

A full-page photograph of Annabel Croft, a former professional tennis player, standing on a tennis court. She is wearing a white and black tennis dress and white sneakers with blue accents. She is holding a red and white tennis racket. In the background, there is a tennis net and a red banner for the 'Annabel Croft Tennis Academy'.

Advantage Annabel

Despite a tennis career of low as well as high points, former British number one Annabel Croft has never stopped loving the game that shaped her life.

When Annabel Croft picked up a tennis racquet on a family holiday to Marbella, her whole life was set to change. Initially exploring things to do in the Spanish sunshine, by the end of the holiday the sporty nine-year-old was hooked.

With a natural gift for the game, she had unwittingly triggered a passion for tennis that has continued through life.

"It was that moment that my love of tennis was sparked," she remembers.

"When we returned home, I nagged my parents for tennis lessons until one day I was sent to the local tennis club with 50p in my pocket for a group coaching session."

The seed was sown but Annabel said it took another momentous occasion to ignite the ambition to play professionally.

"My uncle had spare tickets for Wimbledon. I remember it clearly; it was 1977 and Virginia Wade was playing Chris Evert in the semi-final, Wade then went on to win the competition.

"Experiencing the buzz of the crowd, mesmerised by those outstanding player; nothing compares to that. I'm a firm believer that children should experience live events, whether that be sport, music or arts, it's completely different to watching it on television. It was an incredibly emotional moment."

"I wasn't keen on school. I was the one looking out of the window wanting to be outside. I loved ballet, horse riding, hockey, netball and gymnastics but tennis soon became my first love and kind of took over."

Annabel concentrated almost exclusively on tennis through her teens, admitting that she gave up her childhood and education to pursue her dreams of winning Wimbledon.

With a huge amount of work and natural talent she climbed



the ranks quickly. In 1984 she won the Girls Wimbledon trophy and Junior Australian Open.

She became well-recognised after winning the WTA Tour event Virginia Slims of San Diego beating the more experienced Wendy Turnbull in the final; then represented Great Britain in the Fed Cup and the Wightman Cup. By the end of 1985, she achieved a world ranking of 21; she was still only 20 years old.

By the age of 21, a life of tennis and relentless travel took its toll and Annabel

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left the professional circuit. There was much speculation about her retirement at the time but for Annabel the reason was simple.

“It got to the stage where I knew I wanted to stop. I didn’t enjoy the gladiatorial nature of the matches or living out of a suitcase with very few friends,” she explains.

“Nowadays players have more of a support team surrounding them but that just didn’t exist and I felt very much on my own. I knew I wasn’t going to become World Number 1 and couldn’t achieve my dream of winning Wimbledon. I wanted a normal life and a family.”

Now, an incredibly youthful looking 50-year-old mum, Annabel says she has absolutely no regrets about departing the circuit, though she confesses her life has been far from ‘normal’.

Nowadays, as tennis coverage has become more widespread, much of Annabel’s recent television work is around the sport, with coverage from January to November. However, when she first left the scene, the opportunities – outside of Wimbledon season - were few and far between; Annabel experimented with formats of all kinds.

“I’d missed out on childhood, on parties and boys so this gave me time to grow up. I didn’t have to think about tennis every second of every day. I relished

every opportunity that came my way,” she grins.

She was approached to take part in youth show Network 7, which meant surviving on a desert island in Sri Lanka – an early version of ‘I’m a Celebrity ... Get Me Out Of Here’.

From that, she received an offer to front the popular Channel Four show Treasure Hunt, previously hosted by Anrika Rice.

“It was a time when I could take a different direction and try all sorts of new things. I did pantomime and appeared in a murder mystery. After a childhood of tennis it was fun to experience new things,” she smiles.

It was whilst learning to sail for a television programme that she met her future husband former international yachtsman and investment banker Mel Coleman. She has been with husband Mel for nearly 30 years and has three grown-up children, Amber, Lily and Charlie. 21, 23 and 25.

Together, Mel and Annabel opened the Annabel Croft Tennis Academy in 2009. Based at the National Tennis Centre in Roehampton, the academy has grown from 20 to 400 children in less than a decade.

The couple also direct Annabel Croft Tennis Holidays – luxury tennis breaks in the Algarve and Tenerife with quality coaching for adults and children.

Yet Annabel says she isn’t living in hope that one day she discovers the next Annabel Croft - a child who picks up a racquet and see their future change forever.

“The academy and the holidays cater for all abilities. It’s about living and loving tennis, not necessarily striving to win Wimbledon.

“I would urge every child, or person, do embrace opportunity and give it their all and see where it takes them.”

Annabel is clearly someone who works hard at everything she does, radiating boundless energy.

“I never thought of myself as very driven but I probably always was. If I’m going to do something, I’m not one to fuff. I like to think I approach everything with gusto and 100% commitment. Even now if I’m commentating I’ll spend a great deal of time researching.”

She is a perfectionist who works hard on her background knowledge, and cannot understand anyone who doesn’t give everything their all.

“I remember working with a former Russian tennis player once. She turned up late and when I asked her what she thought of the game, she just said: ‘I have no idea, I didn’t watch it,’ then answered every question with ‘I don’t know.’ Afterwards she admitted that punditry wasn’t as easy as she’d expected! I don’t think she’s ever been seen on television again!” she says.

“I do a huge amount of research. You can’t possibly know everything about every player but you can find out. No-one wants to look stupid, especially on camera. It always astounds me when people are unprepared.”

Despite Annabel’s self-confessed ‘lack of education’ she is clearly intelligent, reads widely and is a well-regarded public speaker.

At nearly 51 years old but looks a decade younger.

“I take a lot more care of myself now than when I was a professional tennis player. In my younger days I ate poorly and struggled with my weight.

“Nowadays I eat like a cavewoman, foods that can be hunted or gathered! I like a lot of grilled fish and colourful vegetables. I’m also very interested in alternative health and homeopathy.”

She runs regularly with a group of mums three times a week, to ‘keep fit and have a natter.’ She’s also a keen advocate of yoga and has run two marathons

Covering tennis for Eurosport, Sky and BBC whilst keeping an eye on running the academy and tennis



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holidays, she’s incredibly busy but says she’s still always open to new challenges. Though she’s not enthusiastic to repeat her stint on ITV’s Celebrity Wrestling back in 2005 (despite the fact that she won).

“I wouldn’t do reality television now, I think it’s a bit tired and formulaic. I’m more interested in sport and documentaries . . . Although I do love Strictly! I might make an exception if I was asked to do that.”

Then she laughs: “though I really don’t think I’d find the time around the tennis season, and that has to come first.

“I’ve had such a full life and an amazing time. I am incredibly passionate about tennis and am lucky to have worked hosting and commentating in such an amazing era for tennis with some of the greatest icons in the world.”

