



PHOTOGRAPHY • ALISHA TOWNSEND

Sandra Dynka

BY CLAIRE PRIME

Sandra Dynka spends five hours a day, six days a week on the tennis court. When she's not hitting tennis balls, she's lifting weights, improving her endurance, building confidence and focusing on her game plan, all under the guidance of the pros at Kitchener's GSM Tennis Club. She even gets advice on how to eat.

At 26, the Kitchener native is aiming high. She hopes to join the ranks of the top 500 female tennis players in the world this year and has even greater goals for the years to come.

Dynka's parents, Miroslaw and Renata Dynka, were both competitive athletes in their home country of Poland. Miroslaw played soccer at the national level while Renata and her brother were swimmers. When the couple immigrated to Canada almost 30 years ago, they moved into an apartment complex with a tennis court and "they just started picking it up for fun," says Dynka. They hadn't even learned to speak English yet.

As children, Sandra and her younger brother, Tom, were encouraged to get into sports. At six, she picked up a racket and, by the time she was 10, she was practising every day and competing in tournaments.

"Both my brother and I are very driven, so even playing board games and stuff, we were in it to win it," she says, laughing.

In high school, at St. Mary's in Kitchener, she continued to push herself but was forced to make sacrifices. "I had to miss dances, I had to miss hanging out with friends because I had practice all the time, every single day. On weekends, I would have tournaments," she says. Her dedication showed. In 2008, she was ranked No. 1 in the under-18 Ontario singles category and was the Tennis Outdoor Provincial Champion and Ontario high school champion.

When the time came to pick a university, Dynka went with an underdog. She was recruited by coach Todd Petty, a new coach at Texas Tech University who hoped to turn the program around. Her class, hand-picked by Petty, graduated from the school with more wins than any other class in the school's history. Now, Texas Tech's women's tennis team is ranked No. 5 in the United States.

After graduating in 2013, she took some time off and worked, but she missed the thrill of competition. For a year, she tried to juggle work and training, but realized "if I want to do this, give this a go, I have to really invest my time and all my energy into

tennis," she says. "If you want to be a professional tennis player and actually be good at it, there's no way you can have a full-time job. It's just not possible."

In the summer of 2015, she returned to the game full time, with the help of sponsors. When she is not training at GSM, she is competing in tournaments around the world. She has travelled to Australia, England and Greece, among other places. "I get to travel the world and see things other people don't get to see in their entire lives," she says. "But it does get hard living out of a suitcase and not having people that are close to you like my friends and family and, obviously, my boyfriend. That man is a saint!"

Keeping her friends close helps when she needs a break from the intensity of training. "A lot of my close friends are actually not athletes, to be honest, which I think is how I keep my sanity," she says. "Sometimes you just need a mental break to talk about something not related to tennis."

Because tennis careers are so short, Dynka knows that if she wants to do this, it's now or never. "I'm OK with making these sacrifices because I know it's what I want to do. It's my dream and I will regret it if I don't," she says. "And also, I will have time for all that stuff later." 