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Abstract

'An all-time great': in June 1978 Yvonne Crittenden, writing for the Bulletin, suggested that Heather McKay's sports record might be 'the most extraordinary the world has ever known'. Outclassing records compiled for any sport, Australian squash-player Heather McKay won sixteen consecutive British Opens, fourteen consecutive Australian amateur titles and two World Open championships.

PAT DOBREZ

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‘An all-time great’: in June 1978 Yvonne Crittenden, writing for the *Bulletin*, suggested that Heather McKay’s sports record might be ‘the most extraordinary the world has ever known’. Outclassing records compiled for any sport, Australian squash-player Heather McKay won sixteen consecutive British Opens, fourteen consecutive Australian amateur titles and two World Open championships.

PD *About two weeks before her death in Newcastle this year, Anna Rutherford rang me in Canberra to ask a favour. She wanted to fulfil a long-standing ambition to interview you for Kunapipi. She was in the final stages of organising a sports issue, and boasted of having faced you on the squash court in Queanbeyan, something like three or more decades ago. Anna confessed that she had been trounced on that occasion, an unusual experience for her. Those who knew her remember her as an intrepid player in life, and an achiever in her own sphere. Her prodigious energy as an academic teacher and editor aside, it was no small thing to have played Heather McKay, or Blundell, as you would have been then, and she never forgot that game.*

When you talk about your sport, what comes across most of all, it seems to me, is a sense of exhilaration that you have felt in competition, and often the suggestion that the contestant you are playing is Heather McKay. You had that drive to be undefeated, and it is a very hard, fast game. To what extent were you motivated to keep ahead of yourself, to test the field of the possible in your own terms? You were pushing the game well beyond other people’s limits.

HMCK When I started to play, I just started because I enjoyed the game of squash and, when I started to do well, I tried to make sure that when I went to a tournament, or went to any competitive match, that I was prepared, and prepared very well, and I set myself a level that I wanted to maintain, determined to keep on improving on that level. I think a lot of top sporting people set themselves a goal, and they’re not that worried about beating their opponent, because they know, if they’ve



Heather McKay, 1976
(Gerry Cranham)

prepared themselves well, that when they go out, they are going to play up to expectations. That's what I always felt — and made sure of — that when I went away to a tournament, I had prepared well. Then I knew I'd done all the work, and, if everything went right, I should win.

PD *You felt confident because of your preparation. Does this mean that, when you found your form in 1962, you had some idea that you would be able to maintain it at that level — and beyond — for a couple of decades?*

HMckK No, I wouldn't say so. In 1962, I was still very much a beginner in the game of squash. Having come from a tennis background, I'd moved to Sydney in '61 and I was still getting lessons from the late Vin Napier, and Vin was still helping me with my technique, so in 1962 I still regarded myself, when I look back, as fairly raw on the squash scene, and at that time I had no idea where squash was going to take me in the future.

PD *Looking back on your career, it seems to me that you have been a trail-blazer in the sport, consolidating both your career and the sport itself — especially the Australian game — in the 60s and early '70s. You*

achieved this by a succession of victories in Britain and at home, and then by going on to win the inaugural Women's World Open Championship in 1976. Before talking about Heather McKay and squash, it might help to explore the development of the game as you experienced it. I believe the first Women's World Championship event was held in Brisbane. What sort of following did squash, particularly women's squash, have in Australia at that time?

HMCK Oh, squash was still very much on a high in Australia at that time, both in men's and women's, and of course with the Women's World Open Squash Championship being the first one, then certainly this gave a boost to women's squash here in Australia particularly, but not only here in Australia, but throughout the world, because they came from all over the world to represent at that tournament. So, yes, in '76 it was still an extremely high profile sport.

PD *When you took up a coaching position at the Australian Institute of Sport in Brisbane in 1985, had the Australian scene changed from the years when you were competing?*

HMCK Yes, quite considerably, because, when I started in 1960, it was a very new game, and I'd seen it grow from a very new game right through to when I competed, and then it had grown and grown, and we'd had many world champions during that period, and then, after having spent ten years in Canada and coming back, unfortunately the peak had died off in the game. Squash was incorporated into the Institute of Sport programme. I think that the young players could see that with help from the Australian Institute of Sport it would give them the opportunity to compete on the international circuit. A lot of the up-and-coming players needed the kind of help the Institute could give them, whether it be financial, coaching, nutrition — that sort of thing.

PD *Why were the squash courts dying off at this point? Was it a matter of lack of private funding?*

HMCK I think what happened was that there was such a boom, and so many were built in that era, from most probably the middle '60s through to the late '70s, '80s. Then all of a sudden we got all these new sports — aerobics, and netball and mixed netball, and indoor cricket, etc. So when the boom period slowed, a number of centres suffered. I also think that a lot of squash court owners had had so many good years that they were left behind in moving with the times as regards incorporating aerobics and gymnasiums in their centres — generally upgrading their centres.

- PD** *Am I right in thinking that the development of squash in Australia coincided with the rise of the boomer generation, in the years of the 'Lucky Country' — those years marked by an improved standard of living?¹*
- HMCK** Were the boomer years the '60s and '70s? Those years, yes.
- PD** *So squash as a community game had to be reinvented later on, because sports facilities in general were becoming over-extended, and some of the older ones were out-of-date?*
- HMCK** Squash had to dig in, and because there was so much competition out there, the numbers had to be spread. It was part of that time.... Just to add a little bit about what happened in the late '50s — '58, '59: of course we did have squash courts in Australia at that time, but when a men's team came out from England, and also Janet Morgan and Sheila Speight came out as well, and they did a tour throughout Australia, that actually kick-started the building of the squash courts in '59, '60. I think that really got the game of squash going. I don't know if it would have happened so quickly if that English team hadn't come out.
- PD** *It was a British game at the outset, wasn't it? It spread throughout the British colonial world, and is now played in more than 120 countries. Its history seems rather obscure, but the modern sport I believe is generally sourced to the game of 'Rackets', played on an enclosed court at Harrow and Rugby Schools in the nineteenth century — becoming formalised in England after the 1914-18 war. Evidently the first Australian courts were built in 1913 at the Melbourne Club in Collins Street. In those days it was a recreational and male-only affair, I guess, but a national game was being played here from the 1930s onwards, after the inauguration of championships for both men and women. As part of the colonial legacy was it in any sense a game for an élite? There is the example of the legendary Pakistani player Hashim Khan.² It was an élite British game in his country wasn't it, when he taught himself to play?*
- HMCK** Yes, Hashim fetched the balls that were hit over the walls of the squash courts. They didn't have any roof on them in his town, and so, when the other club members weren't using them, Hashim apparently used to go on and just practise himself. So it was very much colonial, slightly élitist — and I think also, when I first went to England, they were all private clubs. The pros weren't allowed upstairs in the bar with the members. Particularly: I was talking to Hashim's brother — I had a lesson with him over there, and I also had a couple of lessons with Hashim here in Canberra — and they just weren't allowed upstairs

with the members. They were the pros in the club, and they knew their place downstairs. But completely different here in Australia: we didn't have the private club system; it was a public court.

PD *More democratic?*

HMCK Anyone could pick up the phone, book a court. Buy yourself a racket. Hire your shoes. Hire a ball. You could do that sort of thing. And so reasonably inexpensive in those days.

PD *Are Canada and the United States democratic in the same way, or is there more of a mix of public and private?*

HMCK Up until the last fifteen years particularly — very much private club. Since then, though, they've been changing, and quite a number of clubs are pay-as-you-play. All the clubs we worked in Toronto were private clubs. The Toronto club went pay-as-you-play after we'd been there for six years. But the Toronto Cricket Skating Curling Club was private. America was very private, but they have moved on, as Canada did many years before, to what we call 'pay-as-you-play'. But there are still a lot of private clubs in Canada and America.

PD *And the existence of the private clubs gave you an opportunity to earn a living through squash, didn't it, in the years when it was difficult to do so in Australia?*

HMCK Yes, that was a reason we moved to Canada.

PD *To return to the history of your own game, what was the attraction of squash above hockey? I understand you were a pretty good hockey — and tennis — player.*

HMCK Yes, I loved my tennis, and played a lot of tennis — as well as hockey — and enjoyed my hockey very much. But all of a sudden, in just over twelve months of picking up a squash racket, I was Australian champion, and —

PD *Surprised yourself?*

HMCK *Laughing.* Well I knew I'd never move out of Queanbeyan for tennis, and certainly I wouldn't have made any move for my hockey, because there was really nothing in hockey for me at that stage. So when I came back from Brisbane after winning my first Australian, I had to make a decision. If I wanted to continue with squash I'd have to move to Sydney. It was one-on-one competition, which I enjoy but, on the other hand, I continued to play hockey right through my squash career,

but that got me away from the one-on-one competition. With hockey I was just one of the team, and I was —

PD *It became recreational?*

HMCK Yes. It was a new set of friends, so I felt it took a lot of pressure off me which came through my sport.

PD *There's a tidy collection of articles celebrating the highlights of your career in the National Library of Australia. All great achievers find themselves entering into myth. Reading the articles I find that you are frequently cast as the female Don Bradman or Walter Lindrum,³ and this, it seems to me, does get to the heart of the matter, because what is notable about your performance as a sportsperson is your invincibility. The consistent wins are there on the record: in your case 16 consecutive British Women's Squash titles, which were in effect world titles at that time, 14 consecutive Australian titles, and titles you won in the two world competitions in which you participated before retiring. With your 11th British win, you outstripped the 10-championships record of English great Janet Morgan. When you were on the court, the chief competitors in the sport all wanted to watch. The astonishing fact is that for two decades (1962–1981), you never lost a match. How resolved were you in your own mind not to lose even one game? You floored potential critics by playing a near-impeccable game. People thought they were doing well to note an occasional error. I am interested in the mind-set which produces such performances. Is winning as much a feat of the mind as of physical prowess?*

HMCK When I think back, I didn't have many nerves in those days. I just used to get a little bit nervous when I walked on the court. But again, every time I walked on the court, I *felt* that, the longer the match went, the more chance there was of me winning, because right from the earlier days, and the write-ups in England, — after my first couple of trips — they just said that I was a good athlete, basically playing squash. And then I became a good athlete *and* a good squash player as well, one of the reasons being that I trained a lot harder than the — well I would say 99.9% of the women squash players in those days, and as the years progressed, I still felt that I trained harder than any of the other squash players. So we go back to confidence. If you've done the work, you know that they're going to be a lot more worried about playing you. But, on the other hand, it didn't matter how I felt, everybody still expected me to win, and that used to irk me as well as Brian — Brian more so than myself.⁴ But, as I said earlier: I always made sure I prepared myself well — and Brian also made sure I was prepared — otherwise

I wasn't going to go to a tournament — unless something happened, like I came down with the 'flu, or something happened on the day. If I went on the court, there was no excuse. I believe once you walk on the court you must have in the back of your mind that you're reasonably confident you're going to win. Yes, I trained very hard.

I myself, and Barbara de Bruine, née Barbara Baxter — we were the first two who ever did weights for squash, and that was way back in the early 60s — '62, '63. That wasn't heard of in those days. I ran. I ran upstairs. I skipped. See, also, Pat, the difference was a lot of the English women played very, very good tennis — Wimbledon standard. And so they played tennis in the summer, and then squash in the winter. And they, at the beginning — very early '60s — they kept the two of them apart, whereas Australians played twelve months of the year. But eventually it changed and they became full-time squash players as well. No, I was always reasonably confident that I could, I would, do well at each tournament.

PD *So you were training very hard. But how easy is it to plan tactics in advance — or are you always thinking on your feet?*

HMCK Oh, I always tried to make a point of watching if I could, watching my opponent. And then, over the years, of course, playing them so often, you got to know their weaknesses and their strengths. You knew which ones were strong mentally. You knew which ones were going to be tough physically. So I knew that nearly all of my opponents, unless they were new on the scene. I knew how I was going to basically play each opponent before I went on. Then, of course, if things started to go badly, you had time to think about that between games.

PD *For someone like me, the speed of the game is mind-boggling, with the ball travelling up to 200 kms an hour. At what point is it possible to feel fear, or is fear chronic? Were you — in particular — fearless?*

HMCK No, I think two capable squash players on a squash court — there's no fear. Because you're quite confident in your own ability to be able to control the ball. Basically to control your movement, to control your swing — the racket. We did have accidents. People getting hit with the ball, and with the racquet, being injured — getting themselves split open. That sort of thing. But basically, the only time I felt a little fear was if I went on with somebody of a lesser standard. Mishits. Wild swings. That sort of thing.

[A brief exchange ensues on the subject of advice given on this subject in *Heather McKay's Complete Book of Squash* (1978).]

- PD** *I believe the game of squash is sometimes compared to boxing in terms of the stamina and nerve required in situations of actual bodily danger. What do you make of that comparison?*
- HMCK** Well, I don't know about the bodily danger, etc. *Laughing*. But certainly, when I first started, my father — you know he was a very keen sportsman, and was very instrumental in me getting involved in all the sports I was involved in — we were talking about getting fit for squash, and he had the analogy of the movement — particularly of the boxer and the squash player. Up on your toes, moving, keeping light on your feet. And so, particularly the first few years, I did a lot of skipping for my training, as do boxers. And also, it's good for the arms, and the breathing. So, yes, in that analogy, I think (*laughing*), I always thought there was a little bit there.
- PD** *You've talked to me about preparation for a tournament, but was it always possible for you to prepare your game in the way you would have wished?*
- HMCK** Yes, I think so. I was reasonably lucky. I moved to Sydney in '61 to work at the Bellevue Hills Squash Centre, and I worked shift work, which meant that I worked one day morning and night — which left me the afternoon to train. Then the next day I worked afternoons only — so it gave me the morning to train. So while I was here in Australia, yes, I was able to fit in my training routine. And also being at a squash club, I had the use of the squash courts. Going to England — I used to go over quite a bit earlier before the British and try and play in two or three tournaments leading up to it, and after a few years I was lucky enough to get practice opponents. So I had no trouble, really getting myself prepared.
- PD** *When you were winning those international titles, how developed were the programmes aimed at understanding physiology, psychology and nutrition, and so on?*
- HMCK** What programmes?
- PD** *There weren't any? (Laughter)*
- HMCK** Yes, there was none of that: physiology, psychology, nutrition: no. I always say, and laugh about it: for fifteen, sixteen years, I had steak and salad before I played. Four or five hours before I played. Whereas now, it's a carbo-loading — and that sort of thing. So, no: we had very little help. The weight training that I talked about earlier — . [HMCK explains how a squash player who was also involved with the Australian weight-lifting team helped with a weight-training programme especially

designed for her needs.] But other than that, over the years, I knew what suited me, and I knew what didn't, so I used to go out and do my own thing, and just try and build on it.

PD *So when the Women's International Squash Players Association was founded in 1983, perhaps it did not make a lot of difference to you, but did its activities and influence make a difference for up-and-coming players?*

HMCK In those fields? ... Certainly WISPA has made a big difference, and has come ahead in leaps and bounds in the last few years in particular.

PD *Did WISPA make any difference to the financial rewards of the game?*

HMCK Definitely. The first World Championships I played in — the second one I won, I think, two and half thousand. That was the biggest pay packet I'd had. WISPA struggled at the beginning. They had trouble getting sponsors. But each year they grew and grew, and I believe now they have a major sponsor overseas. And it certainly made a huge difference to the women's game. They started a few years behind the men, but they've done very well, and without WISPA I believe the women's game wouldn't be where it is today.

PD *To stay with the issue of women and sport. The honours you have received have taken different forms: there are your Memberships of the Order of the British Empire (1969) and the Order of Australia (1979), your admission (the first for a squash-player) to the Helms Athletic Foundation, your induction into the Australian Sporting Hall of Fame in 1985 and World Squash Hall of Fame in 1995, to name several. It tells us something about what you were up against in terms of achieving recognition as a competitor in women's sport that you were named both ABC Sportsman (sic) of the Year in 1967, and Australian Sportsmen's (sic) Association Walter Lindrum Award winner in 1967, '69 and '74. Was there no recognition of the role of women in sport during this period? Was it assumed to be a male domain?*

HMCK I think women did get recognised, but we were still competing with sportsmen for sportsmen's awards. It was never called sportswomen's awards. It was a joint award, but certainly women — outstanding women — were recognised in those days. But because there were a lot less of us, then the awards seemed to go to the men more often.

PD *There wasn't much visibility in the media. I don't have recollections of television coverage. It seems women's squash encountered media indifference. Do you think this was the case?*

- HMCK** Well, not just for squash, but for every sport. And still is.
- PD** *We didn't get Saturday afternoons devoted to women's sport, did we?*
- HMCK** No. I think if you read the statistics on some of the newspapers, the media — I mean the percentage of women's coverage to the men's is most probably a lot better today. But it is still nowhere near equal. And certainly wasn't in my time. I think — we're talking about the ABC Sportsman of the Year Award — I think I won it on my 9th or 10th nomination. And I still say today — and I haven't said it very often — I wonder would I ever have been named ABC Sportsman of the Year if I hadn't been named in the All Australian Women's Hockey Team that year as well. So I had the hockey, and I'd won so many British championships as well.
- PD** *So it took a double nomination? You needed a double effect to get a result?*
- HMCK** Yes. So I often think: would I have got it or not?
- PD** *Our own honours system was not established until 1975, so the British had to get in first by awarding you an MBE. How important is this kind of public recognition of individual sports people to the survival of the game?*
- HMCK** I think when you receive it, it's a great honour, but I don't think that's what you're playing sport for. Certainly I wasn't playing sport for that, but I think, for any person in their own sport to be recognized, it gives their own sport a profile as well.
- PD** *When the history of cricket is examined, it is easy to recognise the existence of a nationalist subtext in the conduct and reporting of the game. We have wanted to demonstrate that we are as good as, and better than, the British. Sometimes there's a detectable edge of Republicanism in the fervour of Australian barrackers. Did you ever feel that competition was a nationalist contest? To what extent did you feel you were playing for the honour of Australia?*
- HMCK** *Laughing.* Good question. I always felt I was playing — you know I was always representing Australia, and always proud to represent Australia. But I must say I always got much better publicity in England than I ever got back here in Australia.
- PD** *Did you ever work out why that was so?*
- HMCK** I think it was because the British Championships were recognised as the World Championships. But also over the years, although I kept

winning it, Australian recognition seemed to get less and less each time that I won — it seemed to get less and less coverage. Mum always said that if she never read anything in the paper, she would know I'd won. *Laughter.* I also quote Mum saying that — because, if I lost, there'd be headlines! So, no. I got very good publicity in England and I just feel that, whether they saw me play over there more, and recognized my ability more — I don't know what it was, Pat, but I certainly got better coverage, better recognition, over there.

PD *I think it might be another case of the Australian disease of cutting down tall poppies. You were NSW senior and Australian champion, and when you entered the British championships you gained the title in your first attempt. Who was the young Heather Blundell who, in 1962, made her first overseas trip to Britain? I understand you grew up as the eighth in a family of eleven children, and that your parents' home was in Queanbeyan, near Canberra. Your baker father was a fine Rugby League fullback? Did he encourage all his children in sports activities?*

HMCK I'll start with the last bit first. Yes, Dad was a very good Rugby League player. He played for NSW country and, if anybody knows anything about country football, a Maher Cup, in those days, was a very big thing, and Dad played Maher Cup for many years, around Temora. Yes, I always say we were *encouraged* to play sport — we were never *made to play* sport — and it was nothing for Mum and Dad, and myself, and Robin, and Kay, and Kenny, to go down and have a hit of tennis together, and a couple of the other boys to play football, and so we were a very sporting family, but we were never made to go and play. We were always encouraged to play, and I think that's a big difference to a lot of the young ones today.

PD *I understand your Dad did the baking in the evening, which would have given him hours of daylight at home with his family. Did that make a significant difference to family life?*

HMCK Not really, as he also had a market garden. He certainly did the baking at night, but also he worked very hard in a vegetable garden that we used to have down the road, and that didn't leave him a lot of time. Certainly, though, any spare time he had, particularly on weekends, we spent a lot of time together.

PD *And the Heather McKay who made her first overseas trip?*

HMCK I was a very shy person who, having left home twelve months before that, was given an air ticket to England. I was entered in three

tournaments, and I was given a little bit of expense money, and I was on my way to England by myself. I stepped off the plane; I didn't really know where I was staying, and I was met by Janet Bisley (Shardlow), who was Janet Morgan⁵ before that, and Janet and her first husband Joe met me at the airport, and I was in England for eight weeks that first year, and I stayed with Janet and Joe. I used to go off and play my tournament, and I'd come back and stay with Janet and Joe. They would take me in and look after me, and I always said, right through until Janet died, three or four years ago, that Janet was a second mum — because she looked after me. We used to sit down and discuss squash tactics. We'd never go on a court, because Janet had finished the year before I got there. She'd tripped over a hose and hurt her back — many years before — and she called it quits. I had a sore elbow on my first trip, not long after I got to England, and she took me down to her old coach, Bob Johnson, down at Serbiton, and Bob had a look at me hitting my backhand. He said, 'Yes, well I think you should be doing this and this', and I went away and I did it, and never had a bad elbow from that day to this.

So I was very shy, very quiet. I mean ... when I think back on it, it was a huge experience. And I would never have thought that I would have got through that. They had a cocktail party after the final of the British. I had to go out and buy myself a cocktail dress, because I didn't have a dress to wear. And the private club system, the type of people involved in squash in England — the ex-Lord mayor of London. You know, it just opened a whole lot for me, on that first trip, and if it hadn't been for Janet and Joe, I honestly don't know what I would have done.

[In reply to a question about her British ancestry, **HMCK** replies that the Blundells were of English origin, and that a cousin is working on a family tree.]

PD *The name Blundell is part of the Queanbeyan/Canberra historical landscape. We see this family as part of our regional heritage. To what degree do you identify with this heritage? Is being a Blundell an important part of your identity?*

HMCK Blundells have been around this area for many, many years, and this is certainly part of our heritage, and I believe that Blundells' Cottage⁶ was occupied by my father's father's father's brother, George. Last time I was there I signed the Blundell book.

PD *I believe your mother is still living, and that the extended family, or her extended family, is very much part of your life and, I guess, the main reason you have chosen to return to the original home you and*

Brian established here in Canberra in the sixties? I imagine this was shortly after you married and changed your name to Brian's — as women of our generation did?

HMCK Being one of eleven children, as we grew up, and certainly as we grew older, we've become a lot closer and, having the home here in Canberra certainly influenced me in coming back here. But we do enjoy the four seasons, after being ten years in Canada. And certainly in those days I don't think that there was all that much of a decision whether you were going to keep your own name, have a double name, or just change it to your husband's name. In those days you just took your husband's name.

PD *You have been coming and going from this address for a long time. After you turned professional, you and Brian took up coaching positions in Canada where you lived for a number of years, but I get the impression you were very eager to return to Australia once it became possible to make a living here — even though it meant financial sacrifice. Did the offer of an A.I.S. position come at the right time for you, or do you wish you had been given the opportunity earlier?*

HMCK When we originally took the job in Canada, we were looking at going for three years, and then, when we stepped on the plane to go, we said we would be back. The three years went to five, and then five went to ten. But during that time we always said we would end up back in Australia. Come eight or nine years, we were starting to look at coming back, but there was nothing here to come back to, job-wise, financially. And then when the position became vacant at the Institute, and I got the job, it came really at the right time for us, because I had another two years to go on the contract that I had at the club, and after that two years we were going to come back to Australia regardless. So I was extremely lucky that the club let me out of the contract and was able to come back and take up a position at the A.I.S..

PD *Can you tell me something about Brian's role as supporter, co-trainer, and mate? I believe you met Brian in 1961 when he was coach at a squash centre in Sydney, and you had taken up the job of receptionist there to help your finances. Was that the year you won the NSW and Australian titles?*

HMCK Well yes. Except for that first year, Brian's always been there and, certainly, he has always been the person behind the scene. He's never been one to push himself forward. Not a lot of people know that he played a very good game of squash himself, played top grade in Sydney, but didn't play many tournaments. Very good water polo player, very good all-round sportsman — Rugby League, played a decent round of



Heather McKay, squash champion

Australian Information Service photograph. National Library of Australia

tennis. And he said that one champion in the family was enough. *Laughter.* And I've always said that, without Brian — well I very much doubt whether I would have stayed in the game for as long as I did.

Because if there was any doubt that I could train — . If I couldn't get myself in the position I wanted to be in going into a tournament, then I wouldn't go. So we would discuss all that sort of thing. I was lucky enough that he was good enough to beat me most of the time. I used to beat him sometimes, but we always could practise together. He could train with me physically — that sort of thing. So on the overall picture, to have someone like that. And also the other big thing is that, being as good a squash player as he was, he would watch me play, and pick out things wrong with my game. I might win 3 love, and — you know — 27/2, but I'd come off and he'd say, 'yes, but you could have done this a little bit better', or, 'you could have tried this'. So he was always fine-tuning my game as well, and that is a big help.

PD *I imagine he's also the historian of your performances?*

HMCK He has a pretty good memory, Pat, he really has. So I've been extremely lucky, and yes, when I decided to call it quits, we sat down and we talked about competing in the world championship in 1981 in Toronto, but decided that, because we were both working so hard, and there were so few tournaments that I could play in to lead up to this world championship, that I'd be better off calling it quits, and I did.

PD *You've been coaching vigorously since then, and you have only recently returned to Canberra from Brisbane. Did you enjoy your coaching role there?*

HMCK I loved every minute I ever had with the Institute. I had thirteen years — some full-time, some part-time. It was hard work: you're much more than just a squash coach. There's a lot more than just being on the court with the kids. But I really learned a lot, actually, by being at the Institute. And I feel that I became a much better all-round coach than I was when I came back, by working with the professional people that we had — with the squash unit, the weight-training people, and the nutritionists — the psychologists. I just learned so much, and working with the young talented players of Australia, and just seeing them improve, and when they got into the senior ranks to go overseas, and a number of the ones we coached became world champions — you know — it's a great feeling of satisfaction to say, yes, I had a little bit to do with it.

PD *I'd like to end by talking about the future of the game. I imagine many changes in the technology of the sport — for example, the use of glass and perspex courts — altered the culture of squash dramatically in the years you have been involved. What sort of changes of a technological kind do you see on the horizon?*

HMCK Well we've improved with the glass court and that's certainly improved the number of people that we've been able to get in around the court to be able to see the whole game. Technology-wise the rackets have improved tremendously. I think where we can go in the future is, most probably, using the cameras to make it more successful in the televising or the filming of squash, because I still feel that we could make a big improvement in that area. It's OK for people who play squash, because we've been in there and we've done it. For people who haven't played squash, the game loses a little bit when it comes over on television, and you lose a little bit of the speed and the effort it takes, and I think in years to come the technology will bring that through, so that it will really get a lot more people involved in watching it.

PD *With your wide experience of the world of sport, how do you understand its role in society? The advice you give in your book on squash is as much good advice for life as it is specialised advice for behaviour on the court.*

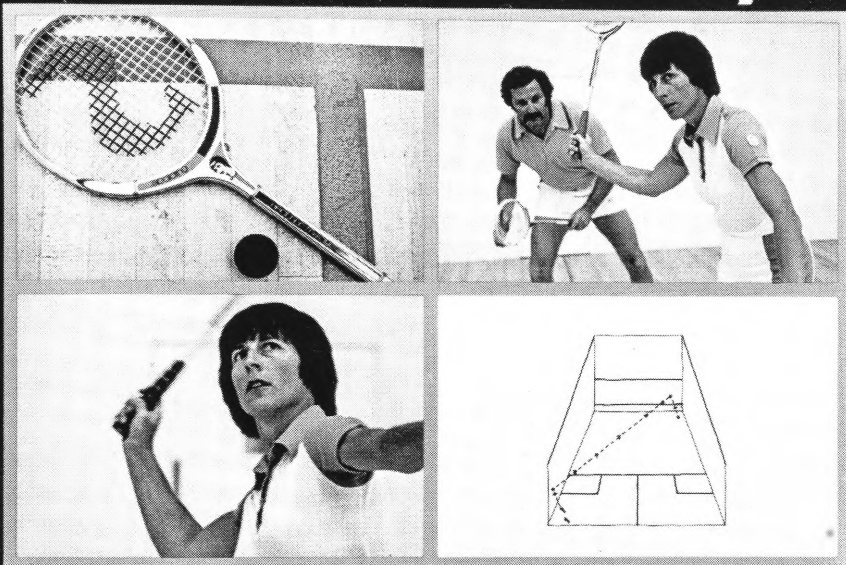
HMCK Sport in itself I think plays a huge role, because people always like to aspire to do things — but when they can't — to have a hero or a role model that they can look up to. I had role models in sport when I was young. Lew Hoad was one of my heroes when I played tennis, and Rod Laver when he came on the scene.⁷ Rod Laver is one of my heroes today, because — I mean the way he played! So I think the public — if they can look at these players, and see how they conduct themselves, and say, 'OK, they did that in this sport, I'm going to do that in real life'. But unfortunately, we're getting too many people watching today. But we still have to keep pushing at a grass root level for the kids of all sports, because it's becoming too easy for parents to let their kids stay indoors, and just use the video/TV, play games and that sort of thing as recreation, and unless we keep pushing to get them out on the playing fields, then we are going to get less and less people out there.

PD *How does squash differ from spectacle sports — in terms of its following, and in other ways?*

HMCK Squash being such an enclosed sport, and also much closer for the audience than a lot of the other sports — squash itself, when the game is in progress — everything is silent. You get in all the outside sports — clapping and cheering, that's all part of that game. So I think there's quite a bit of difference.

PD *How would you rate the chances of the integrity of the sport surviving future threats from increased and more subtle use of performance-enhancers, from international gambling, from self-interested media*

Heather McKay's



Complete Book of SQUASH

Heather McKay's Complete Book of Squash, 1978
(Heather McKay)

appropriating the personal successes of champions, and — to be a bit surreal, a bit sci-fi here — genetic-engineering? (Laughter) What threats do you see looming for young people starting out?

HMCK Well, it would seem that performance-enhancing drugs, for instance — a lot of them that are used today are basically for power. Squash is speed and reflexes. We've been extremely lucky in squash that we haven't had that problem to date.

PD *You were telling me that there is regular drug-testing in squash.*

HMCK Yes, very much so, even down to the juniors, for the junior world championships. When I was made a coach/mangeress of the team, we had two of the girls in the Australian team drug-tested. So, yes, they are pretty well on top of that — at the moment. But, of course, who can see into the future?

PD *Do people bet on the sport?*

HMCK Not that I am aware of, not on the TAB, and on the major betting channels. I'm sure interested parties would have a little flutter every now and then. *Laughter.* But nothing to write home about. The media? At the moment squash isn't really a high enough profile sport — for the media to really do more than report it. Hopefully in the future, when we can televise it — what I call 100% successfully — and we then will get major sponsors, and more money will come into the sport, who knows what will happen?

PD *What about the temptation to engineer champions?*

HMCK Well, yes ... I think that's one of the things that has changed so much from my time — to the young players, say, at the Institute of Sport today. Because, I mean, they know exactly how their bodies work, they know exactly what to put in them, they know exactly what areas to strengthen, the muscles that their sport involves. Yes, I think that, as the years go on, it will become even more specific. And I think that's one of the reasons they're still breaking records today, because they're just finding new ways to improve different areas of the body, and also the mental training. When I came back to the Institute of Sport we got a sports psychologist, and I thought, oh god — you know. I did without one for sixteen years, twenty years, and, I mean, why do the young players of today need a sports psychologist? But I have seen it work, and work really well, and that difference can make the difference of winning or losing.

PD *I sometimes have visions of a postmodern future in which champions are genetically-engineered, cloned, or recreated as virtual reality figures against which real or virtual players, crossing barriers of time and space, battle it out with the greats, but whatever turn the sport takes, it's likely that historians will see a career like yours as coinciding with the golden age of sport. Whatever happens, what you showed us is now on the record and something to which we can refer to help us understand the stretch of a people's physical proficiency at a particular historical moment. I get the impression that, when it all boils down, you've devoted your life to squash for the sheer challenge and enjoyment of it: the sport for its own sake. Is that the way you see it?*

HMCK Without a doubt. And I hate always to compare my time with today's time, but I think we played it for a lot more enjoyment than they do today. We didn't have much, or I certainly didn't have any financial reward. I mean I played for the sheer enjoyment, and the challenge, as much as anything else. I would hate to see genetically-engineered or cloned squash-players running around a squash court. That's looking a long way down the line.

PD *If there's something that's possible human beings will go for it. (Laughter) That's the problem.*

HMCK Well, we see that in illegal drug-taking, don't we? I mean, if they can get away with it, and still be a winner, they're doing it. So, why not, if they can go to the other end: I mean be genetically engineered ... ?

PD *It will be very hard to legislate in these areas, and monitor them.*

HMCK Well, they're having trouble monitoring drug abuse today. And so if science keeps on improving the way it has over the last twenty years, for instance are we going to be able to keep up with what's happening in the world of sport? But no, I always say I'm glad I played the days that I played. It's a business with the top sporting people today. It's their job. I had a full-time job, and I played sport for the fun and challenge of it — whereas today it's a full-time job and they have to perform when they go out.

PD *Different pressures now?*

HMCK Oh, the pressures? You know, I didn't have any pressures from media. I didn't have any pressures from sponsors. They're just two that come to mind straight away. If they're being paid, they should be performing. If they're the top. Because if you're in a job, a highly paid job, and you don't perform, then — .

PD *You're really being employed by a sponsor at that level?*

HMCK Yes, yes. And also, you know, a lot of them are being partially funded by the Australian Sports Commission, or the Institute of Sport, or their states' sports' institutes. I'm not saying they have to go out and win gold medals at the Olympics or the Commonwealth Games or win world championships. I'm just saying that if they go out and do their best or a personal best, that's all you can ask of anybody.

PD *You in particular took up a dare, to be as good as you could be, and brought it off — spectacularly. Most us can only sit back and admire you for showing us the field of the possible. One of life's great barrackers, Kunapipi's editor had just such a tribute on her mind when*

she died. An expatriate Australian for most of her working life, Anna Rutherford followed your career from Europe and was fired by your consistently stunning performances. For Anna it was never a case of 'Up there Cazaly!', but rather, I think, 'In there Heather McKay!' If I can put it this way, as a former lexicographer for the Australian National Dictionary, Anna wanted Australia to be an in-there-McKay kind of country.

Research sources: *Heather McKay's Complete Book of Squash* by Heather McKay with Jack Batten, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1978; Heather McKay, Biography File, Newspaper Room, National Library of Australia; 'Sporting Blundells', pp. 10-12 of *Blundell Family History* (work-in-progress), compiled by Allan Hawke; websites of Australian Institute of Sport, Squash in Australia, and Women's International Squash Players' Association; Yvonne Crittenden, 'Heather-an all-time great', the *Bulletin* (Sydney), 6 June 1978, pp. 70-74.

NOTES

- ¹ In his book *The Lucky Country* (1964), Donald Horne observed that two-fifths of the Australian population was under twenty-one. At this time, the first wave of the postwar baby boomers was reaching its majority and exciting speculation about its possible contribution to a new, affluent society.
- ² A member of a Pakistani dynasty which rose to eminence in squash in the post second world war period, Hashim Khan held the record for winning the British Open seven times (1951-6 and 1958). He was British professional champion five times, and also won the Australian and USA Open championships.
- ³ Arguably the best cricketer in the history of the game, Donald Bradman first captained Australia in 1936-7 in a series against England. He could be relied upon to make in the vicinity of 100 runs every time he went out to bat. In 1948 he took to England what has been regarded as the best ever Australian side. As a matter of interest, he was also a notable squash-player in the early 1930s. The Australian billiards player Walter Lindrum became world champion in 1932. After a career of record-breaking performances, he retired undefeated in 1950.
- ⁴ Brian McKay, a former R. A. N. technical officer, has devoted his life to squash. A rugby league player and outstanding cricketer, he coached squash part-time at the Bellevue Hills squash courts, Sydney, where he met Heather Blundell at the outset of her squash career. After a four-year courtship they married in 1965.
- ⁵ Having won the championship for ten successive years, from 1950 onwards, Janet Morgan (later Bisley, then Shardlow) was regarded as the best female squash-player of the world until her record was beaten by Heather McKay. She became chairperson of the Women's Squash Rackets Association.
- ⁶ Once part of the Campbell family's Duntroon estate and home to farm workers, Blundells' Cottage is now a visitors' attraction on Lake Burley Griffin. George and Flora Blundell lived in the cottage for almost sixty years.
- ⁷ Lewis Hoad represented Australia in the Davis Cup from 1952-56. He won the Australian, French and Wimbledon singles championships, as well as the Italian singles title, before turning professional in 1957. Rodney Laver played Davis Cup for Australia in the years 1958, 1960-62, and 1973 (first open Davis Cup). He won the Australian Tennis championships three times, Wimbledon four times, the U.S. twice and the French once. He was the first player to win the double Grand Slam (1969 and 1962).