

Portrait by Matei Buta for the Guardian

# 'My dream was to be the best. I did everything for tennis'

## The big interview Simona Halep

The world No 1 on beating shyness and physical trauma to get to the top - and how her French Open win eased an exhausting burden

**Donald McRae**  
Sports feature writer of the year

Everything I did in life, until now, was just for tennis. Nothing else mattered. That's why it became too much, maybe. That's why I suffered," Simona Halep says intently on a midwinter afternoon in Bucharest. We sit in a corner of a restaurant where the clinking of cutlery provides a refined backdrop to the raw immediacy of a rare interview with the world No 1. There is snow on the ground outside but only warmth from Halep. Beyond her burning intensity she smiles with relief. "There is no pressure now. I feel lighter. I feel better. I wouldn't have been this relaxed if I hadn't won the French Open. A big weight is off my shoulders."

The 27-year-old has avoided opening up before because, apart from her shy and private nature, she was consumed by a fixation that was finally quenched in Paris last summer when winning her first grand slam. Halep can now offer insight into her life in Bucharest. We meet at 9am and she chats cheerfully while we are driven to an indoor court on the outskirts of the city. I watch her practise for the Australian Open, which begins next week in the contrasting furnace of Melbourne, where Halep suffered so much last year. On the way to lunch, with Halep drained after playing hard for two hours, she finds pleasure in the simple fact she



▲ With Caroline Wozniacki after a punishing Australian Open final

spent her first Christmas at home in 10 years.

"I dedicated myself 100%, so many years," Halep says. "Now I've won a grand slam and I start to enjoy life more. I like to go out, make friendships. I'm more open. Before I won the French I was very focused."

Halep now appears the opposite of a one-dimensional obsessive. Instead, as she reflects on the dedication needed to reach her goals, she talks expansively about physical trauma, psychological barriers, the role of her former coach Darren Cahill and the sweetness of victory.

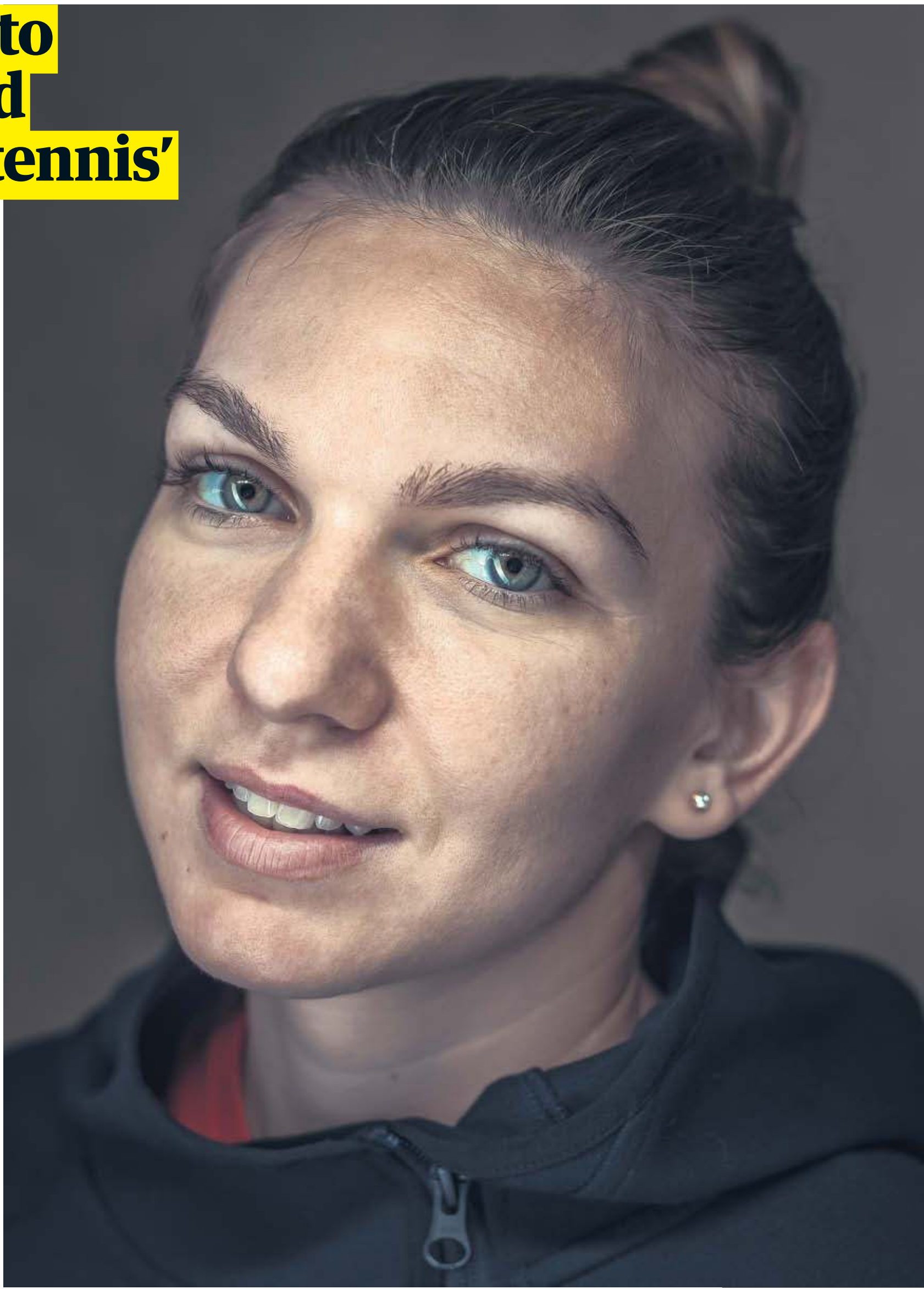
Cahill will spend most of this year with his family in Australia and so Halep is currently without a coach. This unusual situation adds to the fascination as to whether, while returning from a back injury and exhaustion after her momentous 2018, she can become an even better player.

"I have the experience and that's why I decided to be alone for four months without a coach. I want to feel relaxed. I had a lot of pressure [last] year, from Romania, from the people around me, because everyone was talking about the grand slam title. It's just a sport but for me it was everything. That's why I suffered a little."

Halep's psychological resolve has been tested but at last year's Australian Open she was subjected to a physical battering that meant she was taken to hospital after her draining three-set defeat in the final against Caroline Wozniacki. The entire tournament had been an ordeal. "I have never played such a tough tournament and I hope I will not have to again," she says. "It was a disaster. My mum was scared and she said I must never do that again because it was too much. It was a warning."

She had twisted her ankle badly in the first round but struggled on to win that match and the next one before facing Lauren Davis. They played for three hours 45 minutes in searing heat, costing Davis some of her toenails, before Halep won 15-13 in the final set. "That was amazing," Halep says. "She played so well and had three match points. But I think I had more desire to win. That match meant a lot because mentally I was strong. I could stay so many hours on court."

Halep survived another epic in the semi-finals, saving two match points and beating Angelique Kerber 9-7 in the third set, where "it felt like every point was 20 rallies because she's a very big fighter. I was proud of that tournament. I was not even upset after I lost to Caroline in the



final. I gave everything. But there was no more energy at the end. "After the final, we finished with the press around 10pm and they took me to doping control. At 2am I left because I couldn't [produce a urine sample] as I was dehydrated. They took my blood. At the hotel I started shaking and they got me to hospital. My mother was worried and said if she was in my place she would stop and just enjoy life. It was really bad for three months. I was exhausted and couldn't recover totally. But I am proud I played at my limit."

Just over four months later, in Paris, she was tested mentally rather than just physically. A fourth successive defeat in a major final would have felt ruinous - especially as Halep had lost the French Open the previous year when a set and 3-0 up in the final against Jelena Ostapenko. "I have the courage to say I lost that final," she says. "She won it in the end because she was great and when you are young you just play. I lost it because I couldn't handle the emotions. For the next three months, I cannot use the word 'depressed' because it's too much, but I was sad for a long time."

In the 2018 French Open final, Halep was a set and 2-0 down to an inspired Sloane Stephens. "I didn't expect her to play so well on clay so I thought everything will be lost again," she says. "I said I have to try something so I was more aggressive. I went to the net three times in one game, which I never do. I won the game and I had the confidence because I thought about the year before when I was leading and lost it. I really believed then."

Halep's face lights up as she remembers how 20 years of grinding work had finally given her the ultimate happiness she craved on court. "Everything I had dreamed was real in that moment. All the people I love were there and when I lift the trophy, and the national song is played, it was the best moment I ever had. I was crying because it was huge. Maybe it will be my best moment as an athlete. But let's see. Maybe the future will give me even more."

That future is made intriguing by Halep's decision not to replace Cahill immediately. In explaining how much he helped her overcome mentally, Halep suggests her personal challenge is shared by many Romanians. "People here don't believe in themselves much. We are very talented but we don't have confidence. I was lucky. Darren is Australian and totally different. He pushed me to be positive. I changed a lot."

Cahill took drastic action in March 2017 when, after she lost in Miami to Johanna Konta, he walked out because Halep was too negative. "I was shocked," Halep says. "Darren was really upset. He said that if I don't want to change it means I don't want to be the best. After a few days I started to work with a psychologist. This lady [Alexis Castorri] helped me understand myself and to work on my weaknesses. Darren was really proud and so we started to work together again because he really thought I want to be the best."

▼ Simona Halep strains to overcome Sloane Stephens in her first grand slam win  
CHRISTOPHE SIMON/AFP/GETTY



**'Everything I dreamed was real. Maybe it will be my best moment as an athlete. But let's see'**



Savouring her Paris victory last June

## Grand slam record

After three final defeats the world No 1 won her first slam title last year, beating Sloane Stephens in Paris

	Aus	French	Wim	US
2010	1Q	1R	2Q	1R
2011	3R	2R	2R	2R
2012	1R	1R	1R	2R
2013	1R	1R	2R	4R
2014	QF	F	SF	3R
2015	QF	2R	1R	SF
2016	1R	4R	QF	QF
2017	1R	F	QF	1R
2018	F	W	3R	1R

World rankings	Age	Pts
1 Simona Halep	27	6641
2 Angelique Kerber	30	5875
3 Caroline Wozniacki	28	5436
4 Naomi Osaka	21	5270
5 Sloane Stephens	25	5023

Can she succeed without a coach? "No, I need to find a coach. At this level it is impossible to go alone." Will she and Cahill be reunited? "I don't know. I can say I hope so because he's a great person and that matters the most."

Halep is as brave as she is honest and, in addressing all she gave up for tennis, she explains how she chose to undergo breast reduction surgery when she was 18. Did she feel scared? "No," she says. "My family was scared. I was not scared because I knew I have to do it for tennis. My dream was just to be the best. So I was laughing when I went to the doctor. Afterwards, I was so much lighter and all my back problems were gone. So it was the best decision. I was dedicated 100% and did everything for tennis."

Her rise is remarkable because, apart from her background giving her few advantages, Halep's character was perhaps not one of a typical sports person. "Sometimes I was crying that I don't want to go on the court because I was too shy," she says. "I was very introverted. I am still an introvert." Halep smiles when I say she has been confident and revealing in this interview. "I am open now. I improved a lot and I can be more natural."

She has begun to support young Romanian players hoping to make it on the pro circuit. "I received a lot from tennis so it's good to help others because it's very difficult. Many talented kids get lost because they don't have the money. Tennis is an expensive sport in Romania."

Halep also supports a girls' ice hockey team. "I am paying for everything they need - equipment, coaches, some tournaments outside of Romania. They started to beat the boys so it's good. I go see them for the energy and to get motivated." She is also motivated by her own "new goals. A new way. I'm not like some players who won 10 or even 20 grand slams. But coming from Constanta [her home city], from nowhere, and becoming the best, is pretty huge for a Romanian, and for me as a person."

"Now I would love to be better in Fed Cup and the Olympics in 2020. I also want to win a grand slam again, to finish No 1 again. But I won't put pressure on myself. I will have few more years of tennis and then I want to improve in other ways. In 10 years I would love to have three kids, a beautiful family and be out of tennis - knowing I gave it everything."

## Konta pulls out in Sydney for second time in two days

Johanna Konta's troublesome start to the new year took another turn for the worse yesterday when, a week before the Australian Open, she pulled out of the Sydney International for a second time in two days.

The British No 1 was scheduled to play Kiki Bertens as a lucky loser in the first round after having retired from her second-round qualifying match with a neck injury on Sunday, before news of her withdrawal was announced. No reason has yet been given for the decision.

Konta was a quarter-finalist at the 2017 Australian Open after having reached the semi-final a year earlier, but was knocked out in the second round in 2018. She swapped coaches in October when she ditched the American Michael Joyce after less than a full season and in came the Frenchman Dimitri Zavialoff. "We'd kind of come to the end of our road," said Konta recently.

Meanwhile, qualifier Heather Watson made a swift exit from the Hobart International after suffering a first-round defeat by Romania's Irina-Camelia Begu. Watson, who fought her way past the Australian Isabelle Wallace to claim a place in the main draw, went down 6-1, 6-4. The Briton lost six games on the trot as the first set slipped away and although she made a better fist of the second, she was unable to drag herself back into the match.

Konta and Watson have been selected along with Katie Swan, Katie Boulter and debutant Harriet Dart for the Fed Cup tie at Bath in February when Great Britain will be hosts for the first time in more than 25 years.

"I'm delighted to name our strongest possible team," said the captain, Anne Keothavong. "It won't be easy, that's for sure, but it's a challenge we relish and hope to give the home crowd something to cheer about."

Great Britain are one of eight teams taking part in the Europe/Africa Group One zonal event shared with Poland with the winner of each tie going into the World Group Two play-offs in April. The teams will be split into two groups at a draw due to take place on 14 January. Britain have suffered frustration in recent times, reaching the play-offs four times in the past seven years before failing to progress, their most recent reverse in April when defeated by Japan. **Agencies**



Johanna Konta was due to play as a lucky loser in Sydney