Entry type: Person
Entry ID: IMP0180

McKay, Heather Pamela

(1941 -)

Born	19410731, Queanbeyan New South Wales Australia
Occupation	Squash Coach, Squash player

Summary

Awarded the Australian Sports Medal on 30 August 2000, Heather McKay was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) on 26 January 1979 for her service to the sport of squash, and an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in 2018 for distinguished service to squash as an elite player and coach, as a pioneer on the professional circuit, and through support for young athletes. She had previously been appointed a Member of the Order of the British Empire (Civil) on 1 January 1969 for services to sport. An Australian representative in squash and hockey, McKay dominated ladies squash for two decades and lost only two squash matches in her career.

Details

Heather McKay (née Blundell) enjoyed a career of unparalleled dominance in her chosen sport and is one of Australia's greatest ever sportspeople. During a playing career that lasted nearly twenty years, she won fourteen successive Australian Amateur titles in her sport (1960-73), sixteen British Amateur (later Open) titles (1962-77), the inaugural World Championship title (1976) and the World Championship again in 1979. She was named the ABC Sportsman (!) of the year in 1967. She lost two matches in all that time; one in 1960, the other in 1962. Even then, Heather McKay considered those losses to be steps towards later victories. The 1960 loss was to the late Yvonne West in the quarter final of the New South Wales Championship – a result she was tickled pink by considering it was the first time she'd played in the event after picking up the game the year before. She never lost an amateur title match in Australia again. The 1962 loss was to Fran Marshall, the reigning British Champion, in the final of the Scottish Championship. It was the last loss she would ever experience, and Heather was delighted with the result. It was the first serious hit out she had in Britain before her first attempt at the British Amateur Championship, a title she took from Marshall a few weeks later.

These achievements are unmatched by other Australian sporting heroes, yet more Australians will be familiar with the accomplishments of Pat Cash, Shane Warne or the Brisbane Lions Australian Football League team than they are with McKay's. She is a little frustrated by the lack of recognition, not because she needed it but because her sport could benefit from the publicity. Furthermore, she is confident the reason she has been overlooked has nothing to do with the fact that she is a woman and everything to do with her choice of sport. Heather McKay played squash. Despite there being a tradition of excellence in Australian squash at an elite level, and despite its popularity as a participant sport, squash in Australia has never had a high media profile, not even when an Australian woman was literally unbeatable. In fact, in a cruel paradox, the better she became, the less media coverage Heather McKay received. Her mother used to say to her, 'I knew if I didn't hear anything about you, that you had to be winning'. Clearly, if Mrs. Blundell relied on the press for news of her daughter's achievements, she would be waiting a long time!

Heather Blundell, born July 1941, was one of eleven children that grew up in Queanbeyan in New South Wales. Most of her brothers and sisters played sport regularly, some at a high level, in games like tennis, hockey, rugby and A.F.L. Her dad was a champion country rugby league player and both parents played tennis. They actively encouraged all there children to live active lives and, as Heather says, 'it's just what you did in those days.' Given that both parents were incredibly busy (Heather's dad worked as a baker by night and in his market garden by day, Heather's mum had eleven children to care for) the children, the children had to entertain themselves. Sport was a cheap, accessible form of entertainment.

While she was adept at most sports she tried her hand at, as a young woman Heather excelled at tennis and hockey. In fact, it was in order to keep fit for hockey that she initially played squash. After discovering the game when she was on holidays with a friend in Sydney, she came back to Canberra and, along with a group of other girls, made regular games at the 'Squash Bowl' in the city part of her training regime. It was pretty much hit and giggle stuff; they received no coaching, just a good cardio work out. Then one day when she was playing with a friend, Alan Netting, Alan told her that the New South

Wales Country Championships were being held in Wollongong and suggested that they go down to them. After checking with Mum, who gave the plan the all clear, Heather and Alan joined the competition. She finished the tournament with victories in the Junior and Women's titles, a performance that caught the eye of the late Vin Napier, president of the Australian Squash Association. He suggested that she should attend the New South Wales championships in Sydney. With the help of her mother and her grandmother made it to the quarter final and won the junior tournament, without ever having received any formal coaching, and with the NSW Country tournament her only experience.

It was at this point that Heather decided to switch her focus from tennis to squash. This is not to say that she stopped playing other sports; on the contrary, she continued to play hockey throughout her squash career and well into her retirement from international competition. Indeed she was still playing good enough hockey to be named All Australian twice, in 1967 and 1971. But the fact that she never actually played representative hockey, because it clashed with her squash commitments, indicates where her priorities lay.

After winning her first Australian title in 1960 (the first of fourteen straight), she was forced to make another choice; whether she was going to stay in Canberra and fiddle around, or further her career by moving to Sydney. Obviously, her meteoric rise in the sport suggested that she had the raw material to make the move worthwhile. The move was made easier because of the help of some good sponsors and friends. Spaldings (whose racquets she was using at the time) helped her to get a job at the Belleview Hill Squash courts, and Vin Napier put her touch with players and coaches who were generous with their time and advice. John Cheadle would have a hit with her once a week. Keith Walker taught her to think a bit more about the game, rather than just 'hitting and hoping'. Heather spent her first year in Sydney listening, learning and playing a lot of squash.

Having successfully taken on Australia twice, in 1961 and 1962, Heather thought it was time to take on the world. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the British Open was the unofficial world championship – an official world title did not come into being until 1976. Fortunately, she had an understanding employer, an enthusiastic and supportive state association and some helpful sponsors who regularly made it possible for her to find the time and money to take off to Britain for two months every year for sixteen years! She would play demonstration matches as fundraisers; the Australian Squash Association would provide some money, as would the Spalding Company and the cigarette company W.D. and H.O. Wills. All the money went through the New South Wales Association, who then arranged her travel and paid her an allowance; in the age of amateurism everything had to be arranged just so. It could not be seen that she was making money from her sport.

In 1962, Heather flew across to London, knowing virtually no-one and without even a hotel room booked for her first night, in order to have a tilt at the British title. Stepping off the plane, she asked herself 'Ok, what do I do now' – it was a scary sensation. Fortunately, she was met by the late Janet Shardley (Bisley at the time) a renowned British squash champion. In what would become a regular feature of her annual migration, she stayed with Janet and her first husband, Joe and then, after Joe died, her second husband Ambrose. As Heather said, Janet was really her 'second mum', and both Joe and Ambrose were great friends. They were all vitally important to creating the stability that underlay her success in Britain over the next sixteen years, including that first year.

Staying with friends, being billeted out while playing in various lead up tournaments around the country, spending a lot of time alone during the day because everyone else was working ('I became a very good window shopper' claims Heather); the life of an amateur sportsperson in the 1960s was a far cry from the experience of today's professional sportspeople. There were no managers ensuring you ate and slept well in comfortable hotels, there was no coach scheduling adequate warm up, cool down and recovery sessions. There were no media or sponsor commitments. And of course, there was no money. Not unreasonably, Heather wishes that she had the opportunity to make more money from the game than she did, and believes that some of the restrictions placed on amateurs were ridiculous. (The people who insisted that she be classified as a professional because she didn't pay for her half of the court where she practiced spring to mind as some of the most small minded!) Having said that, she still thinks that it was a great time to be playing the game. Precisely because their livelihood wasn't at stake, amateurs could leave it all on the court and establish very good friendships off the court, friends who you could go out and have a drink, or catch a movie, with; friends who you looked forward to seeing again when you all met up at the next major tournament. She looked forward to hard games with players such as the English women Fran Marshall and Anna Craven-Smith and the Australians Jenny Irving and Marion Jackman, but she also looked forward to good times with them off the court.

Why was Heather McKay so good? Apart from an extraordinary ability to stay fit and on the court, she was naturally athletic and very strong; she could get to balls that her opponents didn't think possible and she could hit the ball so hard and accurately they couldn't get it back. She was a technical perfectionist – 'good technique doesn't fall down when you are tired'. She played a conservative game, doing what she did well to the point that she virtually eliminated unforced errors from her game. She 'took no prisoners' on the court, but she did not 'wipe the court' with her opponents either, always preferring a good game to a whitewash. In the end, it was about fitness, technique and taking control of her own game. 'I learned what was good for myself, what I enjoyed doing and what worked for me'.

Her amateur status and late arrival to the sport may also have contributed to her career longevity, and hence, her extraordinary run. Heather McKay never suffered from the soft tissue and repetitive strain injuries that many of the current players succumb to. She recalls only one significant injury – cracked ribs. She can't remember how she got them, but the impact on her game of having them was not serious enough to break her unbeaten run. When asked to speculate on the reasons for her durability, she suggests that she was one of the first squash players to include strength training and stretching as part of her fitness regime, and that this probably had an impact. The fact that she cross-trained, continuing to

run and play hockey, was important. Attention to good technique was also a factor – applying good technique inevitably meant that the body was less likely to suffer stress.

Good genes, good luck and, quite possibly, picking up the game at the age of eighteen and not ten, may have all played their part as well. McKay believes she was at her strongest and best between the ages of 29-31, an age by which many current day players are feeling old, injured or burnt out. Professionalism means that potential champions get identified early and receive excellent coaching and support. It also means that, sometimes, youngsters are required to specialise too early – meaning that the opportunities to cross train, and therefore avoid repetitive stress, are diminished. Heather recognises that these days it would be close to impossible to do what she did (i.e. pick up the game at seventeen and expect to become a world beater) but she does believe early specialisation does bring stress that needs to be managed carefully. Working as an assistant coach at the Australian Institute of Sport (1985-1999) gave her a lot of experience in managing this delicate balance.

In the mid 1970s, however, Heather grew tired of the lack of financial support that accompanied her amateur status and turned professional. She and her husband moved to Toronto in 1975 where they were offered positions as club pros at the Toronto Squash Club, a huge, privately owned eighteen court centre that featured a gym, restaurant and pro shop; there was nothing like it in Australia. The McKay's stayed in Toronto for ten years, moving to positions in different clubs in that period, and seeing the standard of Canadian Squash rise significantly in that time. It was while she was living in Toronto that she became the official champion of the world in 1976 by winning the inaugural Women's World Squash Championship. This was a win with which she was very satisfied. She worked extremely hard for it, played incredibly well and, despite protests from some British officials who, for technical reasons, claimed that it wasn't really an 'official' title, came away having achieved what she had set out to prove. She was the undisputed world champion. 'I've got the T-shirt saying I'm the first' – she received her second (and final) metaphoric t-shirt in 1979. At the age of thirty-eight, she decided that she didn't have the time or inclination to put in the work that was required to compete anymore at the highest level.

Heather and her husband loved their time in North America, but never anticipated retiring there permanently. Family and friends were in Australia and after nearly ten years of them, they had just about enough of the Canadian winters. A 1985 offer to join Australian men's squash icon, Geoff Hunt, coaching at the A.I.S squash unit in Brisbane was just too good to refuse. She thoroughly enjoyed her position as senior coach, and learned a lot from Hunt, who was the unit's head coach, over the thirteen years she was there. In 1999, she retired from the AIS, and from any informal involvement in squash.

Heather still maintains a keen interest in the sport and is delighted to see the progress of world class players such as Sarah Fitz-gerald and the Grinham sisters, who went through the academy while she was there. She thinks Squash Australia is doing a great job promoting the sport, and maintains that it is one of the best 'social' games people can play, as well as one of the most efficient, in terms of the fitness benefits. 'Forty minutes on the court and you have had a very good workout,' she says. She still laments the lack of coverage the game receives, but puts this down to the difficulty of attracting large crowds to live matches and the problems of covering it for a T.V. audience. Four sided glass courts have helped, as have new peep-hole camera angles but, as Heather notes, 'It's very difficult for someone who has never played the game to sit and watch and appreciate the game fully. On TV you can lose the speed and the ball. People who've played can appreciate it, because they can appreciate what it takes to get to the ball. But those who haven't don't understand the effort and skill involved.'

Before Heather won her first Australian title, Pakistani champion Hashim Kahn, who Heather regards as one of the greatest players the game of squash has ever seen, observed for the benefit of the Canberra press that 'this girl could be very good'. Fourteen Australian and sixteen British titles along with two world championships have proven him to be a good judge of talent and a master of understatement! Hopefully, it isn't only squash players who can appreciate what it took for Heather McKay to achieve and maintain her extraordinary record. The world's greatest ever female player of one of the most popular participant sports on the globe deserves better.

Events

1969 - 1969
Appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire

1967 - 1967
Awarded ABC Sportsman of the Year

1979 - 1979
Awarded Member of the Order of Australia

2000 - 2000
Awarded the Australian Sports Medal

2001 - 2001
Inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women

1965 - 1965
Married Brian H McKay

1985 - 1998
Squash Coach with the Australian Institute of Sport

1961 - 1973
Winner of New South Wales Championships

1979 - 1979
Winner of the American Amateur Racquetball Championship

1977 - 1977
Winner of the American Championship

1984 - 1984
Winner of the American Professional Racquetball Championship

1980 - 1981
Winner of the American Professional Racquetball Championships

1960 - 1973
Winner of the Australian Amateur Championships

1962 - 1977
Winner of the British Open Championships

1980 - 1980
Winner of the Canadian Racquetball Championship

1982 - 1985
Winner of the Canadian Racquetball Championships

1976 - 1976
Winner of the World Squash Championship

1979 - 1979
Winner of the World Squash Championship

1961 - 1973
Winner of Victorian Championships

Published resources

Book
Great Australian Women in Sport, Brasch, Nicolas, 1997

The Dictionary of Famous Australians, Atkinson, Ann, 1992

The Champions: Australia's Sporting Greats, Smith, Terry, 1990

Outstanding Women in Australia: Women in Sport, Rolton, Gloria, 1997

Edited Book
Who's Who in Australia 2002, Herd, Margaret, 2002

Journal Article
Interview with Heather McKay (AM, MBE), Dobrez, Pat, 2001

Site Exhibition
She's Game: Women Making Australian Sporting History, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2007, http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/sg/sport-home.html

Faith, Hope and Charity Australian Women and Imperial Honours: 1901-1989, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2003, http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/honours/honours.html

From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013, http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection
Heather McKay interviewed by Nikki Henningham [sound recording]

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