

Women in squash

MELODY FRANCIS

Melody Francis's competitive spirit was always going to be a valuable asset. Even at the age of nine, playing in Sunbury's junior squash program, she preferred to compete against boys and loved it. "I have always been really competitive and as one of the only girls playing in the juniors at our club at the time, I often played against boys. I hated losing against them so that kept me motivated!" Melody said.

Today at 23, Melody is an AIS and VIS athlete. In 2010 she represented Australia in the Commonwealth Games in New Delhi and in the following 12 months won the South Australian, Victorian, Millicent and MacKay Open Tournaments. As a teenager Melody worked her way up from the U/13 state team through to the nationals. "At that stage I was hopeless. I thought it was really cool to say I was in the nationals, but the truth was I was really out of my depth and shouldn't have been there," Melody added.

Instead of dropping out of the sport, Melody got a new coach, committed herself to squash and eventually made it into the U/19 Australian junior team. "During this time I had a bit of a phase where I had to choose between softball and squash. I chose squash as I was better at it but also it suited my nature more. I liked the fact that with squash the result is based on your efforts, it's more pressure but it's your responsibility and you only have yourself to rely on", Melody said.

Melody travelled extensively while on the U/19 Australian team competing in Scotland, Britain, Prague (winning the Czech National Junior Championships), Egypt, India, Malaysia, China and New Zealand. "The opportunities to travel with squash have been amazing. I don't know anyone from my year in high school that has been able to travel as much as me", Melody said.

Her globe trotting peaked as a Commonwealth Games athlete, describing the opportunity as almost surreal. "Being part of the Commonwealth Games team and representing your country was amazing. I had to remind myself not to rush up to the other athletes and ask for their autographs and that I was one of them! It was a great experience and I am really proud to have been part of it.

"The great thing about a smaller sport such as squash is that if you work hard enough and stick at it, it is realistic that you can be successful at a very high level if you want to", Melody said. Melody believes that the sport of squash provides a number of particular physical and mental challenges. She adds that as well as it providing you with one of the hardest workouts you will do in 30 minutes, it is one of the few sports where women can compete on an even playing field with men. "I am competing with men here in Melbourne and I love it. Guys hate losing to girls and I love beating them! Men have so much more strength so if you play them on a regular basis you are better equipped to play women on the tour", Melody said.

But it is the sport's potential to provide an intensive work-out for the mind that has Melody hooked. "With squash it is constantly challenging as there is always the potential to improve. No-one can play a perfect game. A lot of the strategy with squash is about what you are doing and how you are playing. You can focus on many different aspects of the game depending on what sort of person you are. People have described it like physical chess – 90% of the sport is mental", Melody added.

Although, Melody is also studying for a BA in International Relations through Deakin University's Distance Education Program, she plans to continue playing squash until she feels like she can no longer improve and says the sport has played an invaluable role in her life. "The opportunities I have received and the friends I had made through squash are amazing. All the squashies are great people and love getting together. My involvement with squash has given me some really great life experiences", Melody said.

