



"I never tell myself: 'I am number one in the world'"

Women World Champion Nicol David tells her 'secrets' and 'dreams' in this exclusive interview to Squash Corner

By Lao Meng – Photo Fritz Borchert

Squash Corner: It's a great pleasure meeting you again here in Penang. This beautiful island in the north-west of Malaysia is the place you were born and where you started playing squash. Can you tell us when and how did you pick up the racket ?

Nicol: Well I started playing when I was five years old. Actually I was following my two sisters Lianne and Cheryl who started first. The fact is that when they were playing I was always troubling them



running around outside the court, then they finally put me inside and so I picked up my racket. I really loved

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squash from the very beginning and my parents never need to push me to playing or training. In general I loved movement and sports from my childhood and I tried several ones during my school age. But for squash it was always passion. I never felt that training was too much tiring and never had doubts on what I was doing. Actually I discovered quite soon that squash would also make me traveling, knowing new places and

meeting new people, all things that I enjoyed to do from the beginning.

When I was nine I started serious training and I also joined my first competition in KL, playing in a junior tournament where there was only under 19 group and I liked the feeling immediately. That's my nature: I love competing, and possibly winning.

SC: You are famous not only for the outstanding results you have reached in your squash career, also for the concentration, severity and systematicness of your training. Is this one of the keys of your success ? And what would you suggest to a young player to improve both technical and physical training ?

Nicol: Actually I think that I was fortunate enough when I was young, because starting competitive squash early I also had the opportunity to start competitive training very early and to enjoy all the support



from our National Sport Council since I was almost a little girl. Many sport experts from different fields used sport science best know-how to develop both my physic and my technique.

When I was 12 years old they also started teaching me a lot on the psychological aspects of squash competition. From then on I have been always practicing my mental strength, and I always give it great importance.

Then traveling and getting more experience, playing with different opponents, different styles, you start understanding how you can deal with situations, different kind of technical and psychological problems. That's when you build your mental toughness and your focusing ability, and you understand how important the entire mental training staff is.

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side at the same time. For example your body, how much it can make, you push it to its limit and step by step you pass over and move to the next stage. Also on the technical side it is the same thing. You cannot go straight to the extreme; you have to push and moving forward step by step.

To be successful in competitive sports it is not just a question of body. You have really to work a lot on all these three aspects to increase the efficacy of your training and the strength of your game. And you have always to try to do better and better. At the same time you have to try for new things. For example three years ago I decided to change my grip. Why ? To give me more options. It doesn't matter what results you have already reached, you are always targeting to your improvement. Another example is thinking about the great champions who came before you, their technique, their consistency in hitting the ball, and you need to work so hard to try to reach them.

SC: *Going back to the three aspects you talked about: physical, technical and mental; in your opinion what are the best percentages of these aspects which can make a squash champion ?*

Nicol: You have to have all at the same time. But when you want to get the result, the mental is really the one which takes over. You have really to be mentally strong to work out your physic and technical



capabilities, and to do it at the right time. So focus is the very key. My parents told me that since when I was a child I was able to be strongly focused in what I was doing. And in training inside the court I have always been extremely focused.

SC: *So we have discovered three secrets of Nicol to be a champion: unbeatable passion for the game, never doubtful willing of training and practicing squash, and an extreme capability in focusing and developing mental strength. Are these three things enough to be a Champion ?*

Nicol: I don't know if they are enough. But I am sure they are necessary. Concerning me, there are some other things, but I won't tell you, otherwise it would seem to be too easy ...

SC: *I believe it isn't easy. Anyway, at the age of 25 you have already put together one of the best collections of squash titles of all the times: 2 times World Junior Champion, 2 Gold medals and 1 Silver medal at the Asian Games, 3 times British Open Champion, 3 times World Champion. And last but not least, 29 months in a row of N.1 world ranking since august 2006. It is certainly not easy to keep this level of performances, but maybe it is even more difficult to fix new challenging targets starting from a so high basis. Can you tell us what are the your next targets ? Do you still have one "squash dream" which you will work on to reach in the next years ?*



Nicol: Well, right now I am pretty much focusing on my performances. Even

if I have won all these titles, I know that every year I am learning something more. Actually, my matches are built on performances trained before. If I do well in the training, working on some specific aspects, like a certain technique or movement, I want then to see it in my game; I want it can really improve my strength in the match. And when this happens, then my result just comes. So I still have to fix my targets, to work on it seriously during training and finally applying it in the right way during the match. This is the way I am always motivating and challenging myself at the same time.

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Concerning my secret dream, first of all there still is one title which I have not reached yet, which



is a gold medal at Commonwealth Games. I don't want to miss it the next time, even if I know it's never easy, because it's a big game and there are so many of the best players joining it.

But if you want to know really a dream, that is to help squash to get in the Olympic Games. I really want to make sure that I am doing everything I can to bring squash to the Olympic, even if I have to retire before it happens. Hopefully, if it happens in 2016, I would prolong my career to that time and then making real my dream of playing squash at Olympic Games. I will be 33 years old, it won't be easy, but I will train and prepare myself for the challenge, trying my best to get that gold medal.

SC: *You are really the best Ambassador that Squash could have for the Olympic bid and you are contributing to this wonderful dream of all of us probably more than any other. But beside that, or let's say*

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before that, can we say that the only next target left to you is to beat "Nicol" ?

Nicol: Actually, it is really not simple just to stay and keep the position where I am now. The intensity of every match I have to play is so high. You have always to be ready for new challenges from your opponents. So, it is not about beating myself, I never tell myself "I'm world number one". On the contrary I always keep in the mind that at this level this isn't anybody's game, because everybody is so close. At the end it is really the mental aspect, what I call the focus, to make the difference in the very specific situation of every match.

SC: *Talking about your outstanding results, I forgot to say that at present you have been unbeaten in the last 53 matches. You have already become the player beyond all the others, admired but probably also envied, surely the one who all the best put on their target and try to beat at any cost. Do you feel or not the psychological fatigue to be number one and to keep top results ? How do you deal with this kind of mental fatigue ?*

Nicol: Well, I think every match you play you can feel the strain, especially for high level and intensity tournaments. Of course, knowing that the girls who are going to play me have less pressure and they will likely play their best squash all the times they play me, this increase my stress. But I just know that if I do the right training and prepare well also my





physical form, I'm fit enough and I'm strong enough, then I know that I can go through the whole tournament. Being technically prepared and physically fit can reduce a lot the mental fatigue and the stress of the result. Then after any big tournament I need at least few days away from squash. Your body and your mind both need some time to rest and then be ready again for going back in the court.

The fact that there are people coming to my matches, appreciating my game, following my results is obviously very positive and very encouraging for me. Actually not in every country you can get the same support from people. Maybe in some other countries I would be world champion and few people would know it. But in Malaysia I got the attention and the sport is growing here, so the necessary support and funding come from the Sport Council, and being world champion helps a lot. I use all this support to keep improving my game, and keep performances and results in the tournaments. Concerning the envy of somebody, I don't know, and I simply don't think about it.

SC: *Coming to something closer to us, squash in China has big potentialities, but it is still at its early stage of development, maybe something similar to Malaysia long time ago. Do you have any suggestion for increasing popularity of squash in China and developing competitive squash players ?*

Nicol: I think that in the very last years China has already reached some important achievement in developing squash. First of all China is so strong in so many sports, just the decision to start investing and developing a totally new one like squash is already a big step which wouldn't be easy in many other countries.



When I went to China in 2004, with Rachael for WISPA promotion activity, even if it really was the very beginning of squash in China, I saw the willing and the decision of the people involved in squash development, which has been proved by all the things China has done in squash since then.

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No doubt that China has big potentiality in squash; it just needs to keep pushing it for few years more. Then if squash can get in the Olympic Games, I believe the Sport Council of China can really see the chance of developing competitive players in 7-8 years, likely able to fight for medals at the Olympic. In Malaysia in



1998, when I was 15 I joined for the first time an important international game (the Commonwealth Game), then after 7-8 years I was world n.1. In China you have so many top badminton players, and it is so easy to find good racket sports' players, it's just the matter of transferring some of those talents and potential to squash, then developing competitive squash players could really be faster than in other places.

In terms of popularity of squash, you are doing the right things. Increasing the number of tournaments around China, even small ones are always useful to get people closer. Then with the increase of money funding if you can have some big events it always can strengthen the exposure of Chinese squash locally and internationally. But the most important thing is to bring squash among the people, using as much as possible glass courts in public spaces. More and more people will watch the game and it will be easier to get sponsors and TV coverage. When you finally have TV and media reporting squash news the popularity will make a big step forward. Developing social squash is also very important. They are the first public and promoter of squash everywhere.



SC: *China women national team's players Jiang Li, Wu Zhenzhen and Xiu Chen all had the fortunate opportunity to meet you and watch your training last year when they were attending a training stage at Penang Squash Academy. Of course now they are all your fans, but they are also a little scared by the huge distance which separates their skills from your level. What would you tell them to spur them on to greater efforts and possibly narrow the gape to the top ?*

Nicol: I remember China's girls when they were here in Penang, and I really watched big improvements in just a couple of weeks of professional training at the Penang Squash Academy. Especially their movements in the court and the understanding of the game, they are quite fast learners. In my opinion these girls at this point are really doing well, just keep doing it, training a lot, following good coaches, and if possible watching a lot of squash will also be of big help. They should try to go to as many tournaments as possible, not only in China, playing and watching as much as possible. Watching the best players' games is useful to understand technique and tactic, and after every good match you have seen you can visualize better on yourself the right things to do. Then hopefully China is now also developing junior players, taking

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them when younger they will be even faster, and of course potentially stronger.

SC: *You came to China twice in 2004 (playing to the final the first squash professional tournament ever held in China). Since then Chinese Squash Association has done a lot to push squash development in China. But it is still so important for us to promote the image of squash around public and among the most useful things to do, in my opinion, there are tournaments, events and exhibitions with squash stars like you. When will we have the opportunity to meet you again in China ? Can we send out immediately the invitation card ?*

Nicol: I would love to go back to Shanghai and Beijing and to play there again in a WISPA tournament. We had so much fun in China when we went in 2004, we were so well looked after, and we ate a lot. China is a great country and I think that China has so much to attract top players. I know that Hong Kong also can closely support China squash development, especially for women squash as Hong Kong is now quite strong. Anyway, I think everybody would be happy to be closer to China squash development in the next years.

SC: *So we are going to send the invitation card immediately to Nicol. In the meanwhile we wish you the best for the new year, and see you soon ... in China !*

Nicol: Thank you and best wishes to all the players and amateurs of squash in China and a special cheer to the girls of China national team !



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