

Fitz-Gerald moves on

Five-time world champion Sarah Fitz-Gerald tells Richard Eaton about her new life in Australia during a rare visit to Britain recently

Sarah Fitz-Gerald looked slimmer than ever as she passed through the front door unnoticed. Once the British Open had been like a home tournament for her, but now she wore a quizzical look. She hadn't been around for a while.

Life for the legend has changed more than she expected. A record-breaking world champion, a long-time president of WISPA and a celebrity coach, she slipped away from England and returned to her native Australia six years ago.

For two decades the UK had been the hub of Fitz-Gerald's many successes, but a few years into her retirement she needed a new purpose.

She found it back in Australia, but here she was again, with a recently-acquired husband, Cameron Dalley, and a wish to see the old tournament staged outdoors for the first time. Squash, too, had been moving in a new direction.

Was it strange and confusing, or did it somehow still seem familiar? "Yes, all of those," Fitz-Gerald said, embracing the paradox easily. "Sometimes things have to move on."

She spoke as someone who had done

that, yet her conversation was reassuringly familiar. It was like a chat over the garden fence.

She was still self-effacing. There were moments when you reminded yourself that this was the champion with 65 titles and a cut-off volley as deadly as a leopard's leap.

But her self-assessment was surprising. "I'm less tolerant of people who are hurtful or annoying now, or not my kind of person," she admitted.

It didn't show. But two years ago Sarah lost her brother Damien, aged only 48, one of several blows which have affected her.

Another is the absence of children, something she never expected. "These things make you want to live life a little better," she said.

There was distant banging on glass. The final was minutes away. But it was no longer so crucial. Fitz-Gerald showed no immediate desire to move. The chat could run its course.

"I miss the people and the whole squash atmosphere," she went on. "But I have my life and – as Gregory Gaultier

said last night – now he has a baby, squash is not the main focus any more.

"In the past I would have been really sad to miss the British Open. Now it's just nice to be here. But it's ok – I have a different focus and different interests."

What she loves about Australia now – as well as husband Cam, a builder – are property projects. She is also "mad" about animals, takes pleasure in the bush and does plenty of coaching.

They plan to build a house on 36 acres of land in Ballarat, a historic Victorian town. This well-grounded part of Fitz-Gerald's life may feel especially comforting after so long chasing dreams around the world.

Some post-retirement hopes have been deferred. Squash has lost ground in Australia, leaving more questions than answers. "How do you fix something which is broken? I don't know," she admits. "I don't know if anyone knows how to fix it now."

It influences how Fitz-Gerald is seen. For someone who was Australia's Female Athlete of the Year, who received the Dawn Fraser Award for excellence in other areas of society as well as in sport, and who is a Member of the Order of Australia, she is less celebrated than you might think.

This was illustrated by Dalley, who recalled: "I had a friend who was asked to play Sarah at a squash day in Canberra and he said 'Why don't you come and watch me play Sarah Fitz-Gerald?' I said 'Who?'"

"He said 'Cam! Have you not heard of her?' and I said 'No – is she any good?!'"

The relationship helped filled a gap left by her partnership with the Manchester-based entrepreneur Paul Walters, which continued long after her retirement from the Tour.

"I knew I would bump into Paul and I did wonder about that," she said, surveying the spectator gallery. "But it was all right."

There has been little time to dwell on disappointments. Fitz-Gerald is a consultant for Squash Australia, for whom she coaches and takes squads abroad. She also performs roles for the World Squash Federation, representing the WSF at International Olympic Committee athletes' forums and promotional tours.

In addition, she is on Oceania's Major Games Committee, is a consultant to the Victoria Academy and has her own coaching roles – notably with Dipika Pallikal, India's best ever player, and Nicol David, the long-time world no.1

Fitz-Gerald still plays pennant league squash, too, at Kooyong, and sometimes she does MC-ing or TV commentating. Her

Past world champion Sarah Fitz-Gerald (right) hugs current world champion Nicol David, whom she coaches



Baby blues

house was recently full of players preparing for the Victoria and Tasmania Opens.

Contemplating her workload risks feeling as if jet-lag, computer glare and lactic acid deficiency have struck simultaneously.

Amidst this cyclone of activity Fitz-Gerald made a sensational comeback at 41 to help Australia regain the world team title. This, she admits, was "scary", but she won her matches.

Even now, on court with the younger women, "it's all right," she says. You can bet it means she can still beat them.

This ambassadorial modesty has made Fitz-Gerald arguably more popular than any champion before her. But it is hard not to wonder whether it also prevented her classically forceful game winning even more titles.

Now there are other challenges ahead with Pallikal, who might have prevented Laura Massaro winning the British Open but for a startling implosion.

"Dipika was one game and 10-6 up. Then she missed a potential winning drop-shot and I'm like – hmmm, ok," Fitz-Gerald said.

"Then she missed that volley and a quick boast. All went down. Her biggest problem is trying to win too quickly.

"She changed the rhythm of what got her the lead. I have been nagging that what got her the lead was her power play. She has tremendous power. Hammer it to the back, then she can do what she wants.

"One part of it is getting her head right. She got to number 14 on talent. She has to do the work now."

Fitz-Gerald has certainly left a mark on David, even though she has not seen the world's most successful woman for a while. David credits Fitz-Gerald with improving her volleying.

Fitz-Gerald's pleasure is evident. "I was trying to get her to see the volley because I think that was my strength," she said.

"She's terrific. I also worked on her backhand, getting her swing a bit more consistent. I distinctly remember after we talked about it, she came back next January and the first time she hit a backhand, I noticed a change.

"I popped the ball up and she hit another one. Then she looked at me, smiled and said 'I fixed it!'"

Fitz-Gerald would like to fix squash's flaws, too. She was critical of the British Open this time, but too mindful of commercial demands to speak in detail.

"We need to get back to the players and do the right thing for the game," she said. "Unfortunately, we have to go where the money is. As a sport, we are not strong enough to make this choice."

But strength has characterised her personal choices. Leaving so much behind was hard. But a new life and new work have reconnected her with old roots, even if, you suspect, she has roots everywhere.

In a startlingly frank interview with Richard Eaton, Sarah Fitz-Gerald reveals her yearning for a baby

At first it was hard to tell whether the question was throwaway humour, but it was for real and was powerfully emotive.

Sarah Fitz-Gerald has been nagged by questions about why she hasn't yet had children. She seems like a natural mother, and she has a secure home and a husband.

But a baby hasn't arrived. Now she is 44 and looking at what last chances there are. So the question came voluntarily: "Does anyone have a baby to donate?"

And then the great star spoke openly of her agony and her dwindling hopes.

"We have tried having kids, but it didn't work," she said of herself and Cameron Dalley, whom Fitz-Gerald has known for four years and married last September. "We have tried IVF and tried to start a family. Maybe we have been unlucky, so we had tests done.

"My remark asking if anyone had a baby they would like to donate was a throwaway – but a serious one.

"I'm one of six kids, and have 13 nieces and nephews. I always wanted kids, and on tour I never dreamed I actually wouldn't have them."

Adopting has proved as difficult as having a child naturally. Bureaucracy is stifling, regulations ever-tightening, and the years roll by.

"Because of our ages, Australian laws, the process involved, and just the expense of adopting and IVF etcetera, we don't have a lot of options," she says, combining forthrightness and remorse.

"So far I haven't been lucky trying naturally. We did IVF three times and got an embryo, but it just didn't hold. I am absolutely devastated, but life goes on."

Accepting it is not so easy as that. "I have done so many amazing things in my life," she said. "Having a baby is something every female has the ability to do, so when it doesn't happen to you, it absolutely breaks your heart."

She takes comfort from Cameron, spoils her dog rotten and focuses on plans for their new house on 36 acres of land. She loves the bush and the animals, and he loves working on the land. The relationship appears to fit.

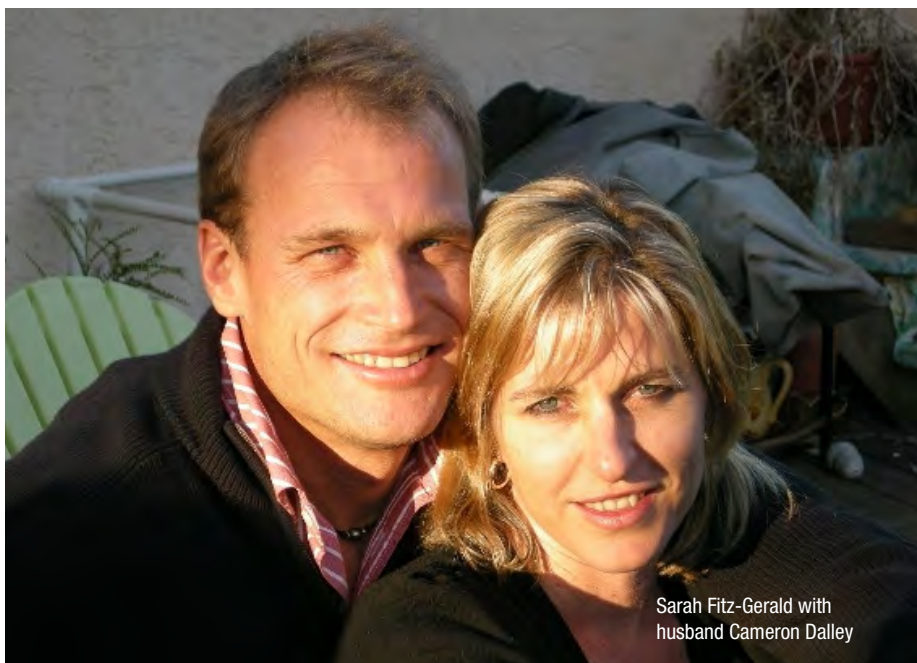
But sometimes these feel like limited compensations and the urge to try again returns.

"We looked briefly at adopting an Indian baby. But that, too, has got more difficult, with the money, time and paperwork. And you can't choose your baby either, not the age nor the sex," she says.

"It's incredible. There are so many children in the world needing homes, but officials make it soooooo difficult, expensive and time-consuming."

She sighs. Will she give up? "We will probably continue to try à la naturelle," she concludes. "After such an amazing career travelling the world, things just didn't turn out as I expected or wanted – but many people are worse off than me."

She has to believe, she says, that conception is still possible. Meanwhile, maybe somebody will answer her question.



Sarah Fitz-Gerald with husband Cameron Dalley