

NICOL DAVID – A MOUNTAIN OF ACCOLADES

Nicol David is the owner of a record 8 World Open titles and 5 British Open titles, is the first female player to win the World Junior title twice, and she maintained her world number 1 status for a record-breaking 108 consecutive months. All that and a mountain of other accolades help describe David, but her megawatt smile and selfless efforts to further the world squash community's reach and influence may be just as important as her trophy-stuffed display case. Indeed, her successes on the court may well be matched by her successes off the court.



Widely acknowledged to be the GOAT (Greatest of All Time!) of female players, she has been a tireless advocate for the sport, traveling the world to promote the game and help in the effort to gain Olympic inclusion. She is the recipient of several Malaysian federal awards for meritorious service, winner of countless national and international squash events, and serves as the embodiment of professionalism in the world of squash, and by extension, all of sport. David has undeniably earned her rightful place amongst squash's most elite players.

She was born in 1983 to parents Ann Marie and Desmond David (pictured above), in Penang, Malaysia. Nicol is the youngest of three siblings, and it is noteworthy that sisters Lianne and Cheryl were accomplished Malaysian state and national team squash players themselves. The family squash obsession came courtesy of her father, who played the sport socially while at university in Australia. Her father was a gifted sportsman and national team athlete who represented Malaysia in football and Penang state in athletics and hockey. Her mother taught English at a Chinese boys' school for 20 years and her father was a civil engineer who worked at his brother's architecture firm.

Sisterly Competition

At the age of five, way too small to manipulate a regular squash racket, her father fabricated a customised wooden racket specifically sized for Nicol. Emulating her sisters, David, even at an early age, was fearless, resolute, and highly competitive. Her game steadily improved, helped by the coaching lessons her parents bought for her. David has fond memories of the unique squash club - the lavish 'Pepsi Squash Centre' - that included both covered and open-air courts. Her dad's friend had built the Penang squash centre, which were the first public courts in the country. Of note: the new title for the club is the Nicol David International Squash Centre. These courts provided the platform from which David's stellar squash career would emerge.





Her parents eventually recognised the talent that she possessed and nurtured her along her career path. "My parents did not force me to play squash, but they were very supportive, and I played because of my passion for the sport. I yearned to one day become World Number One, the best female player in the world."

The three David sisters formed the Penang state team, which dominated the Malaysian national squash scene. Within the state, she always had a bench-mark to follow and that was her sisters. "I love my sisters, but I knew once I could overcome them on court, I would be on to better things."

Nicol won her first tournament at the age of ten, the under-12 category of the national junior championships. At the age of 11, she earned the respect of her countrymen when she rattled the senior women players, giving them a run for their money. As Nicol advanced to a competitive level as a junior by the age of 13, she joined the senior national team. Nicol attended public school during the day and was coached evenings and weekends.

In September 1998, Malaysia would be the first Asian country to host the Commonwealth Games, and David's display of emerging talent earned her a place amongst the Malaysian squash delegation to witness this magnificent event. No one had the slightest inkling then that this pint-sized minor would receive her gold medal just twelve years later.

Junior World Champion

At the age of twelve, Nicol began to train intensely under the guidance of a comprehensive coaching team funded by the Squash Rackets Association of Malaysia (SRAM) and the National Sports Institute, which consisted of a squash coach who worked on the tactical and strength aspects, a nutritionist, a sport psychologist, and others, who all played an integral role in shaping the future legend. She progressed steadily over the next couple of years and, by age fifteen, made history with her first World Junior Championship title. "For me, this was a big deal, being the first female Malaysian player to win a World Championship. This win gave me hope and inspiration to push myself hard to play well, to represent my country and make my parents, family and friends proud of me."

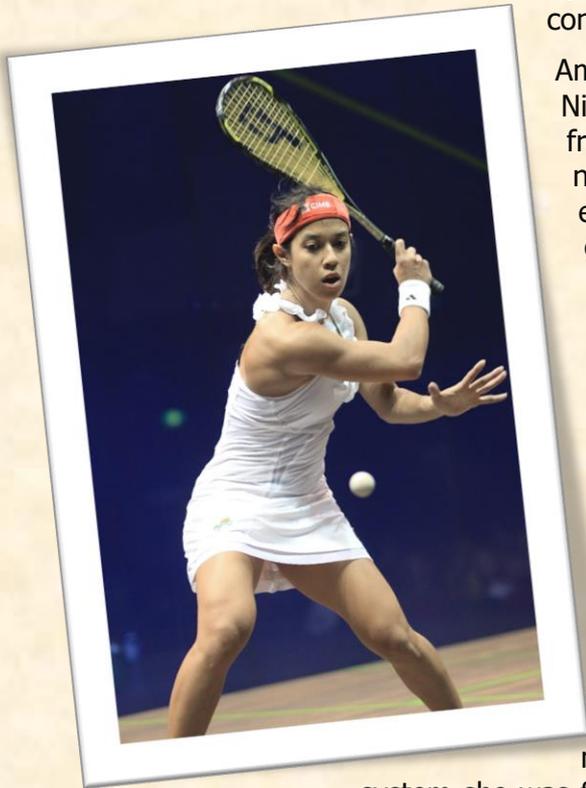
David missed many days at school traveling to different countries to compete in tournaments. Aside from her squash commitments, Nicol was still a typical teenager, hanging out with friends and family when she was not on tour. As she put it, "I did not miss anything when I was growing up - sure, a few parties and events - but once I was at home I was surrounded by my friends and family and we had a great time. I was able to share my life experiences with them and they appreciated learning about my encounters."

At the age of seventeen, in 2000, Nicol turned pro, and within a month had notched her first professional win, in the Finnish Open. But the transition was not without some turbulence. She experienced some challenges on court during the next few years that made her lose her footing. The wins were not as consistent as they should have been. "I was having trouble adjusting to the transition from junior to senior squash and I was becoming very frustrated. I needed to find a game changer."

Nicol did some soul-searching. She was sure she wanted to become a professional player and knew she had the fighting spirit. Her sisters were naturals at the game, but for her, she had to work long and hard. Eventually she discovered Liz Irving (above), former professional World Number 2, Australian team World Champion and a respected coach who resided in Amsterdam. At the age of eighteen, and with the blessings of her parents, David migrated to Amsterdam to be coached by Irving. This move was made possible through the financial support of several stakeholders, including the Ministry of Sport and a few corporate sponsors in Malaysia.

Making Changes, Moving Forward

The move was the game changer she needed. David had to change her entire game and mindset to suit the demands of professional life. These changes took some time to manifest into wins and Nicol would be humbled by some losses before the wins became consistent. "It was a very humbling experience. I had to change my style of play and this took some adjustment. Old habits are hard to break. I lost a few games in the process but that did not deter me. As time passed, my level of confidence improved, and I was able to take control of my game. Eventually, I started winning, and winning consistently."



Amsterdam was a new and enlightening experience. Nicol was welcomed with open arms by the squash fraternity and was able to comfortably mesh with her new environment. Her time in Amsterdam was extremely rewarding and full of opportunities for growth and development. She participated in many events all over the world in the upcoming years and met many professional squash players along the way who had a profound influence on her development.

At the age of 23 in 2006, David went on to clinch the World Number One title, which she retained for a stunning nine years. Soon she would begin an incredible 13-month, 51-match winning streak that lasted from March 2006 until April 2007, during which her stranglehold on the winner's trophy was unassailable. The hard work and dedication meant training for many hours a day on and off court while making numerous personal sacrifices, but the broad support

system she was fortunate to have was critical for her being able to maintain her international position.

During her career she reached 101 tour finals and won 81 titles, a stunning success rate. Her smile, her warmth and natural leadership as an ambassador for her sport are known and respected universally, but on court no match exemplifies her competitive determination better than the Women's World Championship final in Cairo, in December 2014. Opponent Raneem El Welily was 2/1 up in games and a point away from the title, at 10/6, before David saved four match balls to level the match, and then went on to take her eighth title. The 5' 4" David, nicknamed the Duracell Bunny, never gave up. "There were moments when I thought the match could be over, but I didn't want it to end that way."



Nicol was extremely proud of her efforts to gain the sport's inclusion in the Olympic Games. "I was very happy to be part of these undertakings. It gave the sport much needed exposure and media coverage, but even after we ticked all the boxes and did everything we had to do, it was not accepted by the IOC. Now, I believe it's time to shift the goal post. We have managed to grow the sport and attract much-needed commercial value, but I think we need to focus on expanding squash globally while increasing the base of squash players, especially in the junior's and women's categories. I do not believe we will see squash in the Olympics any time soon, but hopefully in the future."

My Strengths

Nicol prides herself in being an exemplar for young women coming up in the sport, along with the likes of her close friends Liz Irving, Sarah Fitz-Gerald and Raneem El Welily, whose playing skills she greatly admires. "Liz, Sarah and Raneem are more skilled players than I and are highly talented. My strengths are my endurance, fitness, pace and agility on court, and these contributed to my retaining the top position for such a long time. I was able to keep my opponents under pressure."

She added that she has no regrets about her career path, as she was able to travel to some amazing countries and meet some beautiful people. "If I had to do it all over, I would not change a thing. I would probably want to savour the moments of my wins when I do achieve them for as long as possible."

David took the opportunity to extend her profound thanks and appreciation to her loving parents, siblings and extended family who have been supportive of her endeavours over many years. "My parents and family have been instrumental in moulding me into the person I am today. They have instilled strong values, humility, integrity and honesty, and these have made me the successful person I am today. The Malaysian Ministry of Sport, National Sports Council of Malaysia, National Sports Institute, corporate sponsors, Liz, Sarah, my support team, my marketing team, the Malaysian public, my friends and many others have played a critical role in my development and I am indeed grateful. I want to personally thank the Government of Malaysia and all my corporate sponsors that continue to support squash programmes, especially for junior and professional development."

Nicol also paid tribute to former Women's Tour Director and later WSF CEO Andrew Shelley for his selfless contribution to the sport over the years. Shelley (above) became one of David's mentors and was very supportive of her on the professional circuit. "Andrew encouraged me to grow and develop as an individual. He always saw a bigger picture for squash and that we players can contribute in a huge way. He opened opportunities for all of us and I am truly indebted to him."

Now in retirement, David is extremely happy spending her time between Colombia - her altitude training ground during her last 2-3 years on tour - and Malaysia. Interviewed during the COVID-19 pandemic, she had been in Colombia for a few months and was enjoying life there. She continues a training programme and takes Spanish classes three times per week. She has also taken up boxing, endurance fitness classes and dancing as a hobby. She has a



million or so followers on social media. She also maintains her commitments to several corporate sponsors based in Malaysia.

The Future

Her advice for up and coming players? "Enjoy what you do. Take care of your body when you are young so that you do not live with regrets. Squash is hard work and intense on your body and muscles, and you need to try to avoid injuries as much as possible. Make the most of the opportunities you have to travel to new territories to participate in tournaments and meet different people, learn about different cultures and expand your knowledge base. Squash is a fantastic sport and has brought me much happiness over the years."

David plans to continue to be involved in the sport. "In the next five to ten years I hope that the Nicol David Foundation will have taken off and be able to empower young children through the values of sport to reach their full potential. Just as many have done for me, it is time for me to give back to my country, and my foundation will provide a solid base and financial support for aspiring children to become anything they set their minds to be by playing sport. We have to build the squash base and help them to travel the world and share in some of the experiences I had when I was on tour. I hope to have coaching camps around Malaysia, and abroad as well. Maybe other professionals can follow in their country as we collectively attempt to grow the sport."

Nicol David, truly a champion, on and off the court....

Interview by Diane Julien.

Photos with thanks from Steve Line.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Won her 1st World Junior Championship title, aged just 15, in July 1999

In Feb 2000 won her first Tour title at Finnish Open, as a 16-year-old qualifier setting record as youngest WISPA title winner

Becomes the first player to win the World Junior title twice in 2001.

Eight times World Squash Champion.

Was world number 1 for a record 109-month unbroken run.

In October 2018 she ended a record 14 year, 9 month (177 months) unbroken run in world top 20.

Won 81 of 102 Tour finals played.

Played 700 Tour matches during her career.

Won Asian Sportswoman of the year 2007.

Voted women's 'Greatest Player of All-Time' ('GOAT') in poll conducted by PSA in 2018

In 2008 she received the 'Order of Merit', Malaysia's highest honour, and was conferred a 'Datukship' by Penang (the youngest ever)

Malaysia's most successful Asian Games athlete with 7 gold medals

