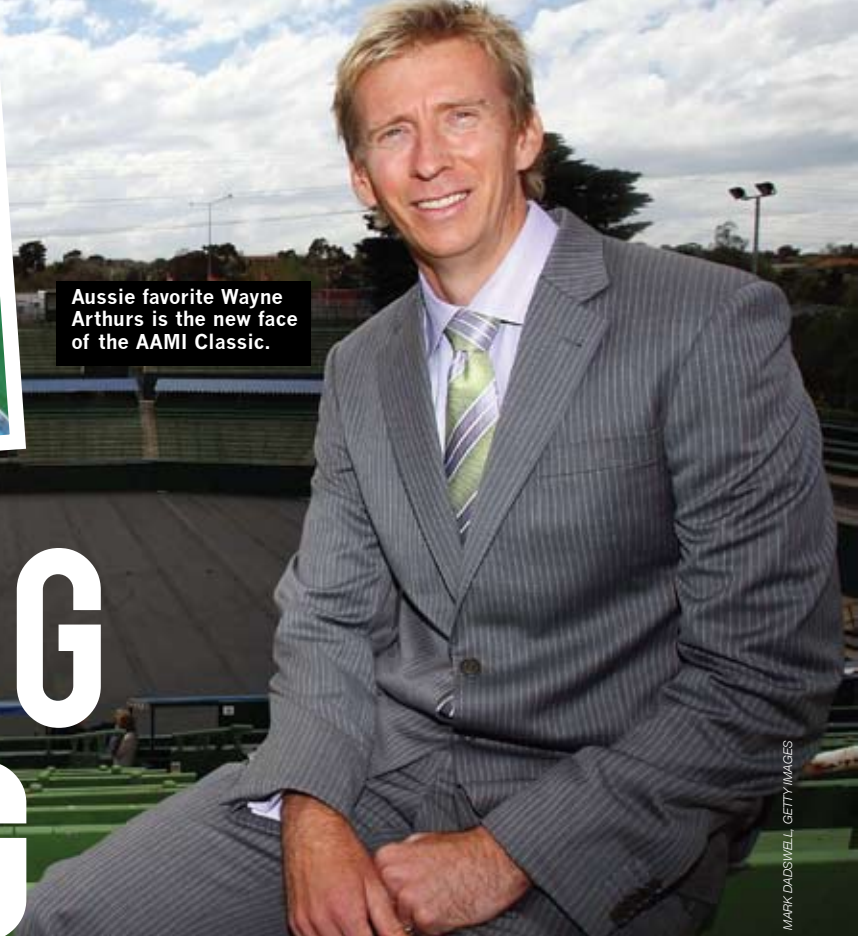


Aussie favorite Wayne Arthurs is the new face of the AAMI Classic.



MARK DADSWELL GETTY IMAGES

# KOORYONG CALLING

Wayne Arthurs is calling on an old favorite as he returns to the game as a coach and ambassador to the 2010 AAMI Classic, where some of the game's top names will once again assemble for a unique and popular event. **By Vivienne Christie**

**W**ayne Arthurs was generally a long way from the Kooyong Lawn Tennis Club when he notched the most impressive achievements in his 17-year playing career, but the historic Melbourne club nevertheless sparked the impetus for the milestones that would make the 38-year-old one of the standout Australian performers in the game's recent history.

"The first memory I have of Kooyong is probably when I first came down and watched the Aussie Open, I think I was about 13 or 14 and I remember watching Wally Masur out on Court 35 or whatever court it was, out on those back courts," Arthurs recalls. "I thought 'that's probably a pretty good life. I wouldn't mind doing that as well.'"

It was inspiration well directed. Playing lower-level events in the early '90s, the left-hander broke through with a fourth-round showing at 1999 Wimbledon, becoming something of a folk hero in doing so without dropping serve once. That performance not only prompted some big-name opponents (including Jim Courier and Andre Agassi) to label Arthurs' serve as the best in the game, but also led to his Davis Cup debut at age 28. In what could be described as a 'late-starting' pattern in his career, the Melburnian amassed 12 doubles titles before becoming the oldest singles winner in claiming the 2002 Scottsdale title at age 33 – a record that still stands.

Along with the individual achievements came some lofty highs as a team member too. Arthurs most happily recalls his appearance in 19 Davis Cup ties, including finals in 2001 (losing to France) and 2003, where victory against Spain provided Australia with its 28th victory in the prestigious world team event.

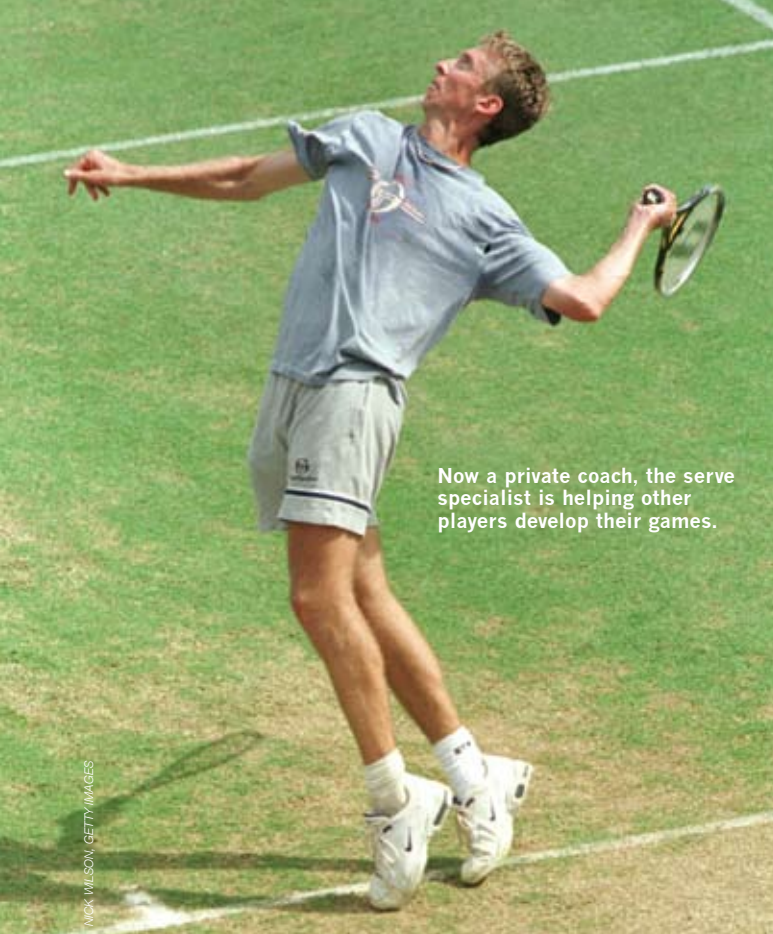
Both of those finals, played at Melbourne Park, were preceded by two-week training stints at Kooyong, which provided Arthurs with a chance to develop an even stronger affinity with the club that is now within walking distance of his Melbourne home.

"Kooyong has always been, I think, the home of tennis – especially in Melbourne, if not in Australia," Arthurs says. "The prestige of the whole club and obviously the redevelopment that they are going through right now is going to make it a premier club in the world."

It's fitting, then, that Arthurs has returned to one of the Australian Open's early venues to make a return of sorts to the game he left as a professional in 2007. But first there were some personal situations to navigate, ranging from the highs of his wedding to Swedish partner Caroline Gideskog and a crushing low with the death of his father, Derek, in 2008.

"That was sort of a rebuilding year, 2008, especially having been so close to my father," Arthurs says of a period spent largely at home with Caroline and his three-year-old daughter Amber. "I wanted time to regroup and not end up jumping into something too early and end up hating the game. I deliberately took a year off and it was obviously a pretty rough year. And then last year I sort of got back into it. I want to put a bit back in."

While still maintaining a focus on his young family, Arthurs has now teamed with another former Australian tour player, Richard Fromberg, in helping promising young players transition to an elite level through the Kooyong Foundation. Based out of Kooyong, the Maccabi Tennis Club in East Bentleigh and his own home, Arthurs says the elite young squad provides another developmental option to those players who aren't working in Tennis Australia programs.



Now a private coach, the serve specialist is helping other players develop their games.



Marriage to Swedish partner Caroline Gideckog was a highlight after leaving the tour.

IVICK WILSON, GETTY IMAGES

KRISTIAN DOWLING, GETTY IMAGES

“We’re not going against their system, we just want to be a help to those other kids and give them a different avenue,” he says.

In fact, while Arthurs agrees with the critics who suggest there are few Aussie men who could match Lleyton Hewitt’s achievements in the immediate future, he also sees “light at the end of the tunnel” with the continued success of Bernard Tomic and the recent Australian Junior Davis Cup team’s victory in Mexico, where Jason Kubler, Luke Saville and Joey Swaysland stamped themselves as potential forces of the future.

Arthurs says that regaining the services of long-time coach Ray Ruffels and the move back to the AIS in Canberra is a step in the right direction. “I believe it’s a very good move, where you get the kids in an environment where there are 15 or 20 other sports at the highest level, all trying to compete at the elite level. It’s got to be good for our kids to be in that environment.”

And amid those positives is the continued rise of Samantha Stosur and other Australian women. “I think the women’s side is actually pretty rosy at the moment,” Arthurs points out. “There’s some good girls coming along and probably within a year, especially with Alicia Molik coming back, we’re going to have six, six or seven girls in the top 100, which looks pretty good.”

There are also positives in the many Australian events that make summers for local tennis fans so special. While steadily building his private coaching business alongside the Kooyong squad, Arthurs is also available for corporate clinics and functions, which will seem him take on an ambassadorial role at the 2010 AAMI Classic, which means spending time with corporate sponsors both during and before the tournament, and attending to player needs where necessary.

While Arthurs never actually competed at the eight-man exhibition event that has preceded the Australian Open for almost 20 years, he has long been a fan of it. With past players including Andre Agassi and Pete Sampras, top names like Roger

Federer have now made it a regular part of their calendar. “It’s a special event,” he says. “It’s very rare that you get a tournament such as this where you can get so close to the players. Plus there are only eight players and four or five of them are top 10 in the world.”

With his new family commitments, Federer is yet to confirm whether he’ll defend his 2009 AAMI Classic title but has requested that organisers keep a place available until the last minute. Further demonstrating the high regard that top names hold for the event, recently-crowned US Open champ Juan Martin del Potro is ready to step into the field if Federer’s presence does not eventuate. Other confirmed starters in the 2010 tournament are Novak Djokovic, Fernando Gonzalez, Fernando Verdasco, Robin Soderling, Tommy Haas and Marcos Baghdatis.

“It’s great to have it at Kooyong and I think the facilities are going to be much improved for the players who come out this year,” says Arthurs. “It’s a testament to the tournament that they can get such a high quality field each year.”

It can only be a positive if spending time around such top-name players provides some sentiment for the time Arthurs experienced at the top of his game. While he doesn’t miss the grind of physically travelling to tournaments throughout the world, Arthurs admits that he does miss many of the cities he visited. With time providing some healthy perspective, he now appreciates every opportunity that tennis provided.

“You don’t really appreciate it when you’re in the moment but you look back and think, ‘I had a pretty good life’. I look back and maybe I didn’t achieve quite as much as I hoped I was going to achieve, but having said that, if you’d asked me in 1996 where my tennis was going, I would have said ‘oh, not very far’,” Arthurs reflects.

“In that respect I was pretty lucky that I got two Davis Cup trophies, my first singles title and a lot of good memories from the tour.” ●