

# David in Fast Lane

As she prepares to defend her world title, Nicol David talks to Rod Gilmour about her happy life off court in Amsterdam and how she relaxes

**N**icol David will celebrate 10 years residing in Amsterdam next March. Half of those have been spent as world no.1 and as she orders her mint tea at Squash City, the bustling club down by the Dutch city's waterfront, it is obvious where she is happiest.

Squash Player has been granted a rare insight into her life outside the gruelling demands of top-level squash, one that takes in cafes, street-dancing, sketching and concerts, not to mention a love for Formula One motor racing.

You almost sense David's life taking the path of an actress, with her vested interest in fast cars. "Yes, I just do squash as a part-time job sometimes," laughs David as she prepares for the defence of her world crown in the Cayman Islands.

Squash City is only five minutes by bicycle from her flat – if she has to bike any longer than 20 minutes, then it's the bus – and under the stewardship of coach Liz Irving, her life since 2003 has flourished.

"It is a great city and now I have a physio and a psychologist. The environment is brilliant, we all live quite close by and the club is always looking after us. It is a nice flow," she says.

A day off will see David recovering in front of the TV. Honestly? It's hard to visualise Malaysia's six-time world champion lounging around her apartment for too long.

In the last few years street-dance classes – a form of breakdance which originated in New York – have taken precedence thanks to "an enthusiastic instructor with bundles of energy", which David says helps with her movement and flow on court.

With a squash player's life consisting of plenty of airport lounges, David has also started drawing – or "doodling" as she calls it.

David has collated a book full of

sketches drawn from black and white images. On her recent summer trip to Africa promoting squash, she found some photos of animals and 'doodled' away. David says they are "nothing too complex, I'm just getting the hang of it."

Over the last five years David has made walking off last on court a habit, with a win ratio of around 80 per cent. In 2008 she cleaned up on tour, winning all 10 tournaments.

As one of a small band of global sports stars who have enjoyed long unbeaten runs during their careers, the Malaysian is a fervent onlooker as to how others maintain their position at the top, with rivals consistently knocking at her door.

She takes the best points of each athlete, anyone from Olympic sports to F1, how they keep in the zone, how their body reacts and how drivers keep their minds clear.

Former squash players are key too. She has swept up all the good points from Sarah Fitz-Gerald and Vicki Cardwell over the years, and made them her own. It is a frightening thought, taking attributes from the world's best to make a Malaysian squash machine.

"You always hope to try and be



Nicol David's sketch of a lion drawn on a promotional trip to Africa for the World Squash Federation

different by including what they have to offer, to be motivated and to push on," she says.

"For a long time Michael Schumacher's consistency blew people away and took F1 to a whole new level. Every time a driver gets on the podium, it is interesting to note how they do it, as what they do is so intense. It is such an interesting sport."

As David prepares for that seventh title in eight years, it is hard to imagine that there are those who doubt her eligibility at the top of the game. "David suffers NY blowout" and "David crashes again" are two recent headlines, no doubt instigated by her failure to win the Malaysian Open in September.

But the truth is that her rivals have edged closer and the Malaysian is enthused by the challenge posed by the current generation. "They have no fear," she says. "Since last year in Rotterdam, everyone has a target to go for."

David notes 17-year-old Nour El Sherbini as an example. "Others are going 'if they can do it, then I can do the same'. Everyone is stepping up their games this year. The Hong Kong, India and Malaysian players are changing the game and pushing other players. I certainly don't know what to expect," she says.

Rather than add more shots to her armoury, David has been focusing on consistency this year, explaining: "I've had a lot of close matches, a lot of five-setters, and come back from near defeat quite a few times. Those matches always seem to come in the first round, but I am working on this."

David finishes by saying that "on their day anyone from the top 10 can win now." But the fact of the matter is that David's brilliance means that she has been playing the game as if she has been 'doodling' and, aged 29, there's no reason why she can't carry on.