

# FROM GREYMOUTH TO GREATNESS

*Rod Gilmour charts Paul Coll's rise from sport-mad schoolboy to New Zealand's first ever male world no. 1*

Ever since Paul Coll left the isolated South Island coastal town of Greymouth to go to boarding school as a 13-year-old, the New Zealander has been on a self-made journey. But squash wasn't always the intended destination. "My mum always said she saw some potential and wanted me to go to a bigger school, to get out of Greymouth and find opportunities," Coll says.

At Christchurch Boys' High School, he was popular and made friends easily. He played rugby league, hockey, golf and squash. By the time he left, he was head boy. However, as a sporting all-rounder, Coll had yet to fully commit to squash. "When I was playing juniors, there were usually three or four better than me. It wasn't until I was picked for the New Zealand team that I decided to figure out how to get better at it," he recalls.

He fell in love with the Silver Fern and playing for his country at age group level. "I had to keep moving away," he admits.

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"It's something I have had to do in my career to make the hard sacrifices to get to the next level."

From Christchurch to Europe, Coll has now spent a decade abroad, starting as a sofa-surfer and now newly installed as world no.1. Naturally, Greymouth is the first place he goes back to in New Zealand – even if it has been over three years since he last saw his parents.

He says: "Everyone knows each other, it is a friendly town and a lot of great athletes hail from there. But you have to take the next step and the next leap to keep progressing. It's a great place to grow up, be outdoors, active and competing in different sports."

***Hailing from a small town, he says, the ethos is that you have to make sacrifices to get what you want. "There's no excuses and it's been built into the culture of having to work hard," he says. "It has instilled some good values in me."***

Coll reasons that enjoying the great outdoors and trying different pursuits and sports from an early age has made him a better athlete. "There is more versatility in terms of fitness and ability to adapt to certain situations," says Coll, who reaches his 30th birthday in May.

"It has made me more diverse in the way I move. You deal with situations far easier when you play a lot of sports. There is a risk of burnout if you only play one sport. For me it builds a better athlete from a young age in the way you see the ball, body awareness and hand-eye coordination."

He has also been aided by a highly competitive family. His uncle Tony captained the Kiwi team at the 1977 Rugby League World Cup while family gatherings would typically see some sort of challenge take place, like planking or holding weights on outstretched arms.

"That in itself just builds a competitive nature," admits Coll. "You get used to that environment. If we played the most stupid game it was always fun but with a high level of competitiveness."

Coll's attitude towards professionalism was also piqued when he was picked for New Zealand juniors and other sports fell by the wayside. "Competing for New Zealand, it wasn't so much there were better juniors than me, it was more that I loved my country and it gave me a real edge in terms of commitment to squash. I was now taking squash a lot more seriously."

***"My workload was becoming too much and I was missing training in other sports which I hated doing. I never liked doing anything without 100 per cent commitment. I hated the fact that someone was working harder than me."***



The decision to settle upon squash saw his parents hug him goodbye at 21. Coll undertook a 'world tour' for three months where he tried to find a permanent base. Eventually he settled in the Netherlands where former world no.11 Cameron Pilley and a cohort of Australians were living. "It felt more like home with them having the

same interests and humour. I enjoyed the sense of familiarity," says Coll.

For the first three years he would go home every three months. He then met his girlfriend Nele Gilis, the world no.13 from Belgium, and made the decision to move over to Europe full-time. The couple live in Rijnsberg, a village on Holland's west coast.

Off court, Coll has a penchant for design and has co-founded a clothing brand, Iwi Athletica. He says: "All the way through school I had a passion for art and graphic design. This keeps ticking that box for me and allows me not to get over-indulgent in squash."

Coll leans on his mentor and fellow New Zealander, Stuart Davenport, for advice. "I rate Stuart very highly in terms of the progress of my career," says Coll of the former world no.3. "He has put a lot of time into my career and taken a big interest in me. He has a very good brain and understands the game at a very high level."

Coll gives an insight into Davenport's mastery of the nuances of elite squash. He'd read one of Coll's social media posts which had talked of "learning from the master" after he had trained with a world no.1. Davenport told him to stop giving players such respect. Coll is world no.1 himself now, and the hunter has become the hunted.

"There is still more I can improve on," says the 2020 British Open champion. "Being at the top and knowing there are still areas to improve on is an exciting place to be."



*Paul Coll attributes his greatest triumph to date – his British Open victory last August – to a last-minute masterstroke by his coach Rob Owen.*

*In Hull, Coll became the first Kiwi ever to win the prestigious title, ending a run of 13 consecutive defeats against Ali Farag in the final. A week beforehand, Owen had suggested a slight alteration to Coll's grip.*

*"I've always had a problem holding the racket too tight, too tense," he said. "We changed my thumb position and index finger on the forehand which helped me relax on the grip."*

*"I've tried lots of techniques but this helped me have more feel over the racket face. Instantly we thought it was a better change – and so it proved."*

*Coll and Owen only partnered up in 2019 and didn't go on court together for 18 months during the pandemic. Their reunion just before the British Open was therefore perfectly timed.*

*Coll says: "When we watch my games, Rob is just great at analysing and spotting areas which need improvement to keep pushing me to the next level. It's such an exciting time."*