

New Series:
Nicol David's mental secrets

David's mental edge

Seven-time world champion Nicol David and her psychologist, Frank Cabooter, talk to Richard Eaton about the techniques they use to ease the pressure on her

You may be surprised to learn that even after winning seven world titles and spending four years as world no.1, the pressure continues to increase for Nicol David.

Some of it came from special factors. As an icon for an emerging nation and a role model for women throughout much of Asia, she finds that even rare defeats are considered shocking, but the Malaysian's other causes of stress are familiar to many of us.

David has sometimes felt imprisoned by expectations, or shackled by tension as to whether she could deliver, or weighed down by periods of grief while recovering from losses.

Hence her relationship with psychologist Frank Cabooter offers insights for many of us. Although their collaboration did not begin until long after David became famous, some of the issues they deal with are relevant to ordinary players.

In particular, Cabooter's and David's work on mental training routines helps improve her focus on court and enables her to deal with pressure. Players of any level can benefit from these.

This then is an introduction to an instructional series with Cabooter, which may be useful to any player, perhaps like Jonah Barrington's ground-breaking fitness regimes were when they became popularised in the 1970s and 1980s.

Sports psychology is already a boom discipline of the 21st century. Its influence has gathered credence at elite level in many sports, notably hockey, football and athletics, as well as squash, but it is capable of serving any of us who don't achieve as much as we would like.

Certainly David has often been a more composed player since 2009, the year in

Nicol David focuses on the next point

which she lost to Madeline Perry in the second round of the British Open at Manchester and had to recover from the loss of the first game to Natalie Grinham in a tense World Open final in Amsterdam.

She came to realise that, even if you improve as a player, the pressure can increase. "Winning the World Open is one thing, but dealing with being expected to win it again is something different," she said.

Other issues would affect her too. "Sometimes I could lose a bit of focus," she admitted. "And after any loss I would always feel bad and it would take me a while to get it out of my system."

For these and other reasons David sought Cabooter's help. Her three best World Open performances followed – at Sharm el-Sheikh, in Rotterdam and on Grand Cayman Island in 2010, 2011 and 2012 respectively.

Each time she appeared more relaxed, losing only one game in 15 victories. In other tournaments there were occasional defeats, but these did not feel quite so devastating as before.

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"Everyone knows I hate losing, but in working with Frank I've learned to take the losses better by talking through them," David said. "Then I discuss them with Liz (Irving, her coach) to tap into areas which need attention to prevent it happening again. Then I focus on moving forward."

David and Cabooter selected special issues, such as dealing with the expectations of others, dealing with pressure on and off court, staying focused during matches and dealing with losses so they don't have too big an impact.

"We use a mix of visualisation, game-plan reminders and other techniques which suit Nicol's approach to matches,"



Nicol David with her team of advisers after winning the 2012 Cayman World Open (left to right): therapist Ronald Fauvel, psychologist Frank Cabooter and coach Liz Irving

Cabooter said. "During a match you only have a couple of seconds, so routines have to be well rehearsed.

"That's where practice matches can be useful. If you approach them as tournament matches, they provide opportunities to practise your mental routines. We worked on changing thoughts from negative to positive ones and on visualisation in preparing for matches."

Reliving moments when she felt pressured or lost focus was important for helping David to understand why they happened. It made her ask questions and helped create ideas on how to change things.

There are occasions when players try to get inside her head. With Cabooter she has learned how to become more aware of when this happens, and uses visualisation and reminders to regain her focus.

More recently they have been assessing what goes on in her personal life. "Working on your personality, self-image, self-knowledge and capacity for stability can create lower levels of stress," she explains.

Some of these difficulties will sound

familiar to players of all standards.

However, each player has widely varying aptitudes, so sometimes the right techniques are suggested but don't work.

A sports psychology course can nevertheless be helpful at any level of

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competition. It can help you focus better, deal with pressure situations (8-10 down, 10-8 up) and stay motivated.

But, as Cabooter adds, this is unlikely to be useful unless you are already physically fit and have adequate skill levels. If you are and if you have, psychology can offer keys to hidden powers.

NEXT ISSUE:

Cabooter talks about pressure.

Your chance to talk to Frank

Frank Cabooter has been a sports psychologist for more than 10 years, during which he has helped top athletes in many sports, including rowing, boxing, judo, basketball, bobsledding, football and windsurfing, as well as squash. He specialises in burn-out and depression, and in helping athletes perform at their best mentally. He is also a clinical psychologist

with his own practice and a guest lecturer at the University of Amsterdam. Since becoming part of Nicol David's back-up team in 2009, working every week with coach Liz Irving, he has helped deal with pressures on and off court. They include coping with the expectations of others, how to remain focused during a match and dealing with losses.

During this time David produced her three best World Open performances, increasing her titles to seven, and extended her hold on the world no.1 ranking to more than six years.

Among the skills Cabooter teaches other players of different levels are goal-setting, thought training, focus training, visualisation, relaxation and personality development.

Do you have any questions for him?

Have you experienced pressure and found it hard to deal with, for example? Email your questions to: editor@squashplayer.co.uk and Cabooter will answer them in a future issue of Squash Player.