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Second time lucky

Natalie Glebova, Miss Universe 2005, won the Miss Universe crown in a city she was destined to live in.

By **KEE HUA CHEE**

NATALIE Glebova stands head and shoulders above most mortals. When this 1.79m stunner swans into a room, your eyes are immediately drawn to her. Call it presence, magnetism or the X factor, but whatever it is, Glebova has it by the container-load.

Well, she is, after all, Miss Universe 2005. Besides being beautiful, she is so articulate that I can hardly believe English is her second language.

"I was born in Tuapse, Russia, and my parents migrated to Canada when I was 13, so language was no problem. I wanted to be a gymnast but I kept growing till, finally, I had to give it up in Canada. I also knew I could never be a ballerina due to my height!"

Looking at her svelte figure, few would have guessed she has a really sweet tooth.

"My weakness is chocolate! I love chocolates and can eat them non-stop till my husband physically stops me as he thinks I might explode and ruin his furniture! But I don't put on

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weight, although I do watch my other food as I really like to be slim. Oh, and I know where to get the best chocolates in Bangkok and all the cities I visit!

"Winning a title, be it Miss Canada or Miss Universe, is not about how beautiful or desirable you look but how you manage yourself and how much luck you have on the night. I believed I was destined not to win in 2004 when I took part as it was not yet my time. I believe in destiny; that if you are fated for something, you will get it sooner or later," says a thoughtful Glebova.

Before the pageants, she worked as model upon graduating in information technology management and marketing at Ryerson

University in Toronto.

"In 2004, I was not even first runner-up but third runner-up! After the contest, I analysed myself to see what went wrong. I realised I was focusing on too many things simultaneously. I mean, I took the best of everything and piled them on me. I chose the latest hairdo, the most fashionable gown, and assumed if I picked the best of everything I would be a total, winning package. I was so wrong!"

The next year, Glebova chose a different approach.

"I decided on just one look that best suited me so I could be myself and look natural. I chose the gown, hairstyle, shoes and accessories that worked for me. I read extensively and was well versed with current affairs. I guess having been through it before helped.

I also had a very strong feeling I was doing the right thing so I felt confident without appearing arrogant. And it worked!"

Glebova was crowned Miss Canada 2005 in January and participated in the world finals in Bangkok in June. Even when she made it into the Top Five, she did not think she would win.

"I was pitted against four Latin beauty queens, Miss Puerto Rico, Miss Mexico, Miss Dominican Republic and Miss Venezuela! These Latin nations are famous as pageant powerhouses, and the odds were against me! Anyone would assume one of the Latin ladies would win."

As a brunette, was it tough battling those blondes?

"No, most Miss Universe title-holders were brunette rather than blonde," she points out.

Giggling, she continues, "This is not my real hair colour! My natural hair is brownish, but I thought I looked interesting with black hair as **my skin is fair.**"

When the competition came down to the final two, Glebova expected to be named first runner-up, and so was left speechless when Miss Puerto Rico, a favourite among the bookies, was named instead. From a non-contender the previous year, Glebova had become Miss Universe 2005!

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Homecoming letdown

After her reign was over, Glebova returned to Toronto for a massive homecoming celebration, dubbed Tastes of Thailand, but the whole affair fizzled out dramatically in cool and progressive Toronto.

"There is a 1990 City Hall bylaw that states if you used public properties like parks and botanical gardens, you cannot discriminate or classify different groups of people. The Thai organisers and I received an official letter stating I could attend Tastes of Thailand but I could not wear my crown, sash or be referred to as Miss Universe!

The official reason was to prevent stereotyping and downgrading of women but this was ridiculous as beauty pageants empower women and allow them to help the less fortunate.

"I didn't go, and it became a big story. International news agencies picked it up. Later, the Mayor David Miller apologised to me personally. He said it was not he but a subordinate who was overzealous in enforcing the law.

The ruling was invoked to ban a band called Barenaked Ladies from performing a public concert!" she recalls.

These days, Glebova is better known in Thailand, where she now resides, as Mrs Paradorn Srichaphan.

Most people think she met her Thai husband, once the world No 9 and highest ranked tennis player in Thai history, during the Miss Universe contest in Bangkok.

"No, I didn't even know he existed when I first came to Bangkok. I only met him on my second trip when I was offered a job by Singha, the beer and beverage conglomerate.

"We were introduced by mutual friends but we didn't click during our first meeting. I never dreamt of marrying him or wanting him to be the father of my children. We didn't even exchange phone numbers.

"I just thought he was a very handsome and nice guy, but you don't marry someone just because he is good-looking and pleasant! It took a few more months for fate to get us together."

Did she have any pre-requisites for her dream man?

"Not really. I was not looking for someone taller but Paradorn is taller than me, which is great but I wouldn't have minded a shorter man. I also never thought of race, occupation or wealth, although I expected someone who was financially independent."

It all worked out fine in the end. Her husband is a strapping 185cm and financially sound, too. His career prize money is calculated at US\$3.6mil (RM12.7mil), and he has earned millions more in endorsements.

His current sponsors are Adidas, Yonex and Thai Airways. Glebova, for her part, is brand ambassador for Better Vision and ICC beauty products.

Last year, she started a charity Party4Charity and is spokeswoman for SCAD (*Soi Cats And Dogs*) as she is a cat person and owns

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several strays.

The couple lives in a luxury gated community in a Bangkok suburb and have a fleet of limousines, each emblazoned with "S.Balls" – Paradorn's nickname is Super Ball. Each car carries the same lucky number 79, the year of his birth.

As part of her Singha job, Glebova once had to go to a distant temple to donate money for AIDS victims. And who should be in the same car as her but her future husband Paradorn Srichaphan.

"That was when we really got to know each other. We talked about AIDS and the charities he was involved in, and I realised he was kind and caring. I was so glad the journey was long! We started dating after that and spent every day together, so it was a very intense relationship as we could not bear to be separated. Even a few hours felt like months!"

Six months later, he proposed.

"Oh, it was so romantic, and I will always remember how he won my hand!" says Mrs Srichaphan.

"He flew me to Bali and kept everything a secret. We stayed at Ritz-Carlton and he took me on a moonlit stroll along a cliff as the ocean roared below. It was incredible. I swear the stars were shining down on us.

"Paradorn was nervous, and I suspected something was going on. Suddenly, he went down on his knees, produced a diamond ring and asked if I would marry him!

"I shouted 'Yes' so loudly I think everyone heard in Bangkok! The most incredible, amazing thing happened after we agreed to be husband and wife. A soft, gentle drizzle fell on us, true blessings from heaven!"

Their 2007 marriage at Mandarin Oriental was the wedding of the year. They are in such high demand in Bangkok's social circles that quite often they are forced to attend events separately.

"I try not to go clubbing too much as I don't want any gossip. Then again, I am sure some people can come up with bad things whatever I do," says the former *The Amazing Race Asia* participant philosophically.

When can we hear the pitter-patter of tiny feet?

"Any day will do!" she laughs.

"I am ready for motherhood! I want my kids to go into sports like their father but I won't encourage my daughter to take part in beauty contests unless she wants to.

"But I want her to take up dance. I missed out on that so I want to relive it through my daughter!"

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A beautiful couple:
Natalie Glebova and
Paradorn Srichaphan.