

The Structural Integrator

Canadian Ronald Fauvel is the man who fixes Nicol David's body when it is hurting. Rod Gilmour spoke to the former ice hockey goalie about his methods

Sometimes conventional methods are cast aside in elite sport. The story of how a former ice hockey goalie from Canada came to work with Malaysia's squash queen, Nicol David, is one of them.

"I got a phone call out of the blue early one morning in Montreal at 4am asking for my services," says 54-year-old Ronald Fauvel, David's specialist physio since she was just a "small lady" starting out in the sport before the turn of the new millennium.

Having worked with Canada's former track star, Bruny Surin, his services were primarily aimed at the Malaysian athletics team ahead of the 1998 Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur. He now also works with Malaysia's ice hockey team. After all, Fauvel says, "Canadians are born with skates".

Originally on a two-year contract, Fauvel has been in Malaysia ever since and the reason is largely down to that first introduction to David by then-national coach Richard Glanfield, who nurtured the Penang star from 1995 to 2002.

"Her infrastructure wasn't as good as it should have been, as she was suffering from a knee injury," recalls Fauvel of their first meeting.

It's at this juncture that we must first filter Fauvel's techniques, for our interview is laced with terminology, underlining why the Canadian is not your average physiotherapist.

Catch Fauvel at the half dozen or so tournaments he travels to and you would be forgiven for thinking he is David's personal bodyguard. Close. He is really David's personal body-mender. "Structural integrator is my profession. It's a technique that's all about mental therapy," he explains.

Fauvel's job is to make sure David's body is restructured in such a way that when she wakes up the next day, "it is like she hasn't gone through such a physical encounter."

After a match she will cool down before venturing into Fauvel's room, where she will talk about the match and where she might feel uncomfortable in her body.



Nicol David celebrates her 2005 World Open success with Ronald Fauvel

David explains: "I've been working with Ronald since the world juniors. It has been a very educational process, how and what's going on with my body and the treatments he is using. I have to be involved in the recovery process and because I have to know what's going on, it makes me feel better.

"His techniques are certainly different from most people's. He gets my muscles pumped up before my matches. It is one of the biggest benefits I could have. He has taught me to tell my body when it needs recovery and given me the confidence to grow stronger in other areas too."

Structural integration is all about balancing the tone of the body. Say David has a niggle on her left ankle, she will likely compensate by shifting her weight to the right. Fauvel's job is to "re-educate" the body to enhance energy flows. He uses electrotherapy to increase the blood flow and find any aggravation. Then comes the recovery massage.

Integration is primarily based around the Rolf technique, which essentially frees up the fascia, the layer of soft tissue that covers the muscles. Fauvel's aim is to

manipulate the fascia enough so that David's body is aligned with gravity and then to remove any tension and return movement to the body.

"It is not easy to do," the affable Fauvel admits. "But I am giving her a chance of being fresh for the final if she reaches it."

With all this intense work and a relationship forged over a decade, Fauvel admits that David has broken down emotionally before. But when you are a marked player on tour, it comes with the territory.

It is obvious, too, that David is where she is today thanks to a high dose of discipline. There are so few off-court misdemeanours that you wonder whether David simply eats, sleeps and drinks squash. There is one incident, though, from a decade ago which Fauvel is quick to defend.

The story centres on David being spotted in the early hours in a nightclub with her entourage, including Fauvel. "The reporter was not there for her, he was there for

another athlete. She just went down to listen to some music before leaving early next morning for the airport!" Drama over.

So how revered is David in Malaysia? "She has never cheated in her life," Fauvel says. "She is the daughter every mother or father wants to have. That's why she is so celebrated in Malaysia and why she is a UNESCO ambassador."

No wonder Fauvel relishes working with her, especially when he is up against it in his other role with Malaysia's ice hockey team, who have to cope with training on an ice rink in a local shopping mall. "It's half the size of an Olympic rink," says Montreal-born Fauvel, whose nephew plays for the Pittsburgh Penguins.

So is 29-year-old Nicol David the Wayne Gretzky – Canada's ice hockey legend – of squash? "Nicol David is the Sidney Crosby of squash," says Fauvel. "He is a better player than Gretzky was at this stage."

"She's not getting any younger. She is one of the few athletes in elite sport to have won 100 per cent of her matches over a two-year stretch. That is quite an accomplishment." And that stretch has in part been down to Fauvel's recovery table.