

*Confidence Comes More
from a Sense of Accomplishment
than from Results*

Naoko Sawamatsu

Having played 34 consecutive games in the 1990s at all four Grand Slam tournaments, Naoko Sawamatsu is a distinguished tennis player who ushered in the golden age of Japanese women's tennis together with her rival, Kimiko Date. We asked her to tell us the secret behind a decade-long career during which she maintained her status as a top professional player.

Overcoming the Adversity of the Kobe Earthquake

Sawamatsu was born into a family of renowned tennis players: both of her parents and her aunt played at Wimbledon. At the age of two, she took up tennis naturally, playing on her family's home court, and at only 15 years and six months, she won the All Japan Tennis Championship title. Dubbed a prodigy born into a celebrated tennis family, she became a center of attention.

Following that glorious moment of being a champion, she hit a slump for the first time in her life.

"After winning the All Japan title, if I made even one mistake, the senior members of my school club were ecstatic, and many fingers were pointed at me in the train or at school with the comment, 'Look, that's the girl!' Overwhelmed by the pressure, I stopped winning, even at prefectural tournaments. At one point, I thought of quitting.

That experience taught me that hardships come to everyone, and that even if you escape one, another will come, and you have to face it squarely no matter how long it takes to overcome it. I should just keep on practicing diligently, so that when the breakthrough comes, I would find a new, more 'grown up' me.

Once you've experienced this, when you come up against another adversity you will find yourself responding, 'Yes! Another chance for growth has come,'" she comments laughingly.

Sawamatsu turned professional when she entered college and continued winning games at the French Open, Wimbledon, and the Barcelona Olympics. However, a catastrophe hit in 1995. During the Australian Open, her home in Kobe was completely destroyed by the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake (a.k.a. the Kobe Earthquake). She was faced with a situation where she had to continue playing, not knowing whether or not her family had survived the disaster.



Sawamatsu competing at the 1995 Australian Open. © Gekkan Smash

"I was abroad, and couldn't reach my disaster-hit family at first. I couldn't stop crying, thinking, 'What if...?' Finally, I was able to talk on the phone to my aunt, Kazuko, who was in the Tokyo area. When I told her, 'I'll just quit and come home,' she said, 'If you became a pro with that level of commitment, quit now and swim home.' This made me say 'What!?' as I was expecting a word of comfort, but her strong words ignited a spirit of defiance in me. At the same time, I realized how naive I had been. Some players compete to support their families, and celebrated player Maria Sharapova didn't even have enough money to buy a racket at first. I think my aunt wanted to tell me that I should play with such determination that I would compete even it meant not being with my parents in their final moments." (Editor's note: They were both safe.)

Perhaps her aunt, Kazuko Sawamatsu, a top-class athlete herself, guessed at her niece's robust mental strength when faced with adversity. Although Naoko was sleepless, and unable to eat or practice for three days, she miraculously performed well and made it to the quarterfinals — her best result ever.

Separate Goals from Dreams and Give Yourself a Pat on the Back

In a world where only winning counts, most players remain in the shadows. There is always only one gold medalist — all the rest are losers.

"So, what do you work so hard for? I would say it's not for recognition," Sawamatsu explains. "It's not for winning, or for playing in the Olympics. It boils down to whether or not you're able to say at the end of the day, 'I was able to do my best today.' Making that affirmation night after night, and this process of self-examination fosters true self-confidence."

Goals are different from dreams — that's the life lesson Sawamatsu has learned from playing tennis.

"You won't muster enough motivation to work hard if your dream is too far-fetched and you're following it aimlessly, so have a goal that you can achieve quickly. And go easy on yourself. When you attain a small goal, give yourself a pat on the back. That should motivate you to work harder toward your next goal."

Currently, Sawamatsu is busy juggling her work and parenting her son. She comments, "My current goal is to raise my sixth-grade son to be a healthy and honest person. And my big dream is to support Naomi Osaka and Kei Nishikori in winning gold medals. Today, Japanese tennis is at a world-class level. You can expect a lot in 2020."



Naoko Sawamatsu

Born in Hyogo Prefecture, Japan, in 1973. At the age of only 15 and a half, she won the All Japan Tennis Championship title. In January 1995, she made it to the quarterfinals at the Australian Open while her home was completely destroyed by the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake. She played at both the Barcelona and Atlanta Olympics. She won the World Tennis Association (WTA) World Tour four times. Her highest world ranking was 14. She now works as a tennis commentator and TV personality. She serves as an "Ambassador" for the Toray Pan Pacific Open Tennis Tournament.