

NICK KEHOE

Nick Kehoe is a journalist with Carlton Television and a squash fan. He is author of the Peter Marshall story, Shattered, a champion's Fight Against a Mystery Illness, and also of 'Kicking with Both Feet', which he wrote with Frank Clark.

The epic battles between Geoff Hunt and Jonah Barrington at their peak have become the stuff of squash legend. In the 1970s, they were possibly the fittest athletes on the planet, yet within a few years of retiring, they were struggling to even walk. The game they had graced so magnificently was starting to cripple them. Both experienced excruciating pain in their hips.

Hunt and Barrington were not alone. Stuart Courtney, until recently Chief Executive of the Squash Rackets Association, was another player to find that his hip joints had worn away by the time his career was over. It isn't just the stars who suffer. Freddie Menzies, from Rye in Sussex, was a good club player but by his own admission not up to county standard. He only played about three times a week. Like his more illustrious colleagues, however, he found a hip giving way as he entered his forties.

According to Sport England's latest survey, there are currently 1.5 million people in the UK playing squash on a regular basis. Should they be worried that they too might be doing themselves damage?

Before anyone decides to hang up their racket for good, they should look closely at the background of the players mentioned above. All four have a family history of hip problems. Geoff Hunt's mother had to have a hip replacement when she was in her seventies, yet she had never subjected herself to the punishing rigours of professional sport. Freddie Menzies' mother also had a hip replacement, as did Stuart Courtney's father. Jonah Barrington's father suffered agony with an arthritic hip when he got older.

When Geoff Hunt began to experience difficulties, he asked his doctor if he was paying the price for the years spent pounding up and down a squash court. "He told me it was probably going to happen regardless of what I did. It's essentially genetic."

It seems clear that the basic cause is hereditary but all the players are certain that the constant twisting and turning demanded by the game speeds up the decline.

Hip Hip Hooray

Worn out hips that will no longer stand up to the rigours of squash have ended many a playing career. Nick Kehoe explores the problem and explains a new operation that is having success with players like Jonah Barrington and Geoff Hunt.

Barrington says, "Squash is very heavy on the joints. The hips and lower back take a hammering."

Barrington was in his late forties when he first felt pain in his hip. The joint gradually became stiffer and he began walking with a limp. "I saw two or three surgeons who told me I had arthritis and would have to have a hip replacement."

That presented him with a dilemma. His cartilage had worn away completely and his hip joint was down to bone against bone. He was having to dose himself with painkillers just to carry out his basic duties as a squash coach. He clearly had to do something but he wasn't prepared to accept the limitations of the treatments available at the time.

The traditional total hip replacement involves cutting away the head of the femur and totally rebuilding the ball and socket joint using metal and various synthetic materials. It restores basic mobility and works quite successfully with people in their sixties and above who don't need to be particularly active afterwards. That wasn't enough for Barrington. He wanted to be able to train and play squash.

"The surgeons were very negative. They said I had to realise that I was getting old and would have to stop doing childish things. They asked me why on earth I thought I should still be able to play squash and nonsense like that."

Barrington had the chance to witness at first hand the limitations of the traditional operation.

"My wife had been an international runner. She had her hip replaced in the early nineties but it didn't work. She had been desperate to start running again but she wasn't able to." The experience of his wife and the negative attitude of surgeons meant Barrington struggled on in pain for several years rather than risk an operation that wouldn't deliver the amount of mobility he wanted.

Stuart Courtney took the opposite view. He describes how at the age of 43 he was still playing squash regularly when he suddenly felt a pain in his groin. "I had X-rays and was told my hips were worn out. It was the first I knew about it." Like Barrington, Courtney faced the same negative attitude from surgeons who didn't see hip replacements as a means to prolong a squash career.

"Then I met a surgeon called Rowan Poole, who was an athlete himself and prepared to consider such issues as quality of life." A few months later, in 1993, Courtney became the first person in England to have a hip replacement using the cementless Spittorno method. Spittorno is an Italian surgeon who developed the technique of performing the traditional hip operation but without the cement normally used to hold the joint in place.

The absence of the cement leads to fewer complications. "I had both hips done within five months of each other and was delighted with the results. They advised me not to play squash as they felt it would shorten the life of the hip but I've been playing on it for eight years now without any problem."

Despite Courtney's success with his operation, Barrington was holding out for something even better. Then in 1997, nearly ten years after he had started experiencing difficulties, he found what he was looking for. A surgeon called Derek McMinn from the Nuffield Hospital in Birmingham was having a great deal of success with an operation known as hip resurfacing.

This was radically different from the traditional operation because it didn't involve cutting away the top or ball part of the femur. Instead, the femoral head was smoothed down, removing all the damaged bone. It was then covered with a round metal head which was glued in place using special cement. Meanwhile, the acetabulum, the socket part of the hip bone, was similarly smoothed down. A metal cup was then bolted in place ready to match exactly with the round metal fixing on the femur.

Hip resurfacing operations were first carried out more than 40 years ago but weren't very successful. McMinn believed the failure had more to do with inadequate materials than any fault in the basic technique. He worked closely with metallurgists to develop more hard wearing surfaces. After years of research, they settled on chrome cobalt.

Top Left: Barrington and Hunt in one of their epic battles.

Below: The consultant who developed hip resurfacing, Derek McMinn.



This is extremely hard wearing. As McMinn explains, "If you try to cut it with a hacksaw, it will break the teeth off the blade." McMinn broke new ground by using a metal on metal joint. There was no synthetic material as had been used before to try to make the connection smoother. In previous operations, such materials had worn away over time creating debris that damaged the joint. With metal against metal there is hardly any wear at all. All that is needed to keep things

means low friction and so low wear. And because the resurfacing technique leaves most of the femur intact, the joint is able to take more stress than traditional hip replacements. It means that McMinn, unlike surgeons using other techniques, has no qualms about his patients taking part in strenuous sports after their operations.

The former champion badminton player, David Eddy, is one of McMinn's patients. He recovered so well that he went on to become world masters badminton champion. Perhaps even more impressive was the record of judo champion David Walker. He went on to win three European Masters Championships after having hip resurfacing treatment.

McMinn and his team carried out more than a thousand resurfacings in the 1990s. The average age of his patients is 48. After five years, 99 per cent of the hip joints were still functioning properly with no significant signs of wear. It was more than enough evidence for Jonah Barrington and he decided to have the operation. He was delighted with the results. Within a few months he was competing in the World Masters at Sheffield. He didn't get very far but says that was more to do with his lack of match practice and the lasting effects of an old achilles injury than any limitations imposed by his new hip.

Now, three years after the operation, he is delighted with how successful it has been. "No one could have worked their hip harder than I have and it's still absolutely rock solid. I can train twice a day. It's really exciting." Freddie Menzies is equally enthusiastic and is now back playing three times a week after having the same operation.

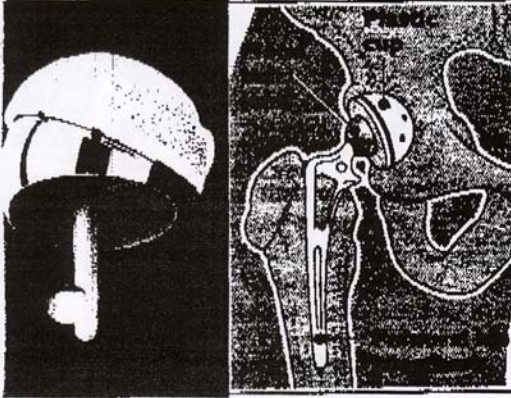
Barrington is still building up the strength

of his damaged achilles tendon and is hoping to return soon to more regular competition. Who is to say that he won't once again sweep all before him and win a masters title? Well, there is one person who might have a say in the matter. Half a world away in Australia, Geoff Hunt is now recovering from his second hip resurfacing operation. He had the first done in Melbourne last year by a surgeon who learnt the technique from McMinn. It worked so well he went back to have the other hip done. Like Barrington, he is delighted with the mobility it gives him and he too is pondering a return to competitive squash.

Is it too much to hope that these two old warhorses could stir themselves for one last contest? "I don't see why not," says Hunt as he recuperates at home in Brisbane. "I'd love to go on court and have a hit with Jonah. Of course, I don't think either of us would take it too seriously, but it would be interesting."

Interesting indeed to see two such legends roll back the years to relive their former glories. But could anyone really believe such fierce competitors 'wouldn't take it seriously' once the match got under way? The chances are that their encounter would turn into another stirring battle; a little slower than before perhaps but no less punishing. And if McMinn's artificial hips could survive that, then they could survive anything.

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Above: Left: The two implants used in the operation; the head is placed inside the thigh bone and the cup is placed in the hip socket. **Right:** How the resurfaced hip sits in the hip joint.

moving smoothly is a lubricant doing much the same job as engine oil in a car.

The use of the lubricant has led McMinn to joke that his hip joints walk on water. There is a serious message, however. The lubricant

