

**This profile of WSF Hall of Fame member Susan Devoy was published in International Squash Magazine Winter 1991 edition, written by Colin McQuillan, with photos from Stephen Line.**



Susan Devoy's exterior is steel hard. She is a street-fighter, a Kiwi grappler who will never let you go if she corners you in competitive play; who will worry and tear at you until you say 'no more', or die.

Her longtime coach and mentor, Bryce Taylor, could not be in Sydney for the Mazda World Women's Championships, but he sent a message by fax that showed his understanding of the women that is Devoy the squash player. "Think of yourself as a bulldog chasing a cat," Taylor instructed. She responded with the most aggressive all-court assault any of her many admirers can recall.

And yet inside this case-hardened shell lives a woman of warmth and compassion; a merry, humorous lady who can charm an audience; an articulate speaker unafraid of revealing herself almost without deference to complete strangers. "Nobody knows how much it means to me to win back this title," she told the record Sydney audience of 1,200 after the Mazda final. "Only Martine now can begin to understand how bad it feels to lose the world title. Only my husband John, in my corner here for the first time, knows how much has gone into winning the championship back. He has lived with the worst of it as well as the best. It gives me so much pleasure to do this for him."

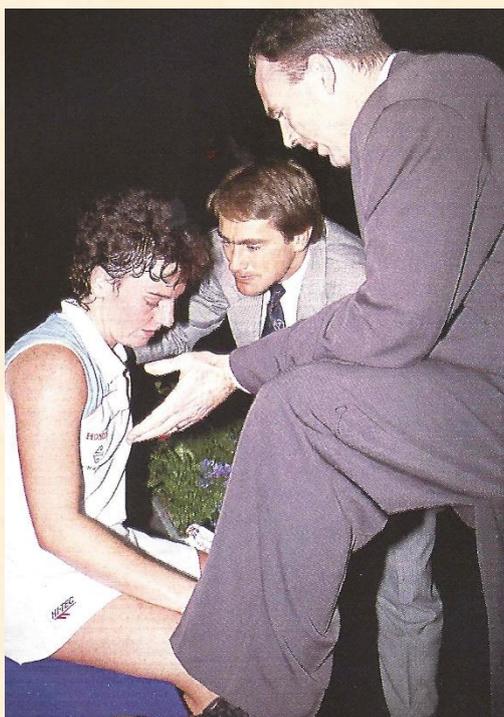


"I have done it for all the people who put so much faith in me. For all my friends and neighbours who have travelled here to support me. For Bryce who couldn't be here and, most of all, for myself, because I am only just beginning to realise as I speak how important the world championship had become to me. You can be world number one, but only being world champion puts you on top of the game."

If there was a tear in the eye and a faltering of the voice, it was almost welcome to the listening throng for surely no woman should be totally as unremittingly destructive as Devoy had been in the final.

The friends and neighbours knew that. They had travelled from Rotorua and from Auckland to join her in her moment of revenge. They hung upon her every word and they cheered her highly personal celebration. They even sang a little song every time she won a match: "She's so fine," it began.

The only daughter in a family of seven children, Devoy grew early to a love of squash in Rotorua. All her elder brothers played the game. Three of them played for New Zealand. Another is said to have been so good at the game that he gave it up in boredom and went looking for something more challenging. She played from the age of six and lost 9-0, 9-0, 9-0 in her first tournament at the age of ten. There have been no defeats like it since.



*John Oakley, middle, and Bryce Taylor*

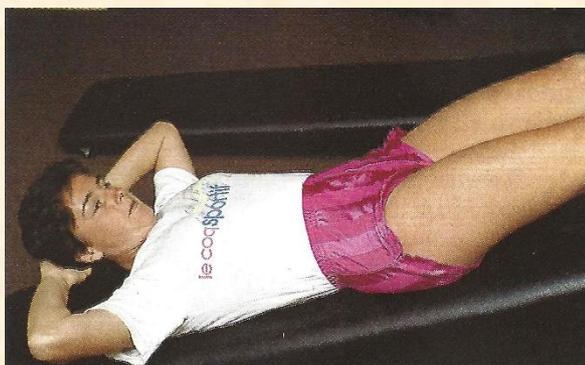
Coached by Dardir El Bakary, the nuggety little Egyptian who was for years the New Zealand National Coach, she went on to dominate junior matters in the country. In 1982, aged 17, she spent a season in England which was as unhappy as it was unsuccessful and once returned home she decided to give up the game.

Six elder brothers thought otherwise. "They persuaded me to go back and try again. Mainly they were concerned, I think, that I should go down fighting rather than wimpering". It was a salutary lesson. Joining up with Bryce Taylor, she went to the quarter finals of the British Open Championship in 1983 and went home to take the national title away from Robyn Blackwood.

Later that year she finished third behind Vicki Cardwell of Australia in the World Championship in Perth. In 1984 she defeated the much favoured Lisa Opie of England still celebrated as the most combative and skillful women's final ever played in the history of the world's leading tournament.

She went to number one in the world in the world after that and has not been demoted since.

She did it all with a simple basic game, unadorned by exciting shots but honed to perfection on the practice court. She is fitter, stronger and intrinsically tougher than any other woman player since Heather McKay. Her finest shot is the backhand straight drop, with a preparation that can be deceptively switched into a straight wall drive or a cross court kill. She takes the ball early, hits hard and keeps hiking the pace until opponents fall away.



"Most of the girls do not know how to win," she has said. "They are just not strong enough." Determination takes on almost supernatural quality in Devoy. She fell in a tough five setter against Robyn Lambourne of Australia in the team event which followed her reclamation of the individual title, knocking her head against the side wall and losing consciousness momentarily. It was 9-9 when she fell and she can remember nothing of the match from that point. But she got up and won the match with a perfect backhand drop and a forehand cross court kill

that were textbook examples of their kind.

"She will not lie down even when she is unconscious," Lambourne said ruefully, and that is as good an epitaph for Susan Devoy as anyone could ask for.

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## **SUSAN DEVOY CAREER HIGHLIGHTS**

- Won 4 World Open and 8 British Open titles (between 1984 & 1992)
- Became the youngest Women's World No1 in April 1984 – and went on to top the rankings for all but two months until retiring in February 1993 (105 months in all)
- Represented New Zealand in 7 Women's World Team Championships between 1981 & 1992 – and led the country to its only two appearances in the final (in 1985 & 1992)
- Won 10 NZ National titles
- Was knighted and so became Dame Susan Devoy in 1998