

Courting Success

James Willstrop outlines to Richard Eaton what a crucial part girlfriend Vanessa Atkinson has played in his rise to the top of world squash

Remaining world no.1 for almost a whole year required James Willstrop to make use of many resources, but one of the least often identified, remarkably, is his relationship with Vanessa Atkinson.

They are the two best known squash players ever to become a couple, yet relatively little attention has been given to Atkinson's input into Willstrop's achievements.

Throughout the most consistent year of his career Willstrop soaked up a great deal of her support, listened to her pre- and mid-match analyses, took on board some of her ideas and capitalised on her feeding ability during drill sessions.

It was hardly a coincidence that after she retired in 2011, he rode a wave of success in 2012, reaching a host of finals, maintaining a remarkable consistency and only narrowly missing his second World Open final. Even if the high-ranking Englishman never becomes a world champion, he will always appreciate the help of his Dutch partner, Atkinson, who did.

"Not all players are good at giving advice, but she is," said Willstrop. "She has a great deal of knowledge and she's incredibly measured and clever."

The reluctance of others to praise her efforts may stem from the widespread awareness that Willstrop's main coach remains his father Malcolm, who introduced James to squash a quarter of a century ago.

But if there is jealousy, it is well hidden. The three spend plenty of time together and there is no doubt that Malcolm also appreciates Atkinson's calm and well-considered influence.

"James could have no better ally than

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I have a great deal of respect for her

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his girlfriend," he said. "She understands, she's very intelligent and she's been through it – he'll never meet anyone better for him. They are ever so well suited."

Mixing emotional and professional relationships can be risky, though. It has worked for Atkinson and Willstrop

to a large extent because she understands like few others can his "strange life", as he calls it. That is what touring can be.

Secret as well as strange. Public though their collaboration appears, it has many secret ingredients – secret pressures, secret fears and hopes, and sometimes secret responses, though sometimes they are visible.

No one who has not experienced these things can easily comprehend them. Theirs is, therefore, a secret love, yet in full view.

It is easy to be sceptical about all this. A successful emotional partnership often requires falling in love many times, and always with the same person, it has been said.

True or not, compliments are often essential ingredients in the mix and Willstrop supplies them, saying: "She's a wonderful achiever. She has eclipsed what I have done, so I would be silly not to have an influence from her," the latter comment referring to her world title success in Kuala Lumpur in 2004.

Those of us who were there still remember how Atkinson, a winner of three titles on that court that year, thrived on the emotions and body-hugs of the Malaysians by outplaying the Grinham sisters on successive days to take the trophy.



Vanessa Atkinson interviews boyfriend James Willstrop in her role as compere at the 2011 World Open

Her victory speech was articulate, amusing and appropriate, which made it all the more surprising to hear that she had not found it easy to deliver. Inhibitions clouded her talents and perhaps still do.

Coaching is just one of those, as it is not a frequent role for her, but when she performs it, there are hints of abilities similar to those which emerged on that triumphant sunny day nine years ago.

"She's good at analysing a match," Willstrop said. "She often talks to me between games and I have a lot of respect for her opinion. She's good between games because she talks simply and calmly. She could have a career as a coach, so I have a great deal of respect for her."

This kind of relationship makes them rarities in squash. There have only been four previous male-female coaching-and-life partnerships between leading players, and only one where the principal coach has been female.

She is Engy Kheirallah, a member of Egypt's 2008 world title-winning team, who has been successful from time to time in harnessing the match-winning talents of her husband, Karim Darwish, the former world no.1.

Arguably Tommy Berden and Natalie Grinham, the husband and wife team from the Netherlands, have a public profile which rivals Atkinson and Willstrop for prominence. Although Berden's playing career was over by the time he began to make a difference to Grinham's game, he has made an even bigger name for himself as a promoter of two World Opens.

Very well known in their day, too, were Rhonda Thorne, a world champion from Australia, and her then husband, Ross Thorne, who was a world no.4 during the 1980s. Their opportunities to help each other were occasional, though, as much of the time they were touring separately.

It seems probable that Robyn Blackwood and Bruce Brownlee, top 10 players from New Zealand who later married, helped each other sometimes, too. Altogether, though, a quartet of couples over three decades is remarkably few.

Willstrop's professional relationship with Atkinson became closer after her competitive career ended in May 2011, allowing them to spend more time together.

"When she was a player, it was a bit tough," Willstrop said, referring perhaps to the heartache of being on different tours and to the difficulty of emotional connections even when they were together then.

"I can give her a bit of grief about things," he admitted. "But once away from the squash court, she is a very calming influence and a clever person – and good at talking about squash as well.

"We don't always go on about squash. If we do go home and talk about squash, that's fine, but there are other things in our lives."

Indeed there are. Together they know almost every decent vegetarian

establishment there is, seek good theatre together, sometimes even when travelling, and enjoy hill-walking in the Dales.

Both are deep thinkers with strong consciences. They can be forthright. Naturally enough they don't always see eye to eye, but then life has not always been easy for either.

Willstrop lost his mother while young; Atkinson was uprooted from Newcastle at the age of 10 when her father took a job in the Netherlands. When he returned to England, she stayed in the Netherlands, fluent in Dutch, with Dutch nationality and retaining Dutch squash loyalties.

She became the Netherlands' first world squash champion and yet her material rewards, as so often for women, have almost certainly been disappointing. Willstrop's may well be significantly greater.

Integrating dual identities is not easy either, even when returning close to

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where you spent your first decade, and Atkinson is still finding ways to forge a new life.

The effectiveness of their professional connection is linked to these and other struggles. Atkinson the player passed through a similar demanding mill as Willstrop and he is candid about the stresses it causes.

"My life is like most professionals' – quite strange and tough. I am often very high and low, and my home time is limited," he said.

"That's what most professionals are – quite selfish. When you have a goal like a squash professional, it's very self-centred – and it has to be. You are trying to make yourself better, and therefore it would be very tough for most girlfriends, wives and partners to understand that.

"There are also lots of girlfriends who do understand but have not been there. Vanessa has done both. She understands the pressure and intensity, and has done it all.

"She knows how difficult a life it is. I am not coming home at 5pm – it's jetlag and intensity, and low times and high times, and she's great at understanding that."

How long Willstrop still has as a leading player at 29 and how much he can still achieve is uncertain. He has evolved from one of the circuit's most expressive strokemakers, firstly into one who hit much straighter more often and more recently into one who is very strictly disciplined, deeply mindful of economies of direction and movement.

With Ramy Ashour having solved



Vanessa Atkinson kisses James Willstrop after another win by her boyfriend

some of his fitness problems and now back as the world no.1, and the much younger Mohamed El Shorbagy making significant strides, the task will not become any easier.

To deal with it best Willstrop may need to seek further evolution of his game. Atkinson has an English degree to finish at Leeds Met and a life of her own, but she may be there some of the time to help him do it.

"It's been immense, and she allows me to play the game and do training and be very selfish," he says.

"Vanessa understands these selfish things, yet she's incredibly unselfish herself. A lot of her life with me is helping me to do the best I can in the time that I have left – and I am grateful."