

FROM NO1 TENNIS ACE AT JUST 17 TO GAME SHOW STAR & NOW RESPECTED TV PUNDIT

Wrestling to find the real me



RINGING THE CHANGES: Annabel, top right, with Celebrity Wrestling buddies

ANNABEL Croft's tennis career peaked very early.

At the age of just 17, she became our women's No1.

By 19 she was among the top two dozen female players on the planet.

And by 21 she had packed it all in. Why, you wonder? Because it was making her miserable.

"My heart just wasn't in it," she tells me. "Going on to a tennis court is like going into combat."

"There's all this anger and animosity. It's like a gladiatorial battle."

"As a child, I'd expected to become a ballerina. Tennis couldn't have felt more different from Swan Lake!"

"We're chatting, of course, at the start of this year's Wimbledon, for which Annabel, now 51, is once again a BBC pundit.

It is, in her own words, "one of the world's greatest sporting events".

"So doesn't a part of her wish she had stuck at it?"

"No, I've no regrets about stopping," she insists. "I'd been on the tour for seven years, surrounded by agents, managers, coaches, sponsors. By 21, I'd lived the life of somebody nearer 35."

"And I'd come to realise that this life I'd chosen – the perpetual travelling, the lack of friends – wasn't what I'd expected."

"You give up everything in terms of schooling and social life, no parties, no boys. You don't grow up the normal way."

"I loved being able to see the world, but that's where most of my education came from. I didn't really have any schooling from the age of 15."

"I would sit in exams and have no idea what to write. I was more interested in my next tournament."

And was being Britain's No1 a burden?

Clever

"Yes, it's something Andy Murray has coped with unbelievably well," says Annabel. "So has Johanna Konta."

"Personally, I don't think I was equipped to. I was very shy. I dreaded all that attention, whereas Andy has embraced it."

Talking of our injury-plagued former champion, does Annabel fear his best days are behind him?

"I hope not. Some of the greatest matches we've watched in the past few years have involved Andy Murray."

"He takes you on this roller-coaster ride. You follow his every move and every grimace. There's a lot of torment, but he's so entertaining. And his tennis is really clever."

"It teaches the younger generation that it's not just about ball-bashing."

But are younger players really coming through?

"Tennis, after all, can be seen as quite middle-class. Aren't grassroots opportunities a bit limited?"

"That is a question that is often asked," Annabel concedes.

"There's certainly a class about Wimbledon in how they do everything, and I guess it attracts a certain audience."

"But there's a lot being done now to engage kids with tennis, making it accessible, whatever your level or background."

Annabel's view, however, is that she should worry less about finding the next Andy Murray ("Every time a kid picks up a paintbrush they don't necessarily want to be Picasso, do they?") and more about what that means for the rest of the world.

During the course of our chat she compares the eight-times Wimbledon champ, by turns, to a dancer ("he looks balletic"), a god ("if he were a religion, he would have a huge number of followers") and a potential 007 ("he

has such presence and style, a James Bond-like quality...").

Whoever takes the title this year will pocket £2.25million. Same in the women's singles, where the Czech Republic's Petra Kvitová is favourite. But Annabel is still glad she escaped and built a different life for herself.

"You don't grow up until you come off the tour," she says. "Once I did, I was allowed to develop my own personality."

"I almost went overboard, trying everything. I was offered lots of TV."

This included Survival, Treasure Hunt and the fantastically dated Celebrity Wrestling, the latter with



HEYDAY: But Annabel found it tough to cope as Britain's No1 women's tennis superstar



PHOTOS: OLIVER HARRISON



A REAL SMASH: Annabel admires Andy Murray; left, Annabel in Treasure Hunt



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