

For more information:

Australia: 1800 334 625

International: +61 3 9529 3711

Website: www.icmi.com.au



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JOHN FITZGERALD AO

John Fitzgerald's first tennis racquet was a John Newcombe-endorsed wooden Slazenger, used during regular hits with his brothers Peter and Ray on an asphalt court on the family sheep and wheat farm near Cockaleechee, on South Australia's Eyre Peninsula.

Young John was 12 when he saw his first Davis Cup final, on television in 1973. It was Newcombe and Rod Laver, an Australian dream team if ever there was one, which trounced the United States 5-0 on carpet in Cleveland, Ohio. Fitzgerald watched keenly. He was enthused, inspired.

So there was certain symmetry to the scenario that unfolded in the offices of Tennis Australia in the middle of 2000. Newcombe had announced his intention to stand down as cup captain after seven eventful years, and it was Fitzgerald, one-time wielder of a Newk Slazenger, who, in late July, was chosen to succeed him.

Fitzgerald became only the fourth man to fill the position in half a century, joining a leadership group completed by Harry Hopman and Neale Fraser. And Newcombe, of course, whose reign in tandem with coach Tony Roche brought one trophy – Australia's 27th – but plenty more colour and controversy.

Newk and Fitzzy, as they are universally known, are of different generations, and are different characters and personalities. Newcombe: the showman, legend, icon. Fitzgerald: less flamboyant and quotable, lower-profile, the quintessential nice guy who, when asked last year what his captaincy style would be, admitted that "I'm not sure – hey, maybe I won't have any style!"

Yet one thing the two men share is a passion for Australian tennis, and the century-old Davis Cup competition in particular. Newcombe played in three winning cup teams under Hopman and Fraser; Fitzgerald was a member of the champion Swede-beating teams of 1983 and 1986, and played for 11 consecutive years from 1982.

Like Newcombe, he never really left the game, despite retiring from it in 1995. The years since have been filled with media work, a directorship of the ATP, ambassador of Tennis Australia's junior program, occasional Champions Tour appearances, and a brief coaching stint with Pat Rafter in 1997.

When the hard decisions have to be made – such as his good mate Rafter not being required should Mark Philippoussis return to active singles duty, to use an unlikely example – Fitzgerald will be one of the men who has to make them. Popular and hugely likeable, he is still one of the boys, yet not quite one of them any more.

Fitzgerald, urged on by Tennis Australia, is also expected to keep more of the team's dirty linen hidden safely in the laundry. He has emphasised repeatedly the importance of communication and respect, that he aims to be "open and honest", and that it is imperative not to try "to be someone you're not". Fitzgerald is both diplomat – he hedges his bets nicely on the equal prize money issue – and conciliator. Any criticisms will be kept in-house.

Fitzgerald's message is that the captain's job is to get the best team on the court for every tie, and that

will be his and the selectors' call, not the players'. Unofficially, the leadership roles have also been tweaked in Fitzgerald's new partnership with coach Wally Masur. Where Newcombe took care of the public duties and courtside match day role, it was left to the publicity-shy Roche to oversee most of the on-court preparation, particularly in the latter years, as well as work with squad members on the road for 20 weeks each year.

The present pair, both in their late 30s, and with young families and active senses of humour, are almost interchangeable. Both are set to travel for about 10 weeks each, assisting and liasing.

He says he is as aware of the responsibility as he is proud and sobered by it. The young Fitzzy may have started out with Newk's racquet, but there will be no playing around with the national inheritance.

CLIENT FEEDBACK

"John met and then exceeded all our expectations."

Deloitte Consulting

"John was very good at conveying his speech and ideas to the attendees. Very good feedback, John is very unassuming speaker and person in general, it was a pleasure dealing with him."

Accenture Australia Pty Ltd

"John is a very down to earth friendly bloke who made working with him very easy. His stories were humorous and very insightful given his close relationship with Lleyton Hewitt. John conducted himself professionally and politely with all our guests and was very willing to have photos taken with our guests and generally take part in our client function.

We will definitely use him again!"

National Australia Bank