

Of the female players on our watch lists named during 2011, only one is currently positioned above the blue-diamond line on our diagram. Petra Kvitová thus heads our following list of rising stars, most of them under age 22 and either above or close to the blue-squares line.

1. Petra Kvitová

We named Petra Kvitová among our likely risers last April when she was ranked #19 at age 21. Now, nearly a year later, having won Wimbledon 2011, she is #3 in the rankings at just under 22.

Kvitová's place above our blue-diamond line -- #3 at age 22 -- is slightly deceptive, as our historical curve shows a discontinuity, bending sharply downward, at that very age. If the aberrant value is excluded, the curve would show median rank at age 22 of about #4-5. Kvitová's place would remain above the curve.

Left-handed, tall, and powerful, Petra has played four critical matches in 2012 to date. She lost three-set semi-finals to Na Li in the Sydney tune-up and to Maria Sharapova at Australian Open. She then won three-setters in Fed Cup action against strong German players Goerges and Lisicki, continuing her past pattern of Fed Cup greatness. She has slipped backward from a brief spell at official rank #2, as Fed Cup achievement carries no WTA points. But, having lost early at Indian Wells and not played at Miami last year, she has no points to defend from these events and therefore is well positioned to move upward soon.

2. Sabine Lisicki

Hard-serving, hard-stroking German star Sabine Lisicki is now ranked at a career-high #13. Severe problems with ankle injuries reversed her climb in 2010, but she returned to earlier heights last year. She appeared on our watch list last August when she was ranked #21 with a target rank of #7 one year hence. Her subsequent climb has been uneven, aided by round-of-sixteen finishes at U.S. Open 2011 and Australian Open 2012. Now at #13 at age 22 1/2, she plots in the realm between the blue lines.

3. Christina McHale

McHale at rank #34 and just under age 20 is the world's top-ranked teenager, having reached the round of 32 at both U.S. Open 2011 and Australian Open 2012. She joined Serena Williams in sweeping the singles for U.S.A. in January 2012 Fed Cup action against a Belarus line-up lacking Azarenka. A strong right-hander from New Jersey, she appears to be closing on, although she is still below, the blue-square curve. She is close to the bubble for obtaining seeded status at the forthcoming tournaments in Indian Wells and Miami, which would help her considerably in reaching the middle rounds.

4. Mona Barthel

Strongly improved results lifted Mona from #208 at end-of-2010 to #67 one year later, attracting relatively little notice amid the several other strong German players recently on the scene. Now at age 21 1/2 and height 5-1, she began 2012 by capturing the tournament at Hobart, winning three qualifying-round matches and then five more in the main draw. She won twice at Australian Open before losing to eventual champion Azarenka, and she continued her winning ways at Paris Indoors, winning the qualifiers and then two main-draw matches. Her current rank is #37, improving, though she is still moderately below the blue-squares curve.

5. Sloane Stephens

A year younger than McHale is fellow American Sloane Stephens, 5-7 now at #89 in the rankings and comparably with Christina below the blue-squares curve. Sloane penetrated the world top hundred after U.S. Open 2011, where she reached the final 32, and she became the youngest player in the top hundred at year's end.

6. Tímea Babos

Born and raised in Hungary, Tímea Babos began a rapid upward rise last fall, winning or scoring well in several ITF women's circuit events in Europe and Canada. From an end-of-2011 ranking of #153, she continued her climb by reaching the finals at Quanzhou ITF and winning a first-qualifying-round match at Australian Open. Then in February she reached the semis at the main-tour clay-court event in Bogota and then won the main-tour hard-court event at Monterrey, defeating two former top-forty players enroute (Cirstea and Errani). At height 5-10, her ranking at age 18 3/4 is now #68 -- only moderately below the blue-squares curve.