

# Massaro – my story

Richard Eaton talks to world and British Open champion Laura Massaro about becoming the first British woman to hold squash's two biggest titles simultaneously

No wonder Laura Massaro wouldn't let the World Championship trophy out of her grasp when the organisers asked if they could engrave her name on it. Instead, she preferred to take it home with her on the flight from Kuala Lumpur.

As her baggage came round the carousel at Manchester Airport, she needed to check that the magical silverware was actually still there inside. It had all been that hard to believe.

Massaro is a down-to-earth Lancastrian who painstakingly built up a careful routine, reliable support and steady success. Despite all that stability, though, she may never be quite the same again.

She is now the only British woman ever to hold both the World Championship and British Open titles, and has become perhaps the most surprising world champion of them all.

It is hard to believe this is the same Laura-Jane Lengthorn, who as British under-19 champion was no obvious world-beater and just focussed on trying to improve and seeing how far she could go.

Three years later she had barely reached the top 20 as Nicol David, who is the same age, captured her first world title. But now, nine years later, Massaro has snatched the world's two most famous titles from the highest profile player of all time.

Her coach, David Pearson, is profoundly aware of what she has done.

"It's an extremely special achievement," he said, sounding moved even to think about it. "I don't think anyone thought she would have done that."

"If we'd all had £1,000 to spare when she was 19, I don't think anyone would have put it on her to become world champion. It shows what can be done through spirit and guts, and being prepared to work."

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Pearson might have said "being prepared to work with courage and intelligence". That was the combination which made a difference and helped give her a sounder all-round game. At a late stage in her career Massaro was prepared to try little technical changes, a tough ask. Pearson had to convince her it was necessary, which was also tough.

"I don't think she could quite believe what she has started to achieve," he said. "British Open and world champion! Where has that come from? She has always been behind other players, but she's started to believe in herself."

That may have been helped by the fuss which greeted her when she returned from Malaysia. It was not possible to restart her daily routine. Even though a week was set aside for the media, the demands continued.

Massaro received requests from BBC Radio Manchester, BBC Sport online, BBC News, BBC World Service, BBC North West Tonight, BBC Breakfast, Blue Peter, ITV and BT Sport. She was also a guest on BBC 5 Live. No other squash player apart from Nick Matthew has had all that.

When she went to Deepdale, the home of Preston North End football club, fans applauded her as if she were a professional

footballer. Her image has altered and her self-image may be altering too.

All this has taken a long time, but there are possible advantages in having done it gradually.

"I am a hard worker, who has chipped away over time and tried to be as professional as I can on a daily basis – which is in some ways why it's been a slow, steady build," she said.

"I wish I could have

Laura Massaro kisses the World Championship trophy after her stunning success in Malaysia



done it earlier, but I think I am the player I am because I have a full understanding of my own body, what my body needs in training to stay injury-free, and a good understanding of my technical strengths and weaknesses. And that's because it has happened slowly.

"If I've managed to win titles later and keep myself fit and healthy, I am not bothered if it's 30 and upwards," she said, the "upwards" suggesting further big successes are on her mind.

Does she feel different?

"That's a hard question," she said, which hinted that perhaps she may. "I feel the same, I think. Maybe a bit more....." and she pauses. "I definitely feel proud of what I achieved. There is a pride within myself that I have achieved what I have."

There are special reasons why she should feel proud. Massaro's world title was one of the hardest of all to win. There were many moments when she seemed on the way out.

She had to fight back from 7-10 in the fourth game of her quarter-final against Low Wee Wern and to save four match points in the 12-14, 11-6, 6-11, 13-11, 11-7 victory which eventually silenced the Malaysian crowd.

That took all of 105 minutes and Massaro was concerned it might have taken too much out of her. However, with the help of England Squash physio Jade Leeder, she worked well enough on her recovery to be able to push through in four games the next day in the semi-final against Raneem El Welily, the world no.3 from Egypt.

The final threw up a test she had not envisaged. When Massaro heard that David had lost the other semi-final to Nour El Sherbini, the 18-year-old Egyptian, she knew it had changed everything. Now she would enter the final as favourite, which became the biggest drain of all on her resources.

"I basically felt sick from about an hour out from the final and nervous for most of the day," she said. "I have never felt like that for a squash match before and I can never imagine feeling like that again."

Perversely, going 1-6 down in the final game may have helped her. "I think I thought my chance had gone and maybe that relaxed me," she reckoned. She fought back and though she did not convert her first match ball at 10-8, she got over the line with a penalty stroke.

As a result of that imperfect but courageous 11-7, 6-11, 11-9, 5-11,

11-9 win, Massaro is a candidate for the accolade of Britain's most successful female professional squash player of all time.

True, she has not yet become world no.1, as both Cassie Jackman and Lisa

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She's started to believe in herself

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Opie did, but then Opie never won the world title, while Jackman never won the British Open.

How did Massaro turn her bit-by-bit progress into something so spectacular? She took important steps after meeting Danny Massaro, a lecturer in sports coaching and performance, whom she married seven years ago, and whose knowledge of psychology helped significantly. It helped her create more positive attitudes, identify more clearly what needed to be done and focus better on doing it.

He encouraged others into the support group and they all added something different.

There was Peter McNab, the psychologist, and Caroline Glain, the therapist, for whose help Massaro is grateful, as well as Phil Whitlock, who coached his daughter Emily to within sight of the top 20, and for a while used his organisational skills to help lift Massaro

## MASSARO THE PROMOTER

Laura Massaro stepped back from her playing commitments in April to run the CourtCare Open at her home club in Chorley with her brother, Chris Lengthorn, who is head coach at the National Squash Centre.

The world champion witnessed a victory for England team-mate Sarah Kippax in the \$10,000 WSA Tour event and a win for Ashley Davies in the PSA Tour's closed satellite tournament.

Massaro said afterwards: "It's been a great experience running this event with my brother. It's nice to give something back to the Tour and have the girls playing at my home club.

"I've really enjoyed my week as promoter, but I am ready to get my playing head back on after watching all the squash this week!"

It is the second year in a row that the world no.2 has organised the tournament with Lengthorn at the David Lloyd club.

into the top five.

More recently, Pearson, who did much to turn Matthew into a world champion, brought clever tweaks to Massaro's technique and additional psychological support. In doing so, he became the first individual coach ever to have both the female and male world champions in his charge.

Laura Massaro plays a drop shot in her World Championship final win over Egypt's Nour El Sherbini





Laura Massaro sheds tears of joy as she celebrates her British Open success with husband Danny in Hull last year

Last year another improvement came when Danny began touring with Laura more often. "After 10 years it's important that I feel comfortable on tour," she explained. "I was getting unsure what I wanted to do.

"Now he is there with me, it's like we are at home and that takes a lot of pressure off me. My life-squash balance is one of the huge reasons I am where I am."

That is within 800 points of becoming world no.1, the closest anyone has been to David for seven years. To climb closer, a successful defence of the British Open title in Hull may be needed.

Massaro will also bid for David's Commonwealth title in Glasgow in July and August. Managing increased media expectations will be important in Glasgow, she reckons, but once into the athletes' village, that pressure will disappear.

Hull will present different, and perhaps more difficult, challenges. "I see myself as defending champion, but at the same time I am number two and Nicol will be favourite," Massaro said wisely. "I will still take all the pressure off myself I can in terms of expectations.

"I know I want to do it and will fight for every point, but at the same time I am not expected to win, so that will help."

It is a sensible attitude and Pearson understands how she came to adopt it. "Now she thinks 'I am quite good'," he says. "That's where she's got to now. She believes that she could win things now."

## PEARSON – A CHAMPION COACH

David Pearson admitted to emotions he had never experienced before as he sat in the Kuala Lumpur hotel after Laura Massaro became world champion. "All of a sudden it hit me – I got a bit tearful," he said.

Pearson had done something unique. A few years ago he coached Peter Nicol, more recently Nick Matthew and now Laura Massaro – all world champions. No one had ever coached both men's and women's world champions before.

Many people might not have noticed the difference Pearson made. It was by "tiny, tiny" changes, according to Massaro, and observing details which at the highest level are crucial.

"It might only make two or three shots a match better," she said. "But it matters." Notably two points were the difference between Massaro and Nour El Sherbini in the world final.

Making "tiny" changes can actually be a big thing, so big, in fact, that some players can no longer make them once their game is grooved.

Pearson suggested to Massaro that she move her grip slightly anti-clockwise. It fitted with the aim of striking the ball

slightly further in front of her, and sharpened the effects of her drop and drive on the forehand side.

Attempting it when you are already world no.2 could be disruptive. Pearson was so aware of this that he left it fully eight months before broaching the subject. When he finally did, he looked her in the eye for 10 seconds before speaking. Trust and confidence were everything.

"It's not like 'I'm a coach and I'm trying to help you'," he said. "It has to be that this person really believes in you. If they go through trauma in life, they trust you are there. You're a friend more than a squash coach. That's the key."

Massaro described how it felt. "David gives me a lot of mental stuff subtly," she said. "That's alongside his main strength, which is massive technical knowledge.

"If things are not going well, he's really good at making sure you don't dwell on it – and he never lets you get too high if you are winning.

"He's had Peter Nicol and Nick Matthew. Me winning is just another in the list of achievements. So you just carry on."



David Pearson, Laura Massaro's coach, explaining that improvement is made in small steps