

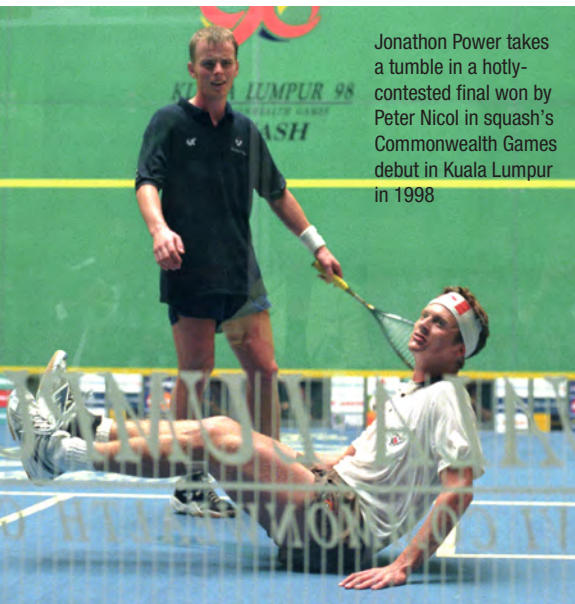
Squash belongs to Glasgow

Richard Eaton looks back at squash's journey through the Commonwealth Games since its debut in 1998 and forward to this summer's Games in Glasgow

It was a kazzam moment. When squash made its Commonwealth Games debut in Kuala Lumpur in 1998, it did more than pass through a new door.

It entered a new world, which carried images of squash to millions more people. It was full of mind-opening possibilities. People could see how it could lead to another, bigger step – to the Olympics.

Successful sports were increasingly globalised and television from Malaysia showed this was happening more to squash too. Geoff Hunt, then Australia's coach, identified this first.



Jonathon Power takes a tumble in a hotly-contested final won by Peter Nicol in squash's Commonwealth Games debut in Kuala Lumpur in 1998

It was spotted quickly too by Canadian Jonathon Power, who won a silver medal and decided immediately that he must win gold next time. The Commonwealth Games had suddenly become, he realised, the most important tournament in the sport.

Its profile was aided by Power and Peter Nicol playing one of the most memorable of their 50-odd matches in the men's singles final. The well-organised Scot edged out the unpredictably gifted Canadian 3-9, 9-2, 9-1, 2-9, 9-2 in a tempestuous encounter which forcefully projected their contrasting temperaments and styles.

Power provided the most exhilarating squash and the most exasperating moments, creating collisions, arguing with the referee and conjuring a melodrama which divided opinion. So much was at stake that it roused the normally undemonstrative Nicol to anger. "It was too much today – his racket almost hit my head," he complained.

It was quieter as Michelle Martin

earned two gold medals for Australia, though her words were unusually passionate. After beating her top-seeded compatriot, Sarah Fitz-Gerald, 9-0, 9-6, 9-5 to win the women's singles and partnering Craig Rowland to the mixed doubles title, she commented: "I've won the world title and the British Open, but this rates higher than all of them."

Hunt's view became the prevailing one. "This has been absolutely fantastic," he said. "It's been seen by millions. It's never happened before. It should do a great deal for the sport to become an Olympic discipline."

Power got his gold and his atonement by beating Nicol 9-4, 4-9, 9-3, 9-0 in the final in Manchester in 2002, but not everyone realised the angst which may have contributed to Nicol's defeat.

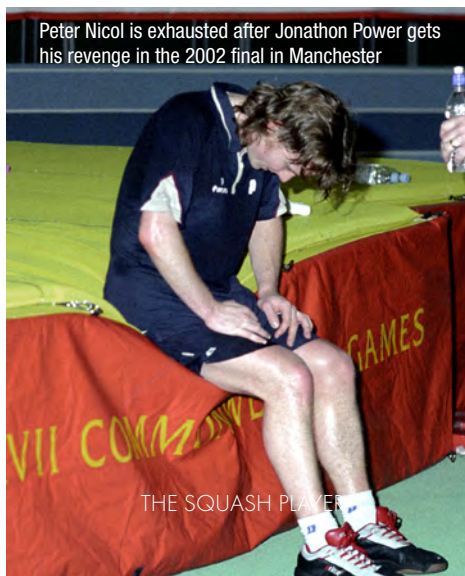
He had recently changed from representing Scotland to England and with the Games located only a hundred miles or so from the border, it was easy for the outraged to confront him with their feelings.

Some regarded his defection as unforgivable. Nicol was called a traitor to his face and one source alleged he even received death threats.

The front page of The Times headlined it as "Scotland serves up England winner". Not immediately it didn't and after the final The Scotsman enjoyed counter-headlining "Peter Nicol's shotgun marriage to St George remains unconsummated".

He was beaten by a Power showing uncharacteristic restraint. Gone were extravagant strokes and the histrionics. He wanted it so much he was prepared to grind out the win.

Nicol was exhausted well before the end – evidence, he believed, that without England's world-class performance programme his body would not survive at the top.



Peter Nicol is exhausted after Jonathon Power gets his revenge in the 2002 final in Manchester

"It was tough to hear some of the things being said," Nicol admitted. "I feel sad that I had to do it. It was something I shouldn't have had to do."

It started a hard final four years for Nicol. By contrast, Fitz-Gerald made these Games a suitable climax to a career which had only a few months to run.

The popular Australian filled the only significant space in her trophy cabinet by winning 9-5, 9-0, 2-9, 9-8 against Carol Owens, a former compatriot by now representing New Zealand. There had been no death threats for her.

'Fitz' began as if her volleying would blow Owens away. Eventually, though, her victory depended on hanging in and preventing a fifth game as Owens remembered how to slow her down. Owens won a bronze for Australia in Kuala Lumpur, but now said: "Silver for New Zealand is definitely better."

Nicol kept his preferences to himself. The Anglo-Scot did, however, strike gold for England with Lee Beachill in the men's doubles. But they only did so after a semi-final which became so ugly that they and the two Australians, David Palmer and Paul Price, had to be separated as they squared up.

International Olympic Committee observers witnessing these and other incidents told the World Squash Federation that they would not sit well with the Olympics. Soon afterwards a three-person refereeing system was introduced to reduce arguments.

There were lighter moments. Chris Walker, the England captain, was settling his nerves on the toilet shortly before being introduced to the Queen, only for Her Majesty to appear early. She had to be kept talking! The scribes were talking too. "Walker sits on the throne and keeps the Queen waiting", one wrote.

There were few more eye-catching stories than Natalie Grinham's record-breaking three gold medals as part of her honeymoon in Brisbane in 2006.

The Australian was not the world's best player, nor even the second best, but after marrying Tommy Berden, the Dutch player, she performed as if she were.

Grinham overcame Nicol David, the world no.1, 9-10, 9-7, 4-9, 9-6, 9-3 in the semi-finals, beat elder sister Rachael (soon to become the world champion) 2-9, 9-6, 9-1, 9-2 in the final and then teamed up with her to win the women's doubles. She completed the astonishing hat-trick in the mixed doubles with Joe Kneipp.



Chris Walker meets the Queen in 2002 after keeping her waiting while sitting on his "throne"!

"Love and marriage," Kneipp shouted at her. Natalie giggled but shook her head, claiming: "I never had expectations – I was just happy to be out there." But her comment suggested Kneipp wasn't far off the mark.

Rachael thought similarly. "Natalie hadn't had many wins in the last 12 months as she'd been planning the wedding," she said. "She wasn't relaxed, but after the wedding it all fell off her shoulders. And when she's relaxed and playing her game, she can beat anyone."

"I can't top this," Natalie said. "I'd better retire right now." In fact, her best years were still to come.

The result was fateful for the women's game. David had been the strong favourite and the intensity of Malaysian criticism for her failure helped convince her to base herself thousands of miles away in Amsterdam.

The men's singles provided the climactic career finish Nicol had hoped for. He won the gold medal again after an eight-year interval, this time with a rose as his badge instead of a thistle. English sports science had indeed prolonged his career and a few more people accepted it, even if they didn't like it.

Nicol succeeded with an extremely hard-fought win by 9-5, 10-8, 4-9, 9-2 over Palmer, who had not been well. Victory underlined the Briton as the 21st century's most consistent player thus far.

David made amends by capturing the only major title missing from her collection with an 11-3, 11-5, 11-7 win over Jenny Duncalf at Delhi in 2010. It purged the long-lasting pain after that Brisbane failure, which had been life-altering. "It's a great relief," she admitted, even though she had by then been no.1 for 55 months.

"I took a while to understand what happened to me last time. There are many things I've taken from it. I'm better mentally."

There were memorable emotions for Nick Matthew too as he won "the most important thing of my career so far" in the men's singles. The "so far" was significant, as the triumph became a harbinger of three world titles.

He succeeded with an 11-6, 11-7, 11-7 win over James Willstrop, which was more of a surprise than it seemed, as Matthew had begun the tournament recovering from illness.

Afterwards, he won another gold, in the men's doubles with Adrian Grant, and paid tribute to a retired hero. "Four years ago a legendary English player, Peter Nicol, got two golds and I've been trying to emulate him," he said.

"Two gold medals in an amazing feeling and doubles is so different from singles. It's all about camaraderie. You almost feel your racket isn't attached to your arm – you are just doing it for your partner."

Despite Matthew's enthusiasm, a question mark hangs over doubles events. As a spectacle, they have not been great.

It is nevertheless true that doubles successes in Delhi for Kasey Brown, who won three medals, and Joelle King, who won two, helped catapult the Australian and the New Zealander into the limelight for the first time and suggested they may be a force in Glasgow this summer.

Since then media coverage has continued to grow and players are more aware that the sport may be

close to an Olympic place. Another fine spectacle in Glasgow could bring that still closer.

Squash has shown in four Commonwealth Games that it sits well in this multi-sport atmosphere. A fifth could show it is ready for greater things.



Nicol David celebrates her victory in Delhi



The extravagant opening ceremony at Delhi in 2010