



**Danny's
deep dive**

Danny Massaro

YOU CANNOT BE SERIOUS!

In a new series on the mental side of the game, Danny Massaro starts by taking a philosophical look at squash's meaning to us as players

About Danny: *As well as being husband and coach to Britain's most recent world No.1, Danny Massaro is a squash player and coach of some repute, as well as being an academic teacher at the University of Central Lancashire, a final year PhD candidate and keen bedroom DJ. Deep-thinking, wise, engaging and often hilarious, he is a popular figure on the PSA World Tour and has become a counsellor and confidant to several top players. In this, his first Squash Player column in a series on the mental side of squash, he reveals the philosophies behind the sage advice he gives to professionals and club players alike.*

Players come to me with a whole variety of issues and anxieties which are affecting them on and off the squash court. They might be facing an opponent they don't like, they may feel referees are against them, their game is off, they're stressed out or just 'feel flat'.

The conversation itself is usually what helps the most and the dialogue generates some useful advice. That advice is tailored to what we discover about their life situation, their own 'lived experience', them as characters, and where they see their career going.

The advice I give them can quite often be summarised thus: stop being so serious.

After all, squash - like many things in life when you boil them down - is absurd. You're tearing around after a little rubber ball in a sweaty box. The game is a high-speed washing machine of constant chaos. What the heck are you doing that for? It's futile and ridiculous. That's very important to recognise in the first place.

But equally, you must acknowledge the deep meaning that squash holds for you. Recognise its essential silliness, but understand that it's totally legitimate to genuinely really, really want to win.

Bear with me here while I delve briefly into Greek mythology. Sisyphus, as punishment for cheating death, was ordered by the Gods to push a heavy boulder up a steep hill, then let it roll back down to the bottom, and repeat this action for eternity.

Over time, Sisyphus found meaning in this most arduous and absurd daily task. Philosopher Albert Camus said Sisyphus's

tale tells us that "the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart."

Just like Sisyphus's daily uphill ball-rolling, a squash player's daily toil is repetitive, damn hard work and has no grand meaning. Highlighting this absurdity to squash players is vital for me as a coach and psychologist. When I do, they like it. There is a release of tension, they laugh a little and are given a wider perspective on whatever predicament they may be in.

Getting them to do this is not always an easy process. It takes deep trust, forged through caring conversations. But acknowledging absurdity allows players to take the **** out of themselves and stop being stuck in an overly serious outlook.

Some modern professional coaches, mindful of their reputation, income and social media status, perpetuate this over-seriousness with a dry, robotic, humourless, outcome-focused approach that only darkens their player's mood.

Don't get me wrong. I give the players I work with my utmost dedication. I play squash in a committed way and hate to lose. But there's a difference between relaxed enthusiasm and that need to control everything. In my early days of coaching,

especially working with Laura, I did not always notice this difference. Spending time with David Pearson (Nick Matthew and Laura's coach) changed that.

I watched how he committed to improving players but never crossed the line into controlling them for his own ego. His lessons are sharp and detailed, connecting fully with the player, whoever they are, yet he always has a laugh, a glint in his eye, with funny moments and stories mixed in purposely to keep things balanced. He has a plan, without needing to document it! This is the magic stuff that helps over time. Good old-fashioned mickey taking, never crossing the line, just an appropriate and relaxed sense of humour.

So, while you need levity and to recognise the game's essential absurdity, that doesn't mean there is no meaning to you personally to chasing that ball down - even losing your cool now and again. Your attitude and effort, improving your game and draining every last bit of energy from your body; that is how you earn meaning from this essentially meaningless activity.

Coronavirus and the closure of courts have underlined this. When it's taken away, we realise the profound meaning we infer from playing squash. Hitting that ball with your racket again, expending every ounce of sweat on that court and sipping that first drink afterwards; it'll feel magical, won't it?



Danny and Laura Massaro share a lighter moment after her 2013 British Open victory over Nicol David