

At 17, tennis champ showcases 62 cups

89'

By Bogdan MIHAILOV

Elena Pampoulova is Bulgaria's new women's tennis champion; she is also the rising star of Bulgarian tennis, coming in the wake of the two elder Maleeva sisters, Manuela and Katerina, who are already established names in the game. At 17, Elena has 62 tournament victories to her credit, most of them abroad.

Elena, in her tenth year at school, is descended from a long line of tennis players. Her mother, Lyubka Radkova, stood at the pinnacle of Bulgaria's women's tennis for a long spell, and held the mixed doubles national title together with Elena's father, Emilyan Pampoulov, until both retired at the age of 35. Mr Pampoulov is now a civil engineer, and Ms Radkova coaches for Sofia's Levski-Spartak Club.

That's not the whole story, though. Elena's older twin brothers, Bozhidar and Matei, were Bulgaria's longstanding doubles champions, with important international victories. Now, Elena promises to become the prima in a star-studded family.

Elena got her first experience of the tennis court from watching her parents play from her own pram. She started serious training at the age of 6, under a programme designed by her mother. Her hobbies: pop

music and swimming. Now that she has her name "in the computer", she hopes to make her way to the top, and to debut in one of the Grand Slam tournaments.



Top: At 17 with 62 cups — not bad, eh?

Right: Elena's skateboard — her secret weapon?

Left: After tennis a little swimming to relax.

Bottom: The Pampoulov family on the court. Emilian, Elena, Anna and Lyubka (left to right).



Photos: Emil MANDJAROV