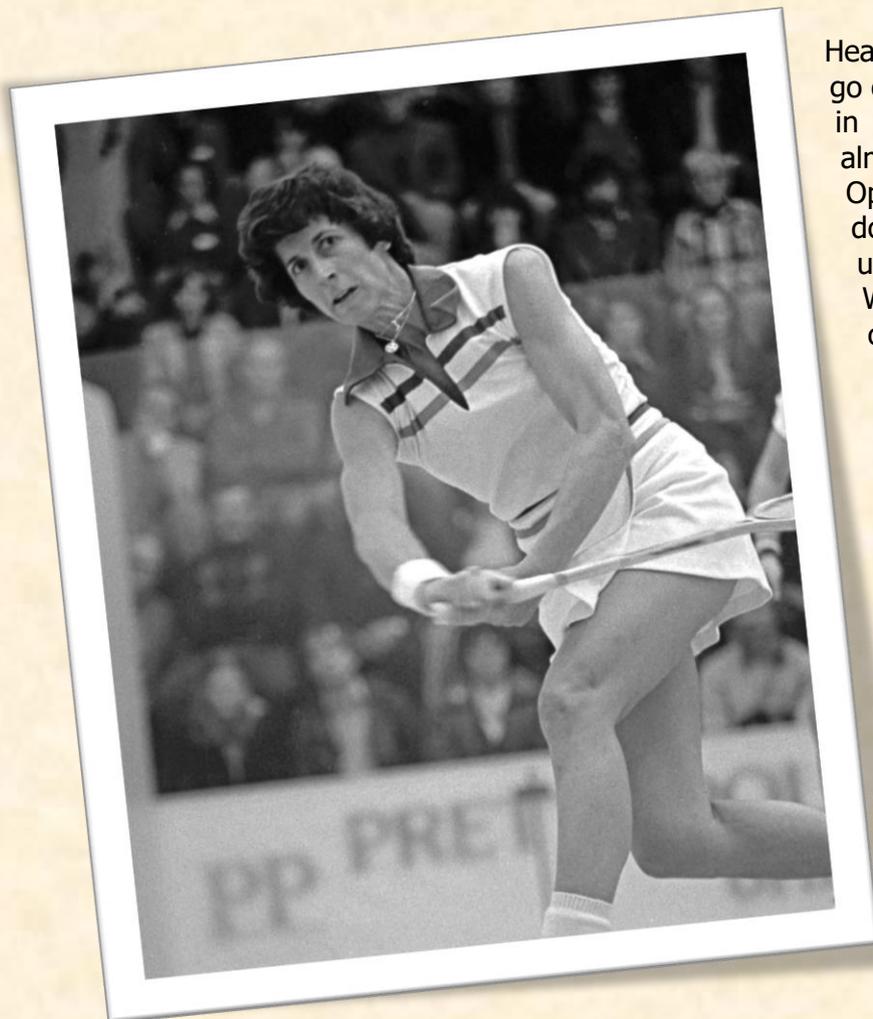


HEATHER McKAY The Ultimate Record Holder

At 17, Heather Blundell was already an ardent sportswoman, playing competitive tennis and hockey. One day, however, she, her best friend and her sister happened by a squash court while vacationing in Sydney. They stopped to watch the match on the court, impressed by the athleticism. As she explained, "We decided to give it a go as we were actively in search of an extracurricular activity to advance our fitness level on the hockey field."

Hockey's loss, squash's gain.



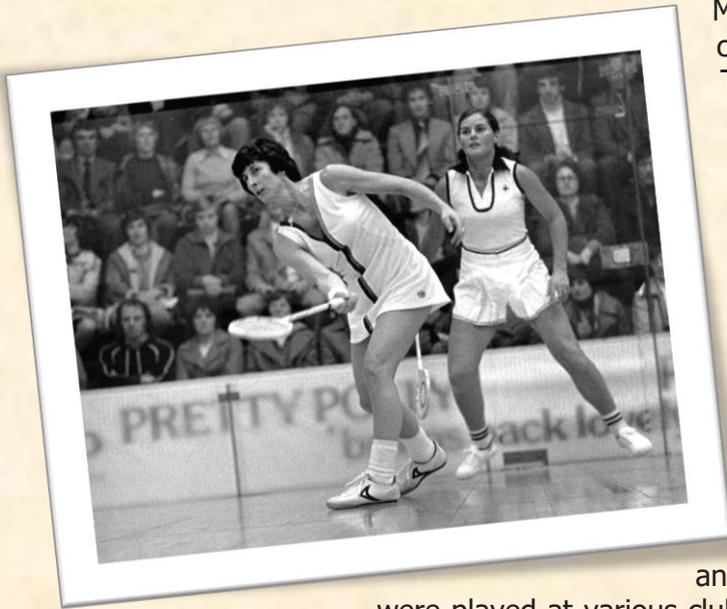
Heather McKay, née Blundell, would go on to have the most storied career in women's squash, winning an almost unbelievable sixteen British Open titles in succession, a period of domination in which she remained undefeated. Her induction into the WSF Hall of Fame, among a myriad of squash accolades, came as no surprise to anyone. She has also been recognized with the prestigious Member of the British Empire (Civil) Award and became an Officer in the General Division of the Order of Australia, an honour she received in 2018.

Despite her complete dominance in the sport, however, McKay is an unassuming individual with an infectious laugh. She is even-tempered and has a wealth of knowledge that she generously shares.

A Sporting Family

McKay came from a family of sporting enthusiasts. Both parents played competitive tennis and her father was also a champion rugby league player. Her siblings — all 10 of them! — were accomplished sportsmen and sportswomen, focusing on tennis, golf, rugby and field hockey and everyone in the family supported each other's sporting endeavours.

McKay continued to play squash following her serendipitous introduction to the sport and each time she played she became more and more enthralled with the game's speed, competitiveness, and yes, the prospect of triumphing over her opponents! McKay told us that, "*during one of my play sessions on the court, coach Alan Netting noticed my budding talent and persuaded my mother to permit me to enter the New South Wales local county Championships.*" McKay emerged victorious, easily clinching both the Junior and Women's titles. Alan would become a very good friend and practice partner.



McKay was always extremely determined and competitive, a fact that was not unnoticed. Then President of the Australian Squash Racquets Association, Vin Napier, suggested that she participate in the New South Wales State Championships in Sydney. This proved to be her big break! As an avid sportswoman herself, it took little persuasion for her mother to leave the rest of her brood at home and, together with McKay's grandmother, travel on the train to Sydney, carting around Heather's rustic kit that she used when competing. Heather was only 18 years old.

It was just as well Heather had her mother and grandmother with her as the night's matches were played at various clubs throughout Sydney. They had the arduous task of using public transport to travel to the various venues. That year Heather reached the quarterfinals of the seniors and won the juniors championships. The support she got at this event from her mother and grandmother enabled her to make an indelible impression.

A Squash Career Develops

In 1960 Heather was selected for inclusion in the New South Wales team to compete in the Australian Amateur Championships. She was then 19-years-old and so no longer a junior player. Competing in the ladies tournament, she had to play a qualifying match to get into the main draw but nonetheless ended up winning the event. McKay recalled, "*This was a tremendous feat as it paved the way for me to stave off defeat for fourteen straight years at the Australian Amateur Championships (1960-1973) and sixteen straight years at the British Open Championships (1962-1977)*" - not to mention the two World Championships she played in. McKay noted that she was defeated only twice in her long, prolific career, once by Yvonne West in 1960 in the quarterfinals of the New South Wales Championships and then by English player Fran Marshall in 1962 during the Scottish Open.

McKay had to choose between staying in her hometown of Queanbeyan and moving to Sydney to pursue her squash career. Moving from a town of 11,000 people to the very large city of Sydney was a huge decision. She decided to follow her dreams and moved to Sydney where she eventually met her husband and practice partner, Brian McKay. Marriage meant she was no longer Heather Blundell and McKay made clear that she had absolutely no reservations or regrets about making that decision.

When asked about the people who helped her along, McKay's list was endless. Under the astute coaching of Vin Napier, who kept her under his wings, McKay's career soared to its highest heights. She worked a regular job as a receptionist at the Bellevue Hill Squash Centre while playing competitive squash, but her earnings were far too meagre to fund her squash career.

New South Wales, the Australian Squash Association and other sponsors all chipped in to help her purchase her airfare and room and board for when she travelled to play competitively. Individuals including Keith Walker, Jack Garrett, Fred Barlow, Kevin Parker and John Cheadle helped her too.

These acts of kindness ensured that she was able to attend all the prominent events abroad. She also played exhibition matches with her husband, Brian, to raise funds for her trips.



Heather McKay pictured in 1999 in Seattle, USA with the World Open semi-finalists Cassie Campion, Leilani Joyce, Natalie Grainger and Michelle Martin when she was inducted into the Women's Tour (WISPA) Hall of Fame.

How Did She Do It? The Elements of Success

As an up-and-coming player, McKay saw the value of interacting with as many squash professionals as possible. She would feed off their advice about game strategies and how to address the challenges of life on the road. McKay said *"she considered herself extremely lucky to be surrounded by positive and motivational people who were always willing to offer her support and encouragement and sound advice that she would then incorporate into her squash routine, with much success."*

At the competitive level, McKay said she was never affected by the nervous energy that is customary in players of her calibre when up against strong opponents. She attributed this calm persona to the fact that *"she did not have to rely solely on playing squash as a means of survival, as her day job provided a foundation for sustenance, however small it was and as such, for her, squash was more of a pastime than a career."* She just loved the game!

McKay admitted that she did not originally intend to play squash for as long as she did, but the love, positive reinforcement and support from her husband made it quite enjoyable to train hard and win tournaments.

She attributed her long spell of wins - nearly 20 years without a defeat - to her ability to make good contact with the ball and hit it extremely hard with great precision. In addition, her good hand-eye

coordination and an accuracy and consistency of play put her opponents under pressure. She is an advocate for total fitness. Her training programme included weights, running, interval training and stretching. McKay is confident that her fitness level and lack of injuries were attributable to this sound approach to training.

Anybody meeting her might be surprised that such a dominating player is not especially tall and is quite slight, but her skills and athleticism took her to the top, and kept her there.



What is her advice for players starting out on the squash circuit? *"I believe that you have to love the game to succeed. Train hard, keep fit, and seek out help from a professional mentor, someone who is an exemplar in the sport and who can provide you with sound advice and support."*

McKay added, *"I made a wonderful life out of squash, even though the remunerations were not what I would have liked."* She is extremely gratified for her long list of accolades, including her induction into the WSF Hall of Fame as well as the United States Racquetball Hall of Fame, a sport she took up towards the end of her squash career and in which she, predictably, excelled.

She is now retired, lives in Australia and no longer plays squash because of lower back problems, but plays close attention to the latest news from the squash circuit, especially women's squash. She still dabbles in tennis regularly and participates in senior tennis tournaments.

Although enthused by the progress squash has made globally over the past sixty years, *"there is so much more that can be accomplished,"* the Australian told us. She lamented the fact that squash is still not an Olympic sport but would dearly love to see it included soon and is hopeful that with increased media coverage and corporate sponsors, the sport can be developed even further.

Heather McKay is one of the legends of squash, with a sporting record that quite likely will never be equalled.

*Interview by Diane Julien
March 2019*

Career Notes

Heather McKay lost only two matches in her entire career (in 1960 and 1962) and maintained an unbeaten record from 1962 through to 1981, when she retired from the sport.

She won 16 consecutive British Open titles from 1962-1977 and claimed the inaugural women's World Open title in 1979.