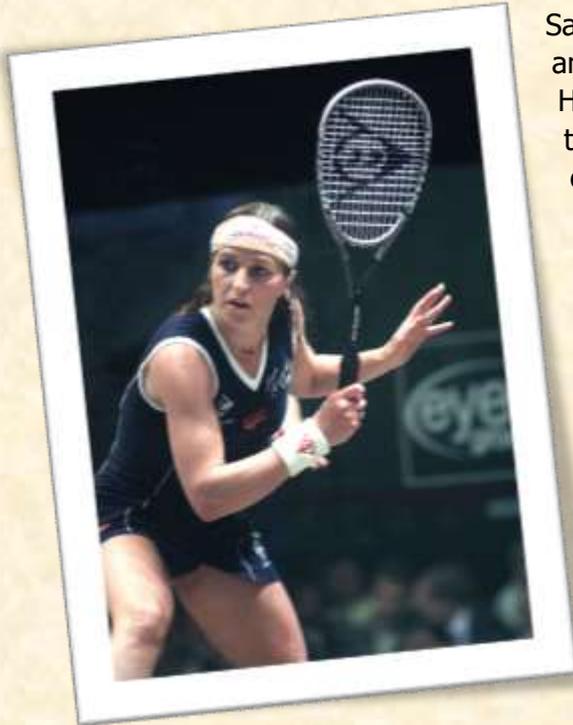


Sarah Fitz-Gerald, Ruthless and Efficient

Anyone who knows Sarah Fitz-Gerald would most likely describe her as petite, feisty and intelligent, but also ruthless and efficient on court. Fitz-Gerald's ambition and success raised the sport to ever-higher heights. She conquered the squash world, both on and off the court, and accomplished many firsts in women's squash. She has given and continues to give her time and energy to further the growth of the sport, both in her native Australia and around the world.

Born to a Squash Family



Sarah, the youngest of six children, was born to Judith and Ted on December 1, 1968, in Melbourne, Australia. Her mother was a four-time Australian Open and three-time Victorian Open squash champion who coached at and managed the Mordialloc Squash Centre, in Victoria. Judith went on to coach the Victorian and Australian women's teams and later coached full time upon retirement from amateur squash. Her father was a branch manager of International Harvester.

Sports in general and squash in particular were important for the Fitz-Gerald family. All five of Sarah's siblings played or worked at the squash courts with their mother; two brothers, Damien and Anthony, progressed to playing championship-level football; and her sister Louise became a talented tennis player on the professional circuit.

Sarah began playing squash at just five years old and at eight won her first trophy when she competed in a club tournament. During this time she also practised and competed in gymnastics and tennis, always with immense support from her parents.

Her mother always insisted that all sporting commitments had to be kept. Once Fitz-Gerald had registered to play in a squash tournament or league, there was no reneging—which proved a lifelong lesson in understanding the responsibility of keeping a commitment.

Touring the World and Turning Pro

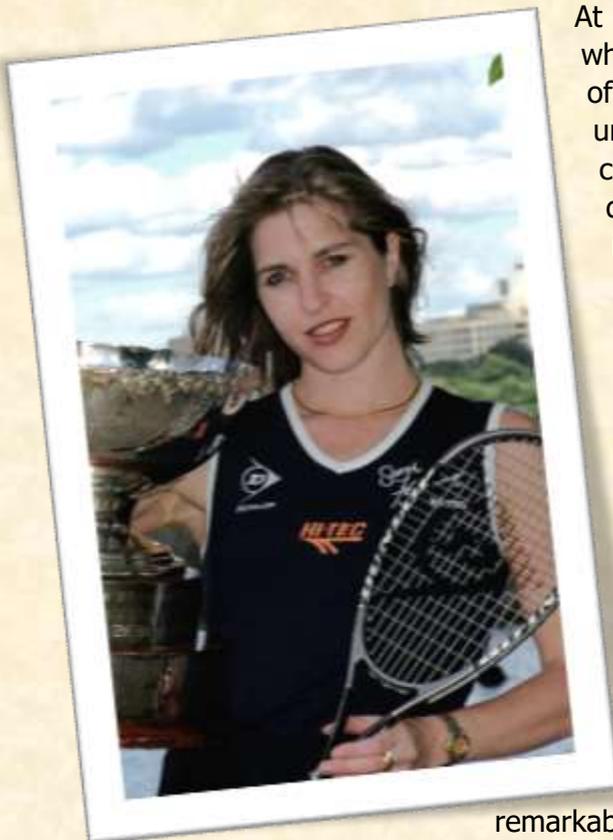
At age eleven Fitz-Gerald represented the state of Victoria; the following year she won the U-13 Australian Junior Championships. At fourteen she was selected to represent Australia in the U-16 age category that competed in New Zealand.

The more she travelled, the more she developed a love for the game, and she longed to take her squash to greater heights. Fitz-Gerald remembered a map of the world that hung on the kitchen wall. She often thought to herself, "I want to see these places for myself. I couldn't wait to travel the world, meet different people and, of course, play squash, and I was excited by the opportunity." Fitz-Gerald was enthralled and knew she had to follow her dreams.

She first embarked on the professional squash tour when she went to England in early 1987 with squash legend Heather McKay acting as travel guide, mentor, chaperone and coach, accompanied by six up-and-coming talented Australian teenagers. They all resided in a suburban home in Caversham, in the borough of Reading (40 miles west of London), where they all trained together. Fitz-Gerald spared no time making a name for herself by winning her first major, the World Juniors in 1987, in Brighton, England, with McKay acting as team coach. Fitz-Gerald's domination of women's squash had officially begun!

From that point on Fitz-Gerald began her quest to conquer the world of squash, competing in events that would take her from one corner of the earth to the next. When asked if she ever felt homesick, she said, "I had two moments of homesickness in the first two years, but didn't ever contemplate giving up! It was good to be home when I did visit, but I was excited booking my next flight and adding another country to the list of places squash would be taking me."

Challenged by Injuries



At the age of 21, Fitz-Gerald suffered a major setback when she sustained a cracked vertebra and a severe case of sciatica that left her in excruciating pain. She underwent a series of diagnostic tests to ascertain the cause and the possible solution for her pain and discomfort, all of which pointed to likely surgical intervention.

Fitz-Gerald was undergoing regular massage and physical therapy sessions at home since she was unable to walk. It was hoped that these sessions, with acclaimed Melbourne physiotherapist Geoff Mackay (the physiotherapist for Australian Cricket, Australian Davis Cup Tennis and the Carlton Football Team), would somehow alleviate the situation.

Literally 24 hours before the surgeons were set to operate, a heated debate erupted between the surgeon and physiotherapist about whether they should proceed with the procedure.

Miraculously, overnight Fitz-Gerald showed remarkable improvement, which was so significant that the surgeons decided to cancel her surgery and continue her physiotherapy. Fitz-Gerald eventually made a full recovery and was able to get back on the court. All through this ordeal, she remained positive and hopeful that she would once again be a force to be reckoned with. And so she was!

"Make the Point as Difficult as Possible"

This petite lady gracefully brushed aside her opponents as she tore through the ladies' squash events.

In a professional career spanning fifteen years, her list of accolades proved phenomenal. Described by authors as a ruthless winning machine, Fitz-Gerald's wins spoke volumes of the character and persistence of a young lady who earned respect both on and off the court.

It was difficult for Fitz-Gerald to single out any one particular achievement—"Each of my wins was significant for different reasons"—but she shared a few that were close to her heart:

Women's Perrier World Open Squash Championship. Sarah recalled the passion and sense of accomplishment she felt when she captured her first World Open title, on October 13, 1996, in Petaling Jaya, in Malaysia. She overcame Cassie Jackman in three games, 9-0, 9-3, 9-4. "I was over the moon with my performance at this event, as only about two weeks earlier I had my wisdom teeth removed under anaesthetic.... My preparation wasn't ideal, but knowing this made me so relaxed, with no expectations, that I played the best squash of my life. I was in the zone.

After I won, the legend that is Jonah Barrington walked up to me at the conclusion and said "Very clinical" and shook my hand. I hadn't met Jonah before but I was so honoured to realise he came out of the stands specifically to speak to me and appreciate that 'clinical' result.

In this moment it gave me the opportunity to approach Jonah for some words of wisdom and advise when I was going through motivation and injury problems a few years laterhis enthusiasm and story telling is so infectious, my motivation was soon back on track".



Women's Mazda World Open Squash Championship. Of even greater significance was winning her second World Open title, in 1997, in Sydney, Australia. She won against longtime foe Michelle Martin in a prodigious five games, 9-5, 5-9, 6-9, 9-2, 9-3. The crowd was kept on the edge of their seats and properly entertained! "My second World Open was special to me for five reasons: defeating my nemesis, Michelle Martin, on her home soil in Sydney; Mazda was my personal sponsor; my coach from England had come out to be there; it was my second World title; and it was the first time some of my family were able to watch me play in such an important event and win it. It was a great match, with a great atmosphere."

Women's World Open, in Stuttgart, Germany. Fitz-Gerald won her third title against Michelle Martin. "I was 2-1 up and determined to win, but in the 4th, I tripped on Michelle's foot and slid across the court on my bum. I was given a No Let, and the fall disrupted my thoughts. Consequently, everything went downhill from that

point.... Next thing I knew it was 2-2 in games and Michelle was serving for the match at 8-2. For a game and a half, I had been so wound up, hitting the tin, committing unforced errors, poor shot selection and overthinking everything. I lost my rhythm. At match ball, I remember telling myself to make the last point as difficult as possible. So I did; I relaxed and next thing I knew I earned a handout and a point. I kept repeating those words—"Make the point as difficult as possible"—and I kept sneaking in points, one by one! Somehow, I kept managing to regain the serve and win points.

"Suddenly it was 8-8. Michelle hit a boast that bounced awkwardly near the right side wall, and I couldn't scrape it off the wall.... She took the point, and the score moved to 9-8.

I couldn't believe I had made this amazing comeback and was one serve away from potentially losing the game and match all over again! All I could do was sigh and repeat the words, 'Make the point as difficult as possible.' Luckily I managed another handout, repeated my words again and evened the score, 9-9!" She went on to win the stunning match.

2001 Women's Eye Group British Open Squash Championships. She won her first British Open in Birmingham. "I played league for local club Edgbaston Priory, and because of that received a lot of local support. Unfortunately, I hurt my ankle during the event but the physiotherapist worked wonders and managed to keep me on the court everyday." She eventually defeated Carol Owens in the finals in straight games, 10/9, 9/0, 9/2, to clinch the coveted title.

Fitz-Gerald discussed a few more of her many on-court triumphs. "My second British Open title was significant because I won in Manchester, my second home in England as I played quite a bit of league matches in the north.

"My fourth World Open was even more memorable, and historic, because it was held in my home town of Melbourne, with family and friends watching me play some of the best squash of my life; and I equalled Susan Devoy's record of four World Opens. For me, it felt like I was destined to win in Melbourne.... That whole week was a blur and could be described as the pinnacle of my squash life."

Another major achievement was winning the 2002 Commonwealth Games in Manchester, despite mounting pressure from the Australian public and media, who had already picked Fitz-Gerald to win gold.

She also discussed her trip to Qatar to play the final major event she ever played—the World Open. "Heathrow Airport came to a complete standstill due to a massive wind storm, my flight was cancelled, I lost my luggage, borrowed clothes, had odd shoes, and nearly missed the first round. But the number 2 seed lost in the semi-finals, changing the whole mental feel of the event for me.

"During the final, both of us crashed to the floor due to dangerous playing conditions. The tournament director was summoned courtside and the stadium was cleared during the match due to condensation I went on to win in four games, collected the trophy and then flew back to England with my opponent, drinking champagne and having a good laugh."

Fitz-Gerald has fond memories of her days on tour and the amazing places she saw while playing her sport. Her main rivals were the likes of Michelle Martin, Carol Owens and Leilani Joyce. "The atmosphere of all these events was amazing, and having the support from local crowds and squash enthusiasts from a highly sports-oriented country like Australia made it even more memorable for me."



Cartilage Trouble

Fitz-Gerald suffered another setback when she sustained a meniscal tear during the Commonwealth Games in Malaysia in 1998. She could still run on court without issues but found it difficult to walk up steps or move around the Games Village. She was able to compete in the Games, however, but later underwent surgery in Melbourne to repair the damage. In 1999 she had to undergo another knee surgery, this time for articular cartilage damage, a procedure that proved incapacitating, confining her to crutches for weeks.

Fitz-Gerald made it back on court but in the back of her mind she knew the time was approaching when she would have to retire. In 2002, Sarah captured her 5th and last World Open women's title by defeating Natalie Pohrer (Grainger), 10-8, 9-3, 7-9, 9-7. She retired from the Tour after this event.

She paid tribute to coaches Mike Johnson (England), Geoff Hunt and Heather McKay (Australian Institute of Sport), Roger Flynn (Victorian Institute of Sport), Mike Way (Canada), Malcolm Willstrop (Pontefract), 'the legend' Jonah Barrington and, of course, her mother. She also thanked her longtime sponsors, Dunlop and Hi-Tec, for all the support they gave her over the years. Dunlop designed her signature racket some years ago.

Life After Touring

After 15 years on tour, Sarah returned to her native land in Australia, where she met and married Cameron Dalley, a builder by trade and fellow squash player. The couple soon exercised their passion for the sport by giving back. Through Sarah's strategic connections and Dalley's highly specialised skills as a builder, the two are building and renovating squash courts throughout Australia and Oceania.

Fitz-Gerald is a highly motivated, energetic astute lady with leadership skills. Testimony to this is the fact that she was President of the Women's International Squash Players Association (WISPA) between 1991 and 2002. In 2016 she was elected Vice President of the World Squash Federation.

In 2018 she took up her racket again to compete in the World Masters, in Charlottesville, Virginia, where she played phenomenal, ruthless squash. Unsurprisingly, she took her fourth Masters title. It is astounding to see how her career highlights have transitioned over the years and how, after four decades of highly competitive squash, Fitz-Gerald is still able to win in a ruthlessly dignified manner.

"Squash is still my life," said Fitz-Gerald, who plays local events, including racketball, coached India's Dipika Pallikal Karthik, and at the time of writing coaches Australian player Christine Nunn. "It's great to see the progress made in the women's game," Fitz-Gerald said, "but there is always more that could be done to take the sport to greater heights. It's great to see non-traditional countries are coming forward to host competitions, like Poland, and I hope that more of these newer countries will come on board to host these or other events."





Sarah, who is an inductee of Sport Australia Hall of Fame and a recipient of the Member of the Order of Australia award, remarked, "If you are serious about becoming a professional then you should give it your best shot, work hard and remain committed to the end. Play to the best of your ability and the results will come. When you achieve your goals, no matter the size, no matter what they are, it's well worth the effort."

A glance at the list of Sarah's accomplishments reveals a highly successful athlete who amassed a string of phenomenal wins in 15 years, seldom needing to engage in five game matches. Her successes on and off the court are why Fitz-Gerald is held in such high regard by the world squash community.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- Won the World Junior Championship title in 1987. (Runner-up, aged 16, in 1985)
- Reached 90 finals and won 62 titles on the Women's World Tour
- Won a 5th World Open title in November 2002
- President of WISPA (the Women's International Squash Players' Association) for over 10 years
- Represented Australia in six World Team Championship-winning teams between 1994 & 2010
- Commonwealth Games silver medallist in 1998, and Gold medallist in 2002
- Topped the world rankings for a total of 40 months from 1996 to 2003
- Retired from WISPA Tour in 2003, unbeaten over 71 matches since 2001
- Inducted into the WSF Hall of Fame in 2004
- Winner of 4 World Masters titles
- Elected Vice President of World Squash Federation in November 2016