss to fellow Russian Maria Kirilenko.

She hadn't played a real match since October and decided, once again, not to play a lead-up to Melbourne, opting instead for some hokey exhibition match where there is no real tournament pressure or ambiance.

Then she went out on the Laver court and committed 77 unforced errors in a three-hour plus match, delivering absolutely nothing of promise for her 2010 season.

All the problems that beset Sharapova's comeback from shoulder surgery in 2009 were on display. More bad serving. No improved movement along the baseline. No staying power in the long rallies.

Geez, you wouldn't call Kirilenko one of the big servers in women's tennis, but she didn't have to be for this match. With the exception of one game in the final set, her serving, including her seconds, were so precisely placed that Sharapova did little more than wave her racket and slop balls back into the net as she groped, off-balance, to get a few shots back in play.

We know she works hard in practice. We know she's committed. We know she's competitive. But she needs matches, matches, matches and it's just astonishing that she didn't get down in the muck the last couple weeks to properly get ready for the Australian. She looked awful and I suppose Nike can't be too happy, either, since that bizarre dress Sharapova wore won't get the expected exposure this fortnight.

Maria's shoulder appears to be fine. She's cracking her serve over 100 mph with regularity and had nine aces in this three-setter. But she also had 11 double faults and, unless I miscounted, every faulted second was long or wide, not into the net -- an indication that she's just not snapping over the ball well enough.

She's got decent pace on the second, but not location and Kirilenko had 13 break points in this match, converting five of them. I can't recall Sharapova winning any long rallies in the final set, despite the fact that Kirilenko is not a particularly aggressive player in the grinding sessions. She hits a lot of balls down the middle -- deep, but down the middle. And Sharapova was very accommodating in producing the unforced errors.

She came in for her post-match press conference with that irritating smugness that she exhibits after bad losses, blowing off questions that she deems unworthy while trying to sound as if none of this matters that much. She said something about there being a lot of people in the world who don't even know what tennis is. Huh?

Sharapova has had some bad losses in Slams -- to No. 154 Alla Kudryavtseva at the 2008 Wimbledon and to No. 70 Melanie Oudin at last year's U.S. Open, though if Oudin continues to improve that one might not be that awful.

Kirilenko came into the tournament at No. 58 and a 1-2 record against Maria -- her only victory coming on a Sharapova retirement. She had no business winning this match. But, then, Sharapova had no business preparing for this Slam like some prima donna.

Charles Bricker can be reached at bricker@primesportsnetwork.com