

Guyana's shining light

In-form Guyanese no.1 Nicolette Fernandes talks to Vanessa Atkinson about her early years in squash, the injury that almost ended her career and her rise into the world's top 20

The quality and spirit Nicolette Fernandes showed in her marathon British Open second-round defeat by England's Sarah Kippax shone some long-awaited light on the vivacious Guyanese no.1.

The affable and popular 31-year-old has enjoyed one of her best seasons over the past 12 months and is currently at her highest ever world ranking of 19.

However, her journey into the world top 20 has been unconventional to say the least. Born in Toronto but raised in Guyana, Fernandes was introduced to squash at the age of six with her four big brothers as her earliest sparring partners.

Her love for the sport was immediate and in her teens caused some initial concern for her parents. "My mom always wanted me to go to university, but all I wanted to do was play squash," she said.

The decision to take up squash more seriously turned into a long series of pleas to her parents, who funded their determined daughter during her first few years as a travelling semi-professional.

"After high school I begged them for a year to prepare for the World Juniors," she recalled. "Then I begged them for another year to train for the Commonwealth Games. After three years of begging, I think they realised I was serious and a year would pass without me having to beg."

Fernandes now commends her parents for allowing her the freedom to pursue her dreams. "In our circle being Caribbean champion is like being world champion," she said. "You become Caribbean champion and it's like, well done, you've had a great career! It was courageous of them to allow me to do what I did."

Her first few years as a full-time pro were

a challenging but crucial learning curve for the young Fernandes. "Getting used to losing was the biggest thing," she said. "At no point was that enjoyable!"

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Growing up, her Guyanese coach, Paul Ince, was and continues to be an important

influence both on and off the court.

However, a move to England eventually put her into contact with former England national coach David Pearson. "After meeting DP, everything just felt really enjoyable," she said. "He completely changed my game technically, but the biggest thing he taught me was just to work hard and enjoy it. He has been a huge influence on my career."

In 2007, though, at the age of 23 and having just reached the top 30 for the first time, disaster struck.

A seemingly minor tweak in her knee turned into a 23-month hiatus from the game. The tweak turned out to be a severe case of patella maltracking, where the tendon constantly jumps off its tracks. Two operations followed, as well as endlessly extended periods of recovery and rehabilitation.

It was almost two years before the knee finally got better and with no ranking, the now 25-year-old Fernandes essentially had to start all over again.

Surprisingly, though, she now views the injury as a blessing in disguise. "I don't want it to sound like a sad story because I'm so thankful for that injury," she said. "It made me appreciate squash again. All my love for the sport came back and I honestly believe I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you if it hadn't happened."

Fernandes puts her recent success down to an enduring love for the game. "It's been the best season of my career and that's because I'm happy and just loving squash at the moment," she added.

However, even though she is undoubtedly one of their most successful female athletes of all time, Fernandes' success goes virtually unnoticed in Guyana. "If I beat Nicol David tomorrow, they'd be none the wiser," she pointed out.

This is not something she is in a hurry to rectify, though. "It's nice when I get a little media attention, but that's not what I do it for. I'm just happy to be able to represent Guyana in a positive way," she said.

