

Michelle Martin, a High Achiever



At the height of a hot summer evening in Australia, squash legend Michelle Martin puts aside time from her hectic personal life - centred round her family and close friends - to field a stream of questions about the highlights of her stellar squash career.

She is unassuming but has certainly earned her place in the squash Hall of Fame, with her titles, including three Women's World Open titles, six British Open crowns, and an Order of Australia amongst other accolades. Michelle Martin created history when she became the first female squash player to win gold medals at the inaugural squash event in the Commonwealth Games in 1998 in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia.

Martin is liberal in her humility, but it is sprinkled with a dry humour that sets the mood for an enlivening conversation.

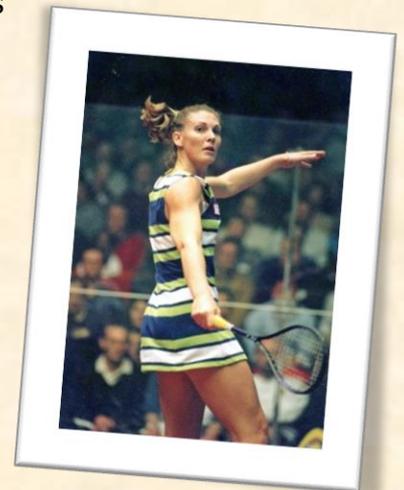
The Martin Family of Squashers....

The Martin family is unique as the only Australian squash playing family to produce three such acclaimed and highly internationally ranked siblings. Michelle's parents constructed the five court Engadin Squash Centre, in Sydney which was attached to the family's house. Having a court at home meant that the children had the opportunity to learn the sport, meet fellow squashers and practice at virtually any time of the day or night - and the children took full advantage of this.

This centre would serve as the hub of activity for the Martin youngsters.... four boys and two girls, and they and their parents who would spend countless hours on or around the court.

The children were not coerced into playing the game and were free to participate in other sporting activities at school. Little did they know that squash would significantly influence the outcome of their lives, especially that of Brett, Rodney and Michelle who would gravitate to the game at its highest level.

All three would go on to join the professional circuit and dominate squash nationally and internationally. Both Brett and Rodney made it to position 2 in the world, while Rodney became World Champion in 1991. Michelle retained a World Number one ranking for 58 weeks, which probably is testimony to the frequently touted expression by many when describing the Martins: "it was all in the genes".



Michelle, the early years...

When asked about her earliest squash memories, Michelle was quick to remark that her first recollection was at the slight age of three years old holding the racket on the court under the direction of her parents.

But she remarked that she played tennis, softball and netball too, and had no real interest in squash as a career. In fact, she stated "*I had more affiliation for tennis than for squash or any other sport then.*" She played squash on evenings after school and on some weekends more as a pastime, but still managed to place second in the National Under-13 championship at aged eight.

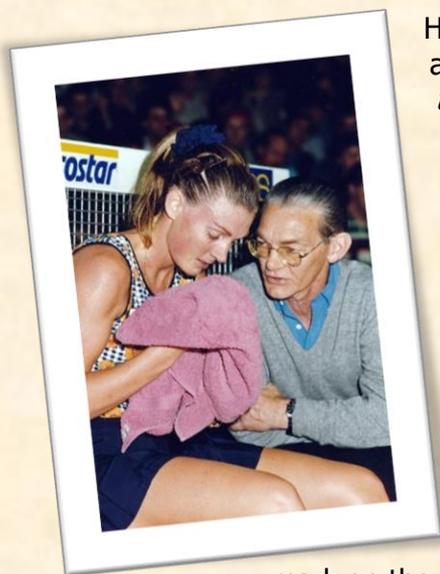
At the age of 13, her family relocated to Brisbane and at the age of fifteen and a half years, the legal minimum age to leave school in Australia at that time, Michelle entered the world of employment on a full-time basis at a financial institute.

Two years on, as luck would have it, she became a recipient of a scholarship from the Australian Institute of Sport, which saw her working in the afternoon at the bank and training competitively at squash in the

mornings with Australian legends Geoff Hunt and Heather McKay. Michelle is certain that this opportunity was instrumental in initiating her squash career. She commented *"I would not have made it to the professional circuit if I did not get the scholarship from the Australian Institute of Sport. It was a big break for me and one that I was extremely grateful for. It launched my professional career."*

Almost two years later, Michelle would progress through the ranks to claim a place on the Australian Junior Women's team alongside Sally-Ann Robbie, Sarah Fitz-Gerald and Danielle Drady. She was following in the footsteps of her brother Rodney who toured with the Men's Junior Team a year previously. The Women's Junior Open team competed in the World Juniors in Ireland in 1985 and won. Squash was definitely her calling and this was the beginning of a flourishing career.

Michelle's rise to the top.....

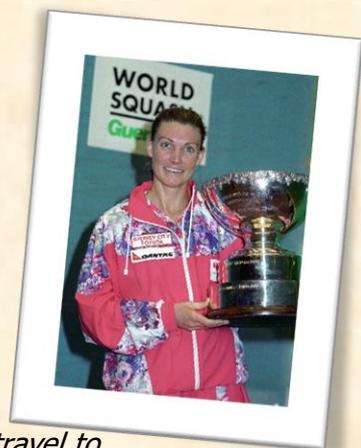


Her ascent to the top of the Women's World rankings was far from smooth as she struggled to win matches often enough. *"I knew I had the potential to reach the top spot, but I lacked the physical and technical aptitude"*, she said. Her uncle, Lionel Robberds (*pic, left*), a Queen's councillor, former Olympic Cox for the Australian Rowing Team and a former Australian squash player assumed the role of coach and mentor, and under his guidance she was transformed into a consistently formidable opponent.

He built foundations to support Michelle in her quest for domination by engaging her in a comprehensive and demanding fitness schedule that involved long-distance runs, weight training and on-the-court sessions that would provide her with the required mental and physical aptitude needed to take the top slot. Before Lionel Robberd's intervention, Michelle was a little in the shadow of her elder brothers, Rodney and Brett but Robberd's input ensured that she placed her own indelible mark on the squash landscape.

An initial target she set was to win the World Open in Canada in 1992. She trained hard for this event, but the win was not meant to be. Holder Susan Devoy was just too challenging a competitor and she lost in straight games, 4-9, 6-9, 4-9. She remarked, *"Even though I lost 3-0 I knew that I had made huge progress in my game, becoming very fit, strong and confident walking onto the court."* Shortly after Susan Devoy announced her retirement from professional squash, and this created an opening for Michelle to earn a place at the top of the leader board.

Two weeks after the Worlds final defeat to Devoy, she won the Calgary Open and this win pushed her to the top of the world rankings for the first time in her career in January 1993. This was quite an achievement and an exciting time in her career, but one that would herald an era of hard work and dedication rather than complacency if she were to retain this ranking. When asked about this time in her life she responded *"Becoming number one made me a target for other players but I was ready for the challenge. I was confident in my approach and my training was designed in such a way that I reached my peak at major events throughout the year. My coach would only travel to the World, British and Australian Opens and we communicated by phone but this limited access to him made me realise that I was really on my own and the discipline that he instilled in me had to become self-perpetuating."*



She flew into South Africa two weeks before the 1993 World Open in Johannesburg to become acclimatised to the altitude. While it still proved to be a challenge it did not stop her from winning the event – her first World Open title, which she dubbed as the turning point in her career.

She also won the first of six British Opens in 1993. *"It was a fantastic feeling winning these events for the first time!"* she said, attributing these Worlds wins to the combination of her hard work and the major role of Uncle Lionel in directing her mentally and physically.

Her Experiences on Tour ...

When asked to share her circuit experiences, Michelle reminisced *"being on tour can be very lonely as you are on your own for long periods, commuting from one place to the next. It can get pretty tough at times but if you really want to be on the professional circuit and make your dreams a reality, then you have to stick with it."* Michelle spent around ten years based at the Colets Club South West of London in England where she stayed with friends. *"This became my home in England and the place where I was comfortable and could be myself. I was thankful for this accommodation and friendship as it could be very lonely being away from friends, partners and husbands."*

Michelle continued to hold on to the top spot until November 1996 when Sarah Fitz-Gerald re-emerged and claimed it until November 1998 - when Michelle would rise again to prominence, thanks to her world-



famous elder brother Rodney. In 1998, Rodney, who had since retired, would then assume the position of coach, much to the delight of his sister whose career continued to flourish under his purview. The duo worked together on technical and physical facets to overcome some of the challenges that beset her, more specifically, those associated with her racket preparation and her footwork. Michelle recalls *"You have to make personal sacrifices if you want to take your game to the next level. My ranking dropped from position one to position two and I had to re-engineer my game if I was to remain competitive".* (Photo with Rodney, left and Lionel, right)

She set her sights on winning the British Open and a gold medal at the first Commonwealth Games squash in 1998. Her recollection *"....." It was a phenomenal year which commenced with me winning the British Open. In the middle of the year we had a huge tour of 8 events in 9 weeks starting with the first ever Commonwealth Games event for Squash. I won the gold medal in the individuals followed by a gold medal in the mixed doubles. We played for 10 days straight. We left Malaysia and travelled to Egypt, we won 2 events and then went on to the USA where we won 2 more tournaments. This was followed by week's rest in England after which we headed to Germany for the World Open followed by the World Teams event. The only target that I missed that year was winning the World Open Tournament. I was extremely pleased with my performance that year."* (She had a commanding lead against Fitz-Gerald in the World Open before squandering several match points from 8-2 up in the decider, only to lose 10-9).

She went on to share, *"Funding was also a challenge as players had to fund their own expenses, so you have to remain competitive to earn sufficient money to travel and participate in major squash events. We were fortunate that the prize money which we earned was decent enough to cover our expenses."*

Her rivals over the span of her career included the likes of her fellow Australian team members Liz Irving, Carol Owens, Robyn Lambourne and Sarah Fitz-Gerald. She had many keenly contested matches with Sarah that usually drew a large following. Another memorable match against Sarah was the final she played against her in the inaugural Commonwealth Games final in Malaysia. Michelle was quick to note *"Carol Owens, Sarah Fitz-Gerald, Liz Irving and myself made a formidable Australian Team. At one point we were all ranked within the top 8 of the World, a bit like the Egyptian squash players today. We would all compete against each other in the World Open and then immediately afterwards we would don our team uniforms to proudly represent our country."*

The hard work and dedication paid off and she remained at the number one position in the world from November 1998 to December 1999. This signalled the end of a highly successful squash career for Michelle who retired at that point, but not the end of her squash activities. Michelle went on to manage and coach the Australian women's junior and senior teams from 2003 to 2016.

Advice for Aspiring Professionals

Her advice for up-and-coming professionals? *"It is important to surround yourself with the right people, find the right base and people who can provide you with sound advice. Travelling on your own can be very tough and you must have someone who you can confide in, someone who has your best interest at heart and who will be there for you to keep you on track and motivated"*

Michelle also shared that she had no regrets of her career path. In retrospect she noted that things could have always been done differently but she thoroughly enjoyed her time on the professional circuit and is proud of all the achievements that she managed.



Life After Squash...

Michelle currently resides in Sydney while the rest of her siblings are in Queensland. She has two teenage boys who tinker with squash socially but have no real aspirations for the sport thus far. She currently works for an Association for Ultrasound in the conference and accounting area. She was coaching up to five months ago and intends to do part-time coaching again later in 2020.

In the near future, Michelle relishes family time and sees herself doing more travelling to see the world and experience different cultures without the squash racket. She also tries her hand at golf and has taken a liking for the sport, but time constraints hamper her greater immersion. Her parting words: *"You only get to live once. Make the most of it!"*

Interview by Diane Julien
March 2020

Career Highlights

- In a career spanning the mid-80s to December 1999, Michelle Martin became one of the greatest female players of all-time.
- Three World Open and six British Open titles.
- Topped the world rankings for a total of 58 months – between March 1993 and December 1999, when she retired.
- Reached 85 Tour finals – with only Nicol David and compatriot Sarah Fitz-Gerald claiming more – and won 56 titles.
- Won two of the sport's first gold medals in the 1998 Commonwealth Games in Malaysia – the women's singles and mixed doubles.
- Led her country to success in four successive World Team Championships, from 1992 to 1998.
- Established a record streak in the world top 5 of 11 years and 10 months – a record which stood for 17 years until Malaysian Nicol David topped it by just one month in November 2016!
- 13 years after retiring, made her first appearance in the WSF World Masters – and claimed the Over-45 title!