

DRIVEN TO COMPETE

Nataly Cahana Fleishman is six months pregnant. But she's still on the tennis court.

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THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

From a distance, Nataly Cahana Fleishman looks like her usual self: petite, toned and muscular as she rips shot after shot across a net.

Up close, there is something subtly different.

Beneath her polo shirt, which lifts just enough when she swings her tennis racquet, is a small, roundish belly.

Playing pregnant hasn't slowed the 27-year-old Fleishman, head professional at Norfolk Yacht and Country Club. And she's not about to let it slow her this week as she defends her Mid-Atlantic clay court title, belly and all.

And even though she's six months along, don't be surprised if she wins.

At the end of May, she won the Virginia State Clay Court Tennis Championships, sweeping the finals in straight sets.

Still, that was seven weeks ago, when the belly wasn't so



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Nataly Fleishman, now six months pregnant, won the Virginia State Clay Court Championships in May.

Fleishman: Easily advances with 6-0, 6-0 first-round win

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pronounced. Now, as she contends in the \$20,000 McDonald's Mid-Atlantic Open Clay Court Championships at Salisbury Country Club on the outskirts of Richmond, there's a little more there.

Fleishman, a former All-American player at Old Dominion University, was off to a quick start Wednesday as the No. 1 seed, winning her first match 6-0, 6-0.

"It wasn't too hard; I felt great — no problems," said Fleishman, who will face tougher competition today. "I'll go day by day with it."

Jamie Williams, whose three children take lessons from Fleishman, said she understands. Williams also played competitively while pregnant.

"I would stand out there and I'd be burning up," said Williams, who added that she had trouble keeping her balance at times and stopped at eight months along with her second child after she took a ball to the stomach. "I'd almost start to feel nauseous. I know it's hot; her feet must hurt."

But at 26 weeks along, Fleishman is barely showing and only seems to have difficulty running off the court.

If she feels discomfort this week, she said she'll reluctantly drop out.

That wouldn't upset her husband.

When the couple, who married two years ago, learned they were expecting, they discussed what she would do about the summer tournaments. Nataly was for playing; husband Seth was against it.

They decided to ask the expert and Seth found himself double-teamed at the doctor's office.

"Her OB/GYN, who happened to be a tennis advocate, said, 'Yeah, that's OK!'" Seth said. "I was asking a tennis fan if a tennis player could play, so I was at a loss."

Seems he would have been at a loss with many a doctor.

Upon hearing about Fleishman's case, Dr. Tara Gellasch said playing elite-level tennis doesn't pose a significant risk for pregnant women.

"Exercise in pregnancy has actually been shown to be beneficial to both the mom and the fetus," said Gellasch, an associate physician at Tidewater Physicians for Women.

Gellasch added that staying active and fit during pregnancy has been shown to ease labor and reduce the risk of postpartum depression. And while there are concerns about abdominal trauma while playing tennis, Gellasch said they are minimal.

"The positive really outweighs the negative," she said.

For Fleishman, playing tennis is nothing but positive.

She grew up around the game in her native Israel, tagging alongside her father who played recreational tennis.

When she was 9 and tired of being dad's sidekick, she took group lessons on her own. Less than a year later, she was riding two buses by herself to nearby Haifa — a three-hour round trip — to play on a club team.

Her coach soon told her she could become one of Israel's top players.

Determined to make that happen, she left home for the first time when she was 15 and moved to Israel's national center for sports, the Wingate Institute for Physical Education and Sport, just south of Netanya.

"We had all the best sport people in Israel in each sport," Nataly said. "It was like a dream come true to me because I got to play even more tennis."

A two-year military service requirement in Israel kept her from starting college after high school, but didn't keep her from hitting the courts. At 22, she left home again to attend ODU, where she was the first four-time Colonial Athletic Association women's Player of the Year and was at one point ranked No. 4 in singles in Division I.

"Tennis pretty much made my life," said Fleishman, who has traveled to more than 30 countries for tournaments. "It gave me everything I had. Since I was young it was something that I did every day, so it was like I was living tennis. I have great experiences through my life because of this that other kids never have.

"It gave me a scholarship to college, it gave me a job. Tennis was everything for me and it still is."

Translation: The second trimester of her first pregnancy isn't about to sideline her.

"It makes me feel like I'm doing something," Fleishman said.

The Fleishmans have decided on the name Shira for their new family member, whose due date is Oct. 21. It's Hebrew for "song."

While she claims she'll shut down the competitive aspect of her game for the remainder of her pregnancy after this weekend, those who know her aren't so sure.

"Nataly's determined and she's fit — everything she does is 150 percent," Williams said. "I'll see her out there probably until the week before her due date. Nataly may go into labor on tennis court."

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