

Massaro's mission

Vanessa Atkinson talks to world no.2 Laura Massaro about her Allam British Open success and her bid to end Nicol David's seven-year reign at the head of the world rankings

When Laura Massaro became the first home winner of the women's British Open in over 20 years with her spectacular victory over world no.1 Nicol David at Hull's KC Stadium, it was a career-defining moment. The 29-year-old from Preston is now the first real threat to David's dominance of the women's world squash scene in over seven years.

Massaro is an unlikely candidate in many ways. Although always within touching distance of Jenny Duncalf and Alison Waters, Massaro has spent a good deal of her career in the shadow of her compatriots.

Initially, Duncalf looked to be the one likely to threaten the Malaysian's grip on the top of the rankings by spending almost three years at world no.2 from 2009 to 2011. However, it was Massaro who seemed to have the game to beat David, regularly taking games off her and eventually claiming her first win at the Cleveland Classic in 2011.

"I've always done fairly well against Nicol, even when I wasn't that highly ranked," she said. "My game doesn't really suit her. I use a lot of height and slow the pace down, which is something not every player can do."

That win catapulted Massaro to a career-high of three and put her ahead of

Duncalf for the first time in her career.

A consistent 2012, despite losing out to David during every meeting that year, cemented her position in the top echelons of the women's rankings.

A win over long-time rival Raneem El Welaily in the semi-finals of the World Open not only put Massaro in her first ever World Open final but also provided the valuable points which enabled her to rise to world no.2 in March of this year.

So what is the key to Massaro's success? When asked about her status as the world no.2 and the chances of going one higher, it is evident that, to some extent, her recent success hasn't entirely sunk in.

She said: "I sometimes struggle to believe that I've got to world no.2! Now people are asking whether I can close the gap on Nicol and I'm wondering how I've managed to come through amongst all these amazing players."

However, this show of modesty belies a steely determination which has enabled Massaro to slowly develop into the player she is today.

A number of astute career decisions over the past few years are a good example of this clear-sighted and analytical approach to her squash.

After a break with long-term coach

Annette Pilling in her early 20s, Massaro started working with husband and part-time squash coach Danny Massaro. However, after a brief period when Danny was her full-time coach, they soon realised this wasn't the way forward. "He didn't have the knowledge that he has now and we found ourselves arguing on court. We talked about it and agreed that he needed to take a step back," she recalled.

A brief but fruitful collaboration with former professional Nick Taylor ended when Taylor relocated to Jersey. On his recommendation, Massaro then approached former British champion Phil Whitlock. This turned out to be a timely move, with Whitlock providing the kind of tough love she was missing.

"I went to Phil and he was more brutal than people I'd worked with before and said the things that a husband just can't say – like the fact that I needed to lose weight and get fitter," she said.

Recently Massaro made another astute decision when she began working with ex-national coach David Pearson. "I realised that I needed to work a bit more technically, which isn't really Phil's thing, and that's where the relationship with DP started," she said.

Husband Danny, although no longer her main coach, still plays a vital role in Massaro's career. It was in December of last year after a first-round loss in Hong Kong that she realised something needed to change. "I was crying my eyes out at the airport and it wasn't the first-round loss," she said. "I just felt really lonely. I was fed up with being on my own. I got home and we decided he needed to start going away with me a bit more."

Danny has travelled to almost every tournament since then to support Massaro during her matches and talk to her in between games. "He's just there as my husband, but at the same time he's helping me do the best that I can," she said. "Because he's coming away more and more now, we've got it down to a T."

The relationship between Danny and Pearson seems to be another important factor in why the collaboration is working so well. "They get on brilliantly, which takes the pressure off my relationship with both of them. They're completely on the same page," she said.

The next tournament after the disappointment of Hong Kong was the World Open in the Cayman Islands and with Danny in tow, Laura put in one of the best performances of her career to make her first ever World Open final.

That match also proved to be a vital learning experience going into the 2013



An emotional Laura Massaro is comforted by husband Danny after her British Open success

season. "I learnt a lot from that final," she said. "The semi-final was such a huge win and I let things get carried away. I got a million texts, but you can't get up on the morning of a final and still be reading 'well done' messages about the previous match. So that was a real lesson I took into my other finals."

Massaro went on to beat David on two more occasions preceding the British Open final, most significantly on Malaysian soil in the semi-final of the KL Open in March.

"I was actually ill in Malaysia," she recalled. "I felt horrendous that morning and the goal was to just give everything I had and focus 100 per cent on my game plan. I didn't think for a million years I'd win that match, but afterwards I realised that if I'm completely focussed, it's good enough to win."

Going into the final of the British Open, Massaro tried to recreate that approach, keeping the focus firmly on the execution of her game plan rather than the enormity of the situation.

"To have a chance, I needed to forget what it means to be British Open champion and be totally focussed on my game plan," she said. "I did that pretty well until about 7-3 in the fourth when I thought, 'Don't mess this up now'. It went hand in hand out and then she served out, and I remember smiling and thinking, 'What are you smiling for?' She'd just handed me championship ball!"

The big question in many people's minds now is whether the Lancashire player can go one further and catch David in the world rankings.

Massaro is quietly confident, saying: "If I'm honest, it feels like it's do-able. There's a point when it's so far off that it's not even on your radar, but then after you've beaten someone, you start to think if she's world no.1 and I've beaten her, then why can't I do it?"

Nevertheless, she is determined not to let herself get too carried away with the world no.1 status. "I'm not training every day to stay at two," she stressed. "I'm pushing to improve myself, not necessarily to become world no.1, but if that gets me there, that would be brilliant."

Possibly a touch premature considering she's only 29, but when asked how long she intends to continue playing, Massaro keeps her options open. "In my head I'm thinking 33/34 is a good age, but if I'm still playing at this level in five years' time, it would be really hard to stop," she replied.

Looking further ahead, the Massaros have recently acquired a house in their home town of Chorley, where budding professionals were able to live and train from August of this year. Players will have the opportunity to be coached by Danny and train with other professionals, as well as with Laura herself. "We're trying to build something for the future while at the

same time helping my squash now," she explained.

A role as coach at some stage is certainly not out of the question. "The longer I've been on tour, the more I've thought that I've got a lot to offer, particularly at the elite end," she said.

For the moment, though, Massaro's focus is primarily on her own career and the season ahead. With this year's World Open still not confirmed on the WSA calendar,

Massaro is taking it one step at a time.

"No matter what, my goal is going to remain the same as it has been for the past year, which is to take care of the little things and the big things will take care of themselves," she said.

If the past year is anything to go by, the women's tour could about to enjoy one of its most competitive seasons ever, with an intriguing rivalry between the world's top two players taking centre stage.



Laura Massaro raises the prestigious British Open trophy after beating Nicol David in the 2013 final