

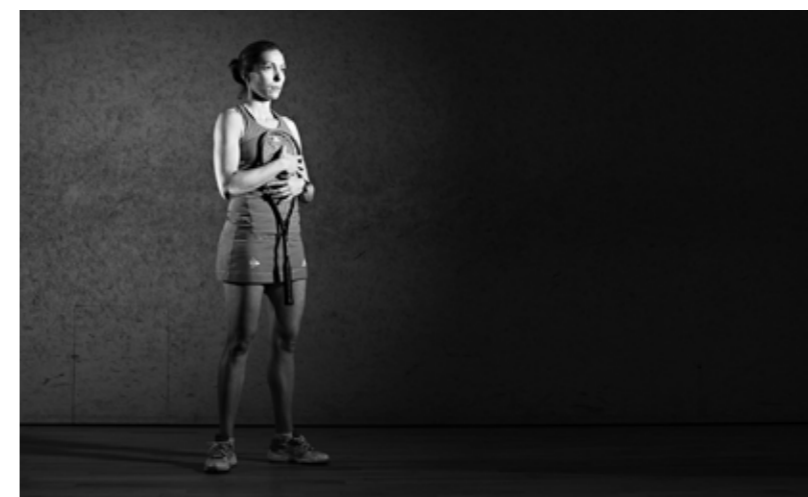


Pictures by Laurence J Photography

MADELINE MAKES A RACKET FOR OLYMPIC BID

Yorkshire-based sports star Madeline Perry is one of the world's top squash's players - but only a few years ago she was told she might never play again following a life-threatening assault. beyond reports on her inspirational story and her dream of making squash an Olympic sport.

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As sporting comebacks go, it surely has to be one of the most astonishing around.

In 2007, top squash player Madeline Perry nearly died following an attack outside a restaurant in Milan, Italy.

The incident, which left her with a severe brain injury and a broken temporal bone in her skull, would have finished many off but not only did Madeline recover, she was back on the court within weeks of the attack.

Astonishingly she even went on to win her comeback tournament, landing the Irish national title in Dublin.

If that wasn't enough, a year later she reached the semi-finals of the 2008 World Championship, and by 2011 she was ranked number three in the world. Incredible when you consider that doctors told her she might never play top-level sport again.

Madeline, who has been ranked in the world's Top 10 for the past decade, said: "It took me about 10 months to get back to that sort of level. I had problems with concentration for a long time. I don't know whether it was a medical thing, or just because something major had happened which made it hard for me to focus on playing squash, when I was thinking about so many other things."

"To have something like that happen and to have to work my way back up there again was tough. But by the time I got to the semi-finals of the World Championship I felt really good physically. And I felt I could probably go on longer in my career than I'd actually wanted to."

A real fighter all the way, Madeline – who is originally from Northern Ireland but now lives in Halifax having moved there in 1999 – went on to win the 2010 Australian Open -one of the game's Grand Slams, and only a few months ago she reached the quarter-finals of the World Open in the Cayman Islands.

The 36-year-old has nine WSA World Tour titles and eleven Irish National titles to her name, and has been backing the bid to make squash an Olympic sport for some time now.

Indeed, given squash's huge international reach and popularity, it's puzzling to think that the game remains a non-Olympic entity. The sport is played by 20 million

people in 185 countries, while more than 850 players from 74 nations compete on the professional tour.

It is something that clearly grates with Madeline, who for the past few years has worked tirelessly to get the sport recognised as an Olympic event.

In 2009 it lost out on gaining Olympic status at the 2016 Games to golf and rugby and this September will be decision time to see whether it will be included at the 2020 games.

When you consider the amazing mental toughness and determination Madeline has had to show to get back to the top of her game, it certainly seems criminal that she was unable to compete in London 2012 last year.

Madeline, who trains at Queens Sports Club with other World ranked squash players, said: "Last year was tough watching the home Olympics and thinking 'here I am at the prime of my career and I'm not involved.' It was pretty depressing, to be honest."

"Squash is a huge sport and to have the chance to represent my country on the world's greatest sporting stage would be amazing, not just for me, but for all players around the world."

"Sadly it will be too late for me now to perform on such a stage, but I will keep working and promoting the sport in the hope that one day it will become the Olympic sport it deserves to be."

Madeline has spent her life travelling the world playing the game she first started aged 11 and was recently No 1 Seed at the Tournament of Champions held in a specially built glass court in the centre of Grand Central Station.

But modest Madeline says it is not the fame and fortune she craves. She said: "Celebrity and fame is a very powerful thing but squash players don't have that. We just have to try and build the profile of the game."

"This year will be hugely significant for the future of squash as the International Olympic Committee decides in September whether to add it to the roster for the 2020 Games."

It might be too late for Madeline to play in that but if anybody deserves to see the sport achieve Olympic status it is the plucky Irish woman who loves making a racket about the game.

madelineperry.co.uk