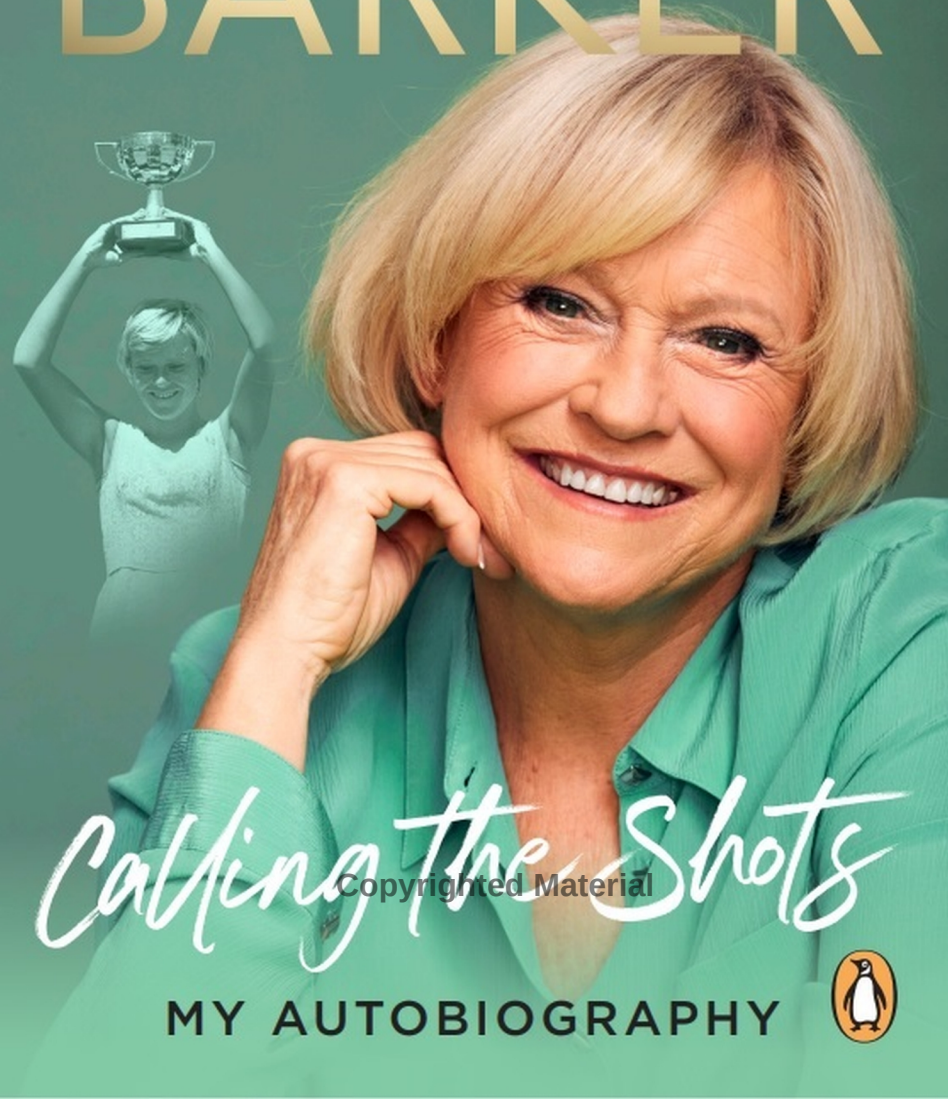
THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

SUE BARKER



Calling the Shots

MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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SUE BARKER

with Sarah Edworthy

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CHAPTER 1

MR ROBERTS

Not many 11-year-olds are lucky enough to know the day when their dream might start to become reality or to be able to identify the person who can shape their destiny. I recognised both with certainty. With every whack of the ball against our garage wall at home, every rally on the public courts where I played with my family in mixed-age groups on Saturdays, I visualised the moment when I would be talent-spotted by one man.

His name was Arthur Roberts and he was the resident tennis professional at the Palace Hotel in Torquay. Mr Roberts – as I would always call him – was a legend far beyond our stretch of the South Devon coast, with a reputation for coaching players to the top flight and a parallel notoriety for being formidably strict in his approach. In the early 1950s, before I was born, he had taken on Angela Mortimer – and she had gone on to achieve Grand Slam success, including winning the Wimbledon title in

1961. In that same Championships, another player from his small Torquay cohort reached the men's semi-final: Mike Sangster, famed for his 150mph cannonball serve. Arthur Roberts's success rate was phenomenal for an independent provincial coach – a one-man band, whose bread-and-butter job was to manage the courts at a popular seaside hotel.

I'd been introduced to tennis by my older sister Jane, who was a good player, and initially I was determined simply to emulate her. But tennis turned into a personal, all-consuming passion. By the age of 10 or 11, I was reading all I could about the game, largely to follow the progress of Corinne Molesworth, Mr Roberts's latest protégée, who came from Brixham, a fishing port on the other side of Torbay. She had just won the junior girls' singles title at the French Open on the clay at Roland-Garros. From his training set-up at the Palace Hotel, he had launched her as a tennis player, and now, at the age of 18, she was travelling from tournament to tournament in the United States, living the dream. To me, Corinne was a goddess. I studied pictures of her in the local paper. I admired her competitiveness, the way you could see she poured every ounce of effort into each shot. I desperately wanted to be like her.

So you can imagine the butterflies I felt on a cold October day in 1967 when word got around that Arthur Roberts was due to visit my school, the Marist Convent in Paignton, to assess PE teacher Mrs Embury's new intake. It was the first term of my first year in the senior department, a period when every aspect of life felt like a transition into a bigger, more thrilling adult world. Mrs Embury told us that Mr Roberts was coming

to potentially pick two girls for private tuition – and I was determined to be one of them. I just had to be. I can see myself now, bouncing from foot to foot in my Aertex games shirt, racket in hand, shivering as a light sea breeze gusted across the courts. It wasn't the autumn chill that got to me, but the surge of nerves, the excitement and heady expectation as we started to hit balls, awaiting the arrival of this scary character. Every article I read about Corinne included a mention of how uncompromising Arthur Roberts was in his coaching methods, how he sought a high standard of dedication from his players, not just to tennis but to him personally, and how, in return, he would go to untold lengths to further their tennis careers.

This man with the gargantuan reputation had acquired mythical status in my imagination, but here he was, a small, wiry, slightly stooped figure in his early sixties, escorted by Mrs Embury to observe our afternoon PE session. Tweedily dressed, he stood at the back of the courts, pipe in hand, expression unreadable. The air was full of the sounds of rackets thwacking balls and shots skidding off the shale court surface and landing in the net, of girls screeching 'Sorry!' and 'Aaaargh!' After watching us closely for some time, Mr Roberts conferred with Mrs Embury. I noticed she nodded and then called out his first selection: 'Judy Reeve.'

I started to hit the ball harder, and move around the court with more intent, panicking that he wouldn't notice me. In my heart of hearts, I knew I wasn't the next-best player on court that day: there was a girl called Jane Burnell who presented a more accomplished all-round package. It seemed inevitable that hers

would be the next name to be called out. I scurried after every ball, putting everything into the rallies, trying my best to get him to take note. Agonising minutes ticked by before Mr Roberts leaned towards Mrs Embury again … 'Susan Barker' … and I was beckoned over.

Mr Roberts was gruff and to the point, but I lapped up his comments. He said I wasn't the second-best player in the group, but he had observed how I was able to play shots even with the wrong foot forward and get myself out of trouble. He admired my balance on the court and said there was a rawness to me that he could work with, as opposed to someone who'd been overcoached. Later I would hear him say over and over again, 'A coach cannot put in what is not there. My only job is to bring out what is there.'

Potential was all, and I have always realised how fortunate I was to be born in this tennis hotspot in Devon at a time when this absolute guru of a coach actively sought out local talent. Mr Roberts said he had also picked up on my determination to impress him with every shot – a quality he rated because he knew that sort of resolve would develop into long-term commitment. Once I was under his guidance, he would refer to me as his 'alley cat', saying he was confident I would scratch, claw and bite my way to victory.

That autumn day 55 years ago set me on my incredible journey in life. When Mr Roberts said he saw in me a determination that he hadn't seen in any other kid, I took his words to heart. If determination was a quality that opened that first door, I soon learned that it would also carry me through the ups and

downs of pursuing my professional tennis dreams and lead to opportunities that I would never have imagined possible. But first I had to listen and learn.

At the end of my first coaching session on the Palace courts, I handed Mr Roberts the £1 note my parents had given me. He took it slowly, eyes locking with mine. 'If you give me this money, it means you are employing me and you can tell me what to do,' he said. 'If you come back on Thursday and don't pay me, can I tell you what to do?'

And so began a 19-year relationship that shapes my life to this day. Mr Roberts was a tough taskmaster, a brilliant but formidable tennis coach, a source of wisdom and inspiration, yet also something of an enigma. With a huge emphasis on work ethic, he coached me in every aspect of the game, honing my shots and schooling me in positioning and tactical awareness; he taught me how to approach competition, how to handle defeat, how to continually self-analyse in order to improve. He had exacting standards and there were plenty of tears along the way – but he was always there for me, a constant in the spinning whirl of junior, national and professional tennis competition. Behind that dour, uncompromising manner was a remarkably generous man, always ready to guide, or chide, me (even if I won, he might not have liked the manner in which I won). He understood me better than I did myself. Throughout my entire career in tennis, Mr Roberts refused to take any money from me apart from that initial £1, even when I started earning good prize money. I used to beg him to let me give him a fair percentage, but he was adamant. It was my money, I'd earned it. It was me out there on

the court, not him. A shared passion for tennis was all he wanted; his pleasure came from seeing me chase my dreams and do well.

Mr Roberts was so much more than my tennis coach and mentor, he was my confidant … my hero. And I hear his voice ringing in my ears to this day.

CHAPTER 2

WIMBLEDON HIGHLIGHTS

Clearing out a cupboard in my mother's home, I found some storage boxes that hadn't seen the light of day for years. Among these was a large plastic container with a clip-top lid, and I could see through the transparent sides that it was full of the old scrapbooks my father began to collate when I started competing in local junior tennis events back in the late 1960s. My daily sessions with Mr Roberts quickly led to a busy schedule of junior tournament play. Dad took great pleasure in sticking in news cuttings, photos and programmes, labelling each new addition with the occasion and date to create what is now an Aladdin's Cave of memorabilia. He'd found 'Susan' in large letters in a random headline and cut it out and glued it on the inside cover of the first album, 1969–70. And he went to the trouble of adding extra details in neat

black pen under the entries. Beneath a picture snipped from the local paper of an array of trophies won by our tennis-mad Marist Convent team, he itemised 'Susan's Contributions'. My haul, as per Dad's list, was three shields, one trophy, one cup, five medals, one spoon and the Aberdare Cup, the trophy awarded to the top national girls' school tennis team. At the time, I had no idea he put so much effort into these albums – I was just playing tennis.

Thinking about the early scrapbooks makes me chuckle. I was always 'Susan' at home; it wasn't until I was picked out for individual coaching by Mr Roberts that I became 'Sue'. We were all a bit scared of Mr Roberts's brusque manner. Early on, he made no bones about the fact that he didn't like my name. Susan was too soft, he said. 'Sue' had more bite. A view you might say was underlined many years later when I was presenting the BBC's *Sports Personality of the Year* show in 2012. On stage at ExCeL London, I addressed Bradley Wiggins, the Tour de France and Olympic time trial champion, as Bradley, instead of Brad – not having had the chance to ask him what he would prefer to be called. Throughout our live exchange on stage, he persisted in calling me 'Susan' with pantomime formality, much to everyone's amusement. *Touché!*

I didn't dare open these boxes and their cache of nostalgia when I found them at Mum's. I knew that no sooner had I spotted a photograph of Arthur's stable of kids on the Palace Hotel courts, or read a report of 12-year-old me playing for the Devon Under-14 team at Bristol, or seen a headline from the *Paignton News* anticipating a victory for the Marist Convent in the national schools' competition at Wimbledon, or a picture of me jumping the net alongside the world's best player Rod Laver at a junior international

tennis clinic, than I'd be wandering down a long and winding memory lane of happy reminiscences for hours.

But something caught my eye: a cream envelope, wedged between two turquoise albums. I recognised it straight away as a talisman I'd squirrelled away more than 50 years ago, and my heart leapt. I plunged into the box and drew out this long, thin paper packet that had been sealed and folded in half again to doubly protect its treasure. Dad's looping handwriting was as clear as the day he wrote it: 'Grass from the Centre Court (Aberdare Cup. July 1969)'. The Centre Court. No need to say where.

Summer 1969! I didn't want to risk opening the envelope in case those carefully preserved clippings evaporated into dust. Wrapped up in crumpled black tissue paper inside was a precious harvest of grass from Centre Court, nicked on my first visit to the home of tennis to play in the national schools' event. Just to hold the packet in my hand again was such a magical feeling. From the moment I first picked up a racket, Wimbledon signified the ultimate goal. These matted blades of grass were the symbol of my passion for tennis.

And what did they mean to me today?

I recalled the fun of that first visit to the All England Club, home of the Championships known universally as Wimbledon. Our squad of ten, drawn from various year groups, travelled up from Devon in the old school bus, driven by our patient PE teacher, Mrs Embury. There were only 198 girls at the Marist but, thanks to Mr Roberts, who coached several of us outside of school, we were the best tennis team in Britain for four consecutive years.

We stayed at our sister school, the Marist in Sunninghill, Berkshire, which we dreaded because the older girls said the convent food was unpleasant. Sister Evaristus, Sister Placidus and Sister Moira accompanied us for the trip and on the short journey from Sunninghill to our destination in south-west London they would whip out their rosary beads, poised to channel all the powers they could muster to give us an extra competitive edge. They used to say that they would be praying hard if our matches got tight – and I'd wonder if nuns should be taking sides like that! The sisters from Sunninghill used to pack into the old bus, too, to boost our support. We were so embarrassed by our holy barmy army, cheering us on in their black habits and headdresses. They were the noisiest spectators. You can imagine our street cred.

We filed off the school bus and crossed the road excitedly. I've never forgotten the first time I walked through the grand wrought-iron gates on Somerset Road: it was an incredible moment seeing the sun glittering on the golden 'AELTC' lettering on the gates and the picture-perfect vista through the railings – the purple and green club crest spelling out 'The All England Lawn Tennis & Croquet Club' and the formidable Virginia creeper-clad clubhouse. We played on the shale courts in the south of the grounds – roughly on the site where the new No.2 Court is today – and once the competition was over we were offered a tour of the landmark clubhouse as part of our prize for winning. We took photographs of each other under the famous clock, right in front of the doors where just a week or so earlier that year's Wimbledon finalists – the Australians Rod Laver and John Newcombe, American Billie Jean King and the British champion Ann Jones – had gone in and out, and we

were then led down through the inner sanctum to walk out on to *the* Centre Court. I already had plenty of reverence for the place Billie Jean calls 'the cathedral' of tennis. I loved Billie Jean's feistiness; her competitive spirit had become my benchmark ever since I'd watched her on the black-and-white TV that we'd sat around as a family, our eyes glued to her epic battles with her great rivals – the Australian Margaret Court, Maria Bueno from Brazil and Ann Jones – in Wimbledon finals. My awe for the whole scene intensified when we filed on to the hallowed turf below the Royal Box. Standing there, drinking in the atmosphere and thinking of all the epic matches played in this grand yet intimate stadium was just surreal. The empty, undressed court was alluring, inviting: *Come play on me one day*, it seemed to say. I knelt down to pick some blades of grass, wrapping them up in a bit of tissue and shoving them in my pocket to take home. My own piece of Wimbledon.

That first visit cemented it for me. I collected the grass much as you pick up a souvenir from a foreign city you may never visit again, but I knew Wimbledon would always be a special place for me. Who knows, maybe I manifested my life here through my dreams and determination? For in my imagination, I had played on Centre Court many times before I crossed the threshold of the famous gates on that early Aberdare Cup adventure. Centre Court was the garage wall at home in Paignton, where I pummelled Billie Jean on a daily basis, always beating her in a close final set, 7–5 or 6–4. It was the swingball in our sloping back garden where I whacked the ball with my older sister Jane, with the sea across the Torbay skyline sparkling in the background. It was also the public courts at Oldway Mansion – a park situated

between our house in Barcombe Heights and Paignton Beach – where I played on weekends with my family and locals of all ages. A bit later, of course, it was the indoor courts and the hitting wall at the Palace Hotel, where I was drilled by Mr Roberts to emulate the feats of his former protégés, Angela Mortimer and Mike Sangster. Not that he'd let me dream about Centre Court: Mr Roberts was all about a steady work ethic and small steps to build confidence in my technique and competitive ability – he would have had me dreaming about winning an Under-12 event in Exeter! Privately, every single swing of the racket edged me one ball closer to my ambition of actually competing on Centre Court at Wimbledon; every winner I struck was a crucial point in a fantasy match on my way to glory there.

I didn't foresee when I sealed that first envelope of Centre Court grass that every year for the next half-century, I would be back in some capacity – as a junior aged 15, as a Grand Slam winner ranked No.3 in the world and as a broadcaster sharing all the action as it unfolded to an audience of millions with the likes of Chris Evert, Martina Navratilova, John McEnroe (Mac), Boris Becker, Tracy Austin, Tim Henman and Pat Cash as my studio guests.

Wimbledon and me, we go back a long way, and the magic of the place is still entwined with the pride I felt walking in as that 13-year-old kid who had earned the right to play there. Each of the four Aberdare Cup schools' finals I competed in and won from 1969–72 – and the junior national championships, which were also held on the club's shale courts – gave me a sense of belonging, and a longing for more. For the short duration of those events, I was a bona fide insider at the home of tennis. Centre

Court, and the history of all who had played there, loomed large in my peripheral vision as I mortared the lines with sledgehammer forehands to smash the junior opposition.

Holding these clippings in my palm again, I had to pinch myself to think about what happened subsequently in my career, and the way my passion for tennis has shaped my life. The grass-clippings collection became a ritual for me and Dad; I would pluck some grass every year over the next four summer trips to and from Wimbledon on the old school bus, and hand it to him as soon as I got home. Was I keeping it as a memento? Or to nurture continuity in my association with this special place? The more I claimed a tiny piece of Wimbledon, the more it became a part of me. If someone had told me then that I would actually play on Centre Court, that I would twice be just a match or two away from reaching the Wimbledon ladies' singles final, and that I would go on to present the BBC coverage alongside such TV legends as Des Lynam and Harry Carpenter, I would have laughed in their face.

But I did, and I have Mr Roberts to thank. Had he not picked me out for special individual coaching when he came along to the Marist Convent courts to watch the first-year seniors play, my life would have gone in a different direction. Had our little school not had tennis courts and a proud tennis history, or a PE teacher like the wonderful Mrs Embury, who forged the connection with Arthur Roberts, I would never have developed my love of the game. One thing led to another, and it all stems from travelling to school competitions with a busful of nuns and being coached by a maverick hotel tennis pro in the seaside town made famous by *Fawlty Towers*.

Wimbledon is the constant that runs through my tennis and broadcasting years, like the letters that spell out 'Paignton' in the traditional sugary sticks of rock sold in the sweet shops along the seafront of my hometown. I've never missed a year. For me, that green patchwork of grass courts down the hill from Wimbledon village has been a place of eternal sporting drama and a place of work. It's both a professional touchstone and my home from home. Courtesy of my indispensable floor manager Liz Thorburn, I have my own coat hook in the BBC studio within the Club's Broadcast Centre marked 'H.R.W.H.' (Her Royal Wimbledon Highness) and my own nickname among our close-knit crew (DOC, short for Demanding Old Cow – far too complicated to go into here).

Every July, I'm still down there on the edge of Centre Court, no longer worshipping the grass myself but with a camera and sound crew and the likes of Boris and Tim or Chrissie and Tracy. I might be previewing matches as players knock up before I rush back to my studio chair as a match gets under way – I consider myself the official Wimbledon warm-up correspondent, as I never see a ball hit live throughout the fortnight of a Championship. Or I'm tucked away behind a curtain just off Centre Court, watching the last minutes on a small monitor, primed to walk on to interview the champion and the runner-up. It's quite something to think how often I've now walked across that same patch of court I knelt down on as a kid, and watched a roll-call of great champions honour the court in their own way: kissing the grass, eating it, falling backwards on it in jubilant exhaustion, shedding tears of joy or disappointment. The ground staff today would be bemused to know I once showed such respect for their carefully

manicured grass: after years of trotting down in heels with the camera crew, the wary groundsman's team eventually found a bit of green carpet to protect it from my spikes!

These days I come traipsing in through the media entrance with my day's notes spilling out of a rucksack, which isn't half as fun as being with my mates on the old school bus or as glamorous as a player being delivered to the clubhouse door in a courtesy car. From 1993, Wimbledon became just one of the prestigious sports events I've presented each year for the BBC, alongside five Olympic Games (Atlanta in 1996 through to London 2012), five Winter Olympics, as well as Commonwealth Games from Canada, Malaysia, Manchester, Melbourne and Delhi; numerous World and European Athletics Championships, racing festivals, figure skating, 19 *Sports Personality of the Year* shows … I've travelled the world and worked from the heart of the premier events of global sport to share the stories as they unfold. I'm immensely proud of being one of very few former athletes who have gone on to present multi-sports programmes on such a high-profile channel – but I still get chills when I walk through the gates of the All England Club. And I still have a ritual.

On the eve of a Championship I make a point of coming in early and going up to the roof above the Broadcast Centre to look out over the grounds and feel the transformative power of the place. I love that private moment. You hear the courts being mown, smell the freshly cut grass, the flowers; there's something special about seeing everyone scurrying around the walkways preparing for a glorious fortnight of action. It gives me goosebumps every year. What am I now, 66? And I first walked in when

I was just 13. Everywhere I glance from the rooftop prompts a host of memories and also a sense of wonder about what history will be made over the next 14 days while I'm in the presenter's chair. Once the tournament is under way I certainly don't have time for contemplation, but I enjoy seizing that moment for myself to just take stock and feel the timeless spirit of the place.

I always say I am a player first, a broadcaster second, but I mean that in spirit. I never dwell on the standout matches I played here myself. Frankly, there are a few I'd like to forget. But it's bizarre to glance towards the ivy-covered walls of Centre Court and think it's where I played the great Maria Bueno on my singles debut on the show court in 1976 – the year Björn Borg won his first title, beating Ilie Năstase on that same swathe of sun-scorched grass. After all my dreams of that longed-for occasion, I didn't have a sleepless night anticipating this head-to-head with one of the greats of the game. I only learned I was due to play in the second match on Centre Court that very morning when I was staying with my friend from junior days, Linda Mottram, in her family home in a Wimbledon cul-de-sac. I was tucking into bacon and eggs at the kitchen table when Linda's mum looked up from the newspaper and said, 'Oh, Sue, how exciting! Have you ever played on Centre Court before?' In those days we didn't get the Order of Play the night before; you had to look in the morning papers or ring up the referee's office. That was the first I knew of it.

From the rooftop, looking over to the left, there's Henman Hill, which didn't exist when I first came to Wimbledon. The land was leased to a New Zealand sports club and was used as

a car park during the tournament. As I survey its sweep of lawn and picnic tables and the giant TV screen, I smile to think that this landmark is named after a skinny ten-year-old who I coached at the David Lloyd Tennis Centre in Heston shortly after retiring in 1985. (I was shocked to hear Tim recently describe me as a 'borderline scary coach', but yes, I did expect 100 per cent effort in my drills!) Sometimes when I dropped the boys back at Reed's, their boarding school in Cobham, I would ask if they fancied a burger and take them to McDonald's, or pick up some Coke and chocolate at the service station. I felt sorry for these little lads dutifully eating their strict nutritionist-controlled diet. They loved me! To this day, Tim calls me Auntie Sue, and blames me for never winning Wimbledon, saying I compromised his athlete's diet from a young age. I think he's joking.

On the other side of Centre Court lie the club's original grass courts, separated by narrow walkways. If I close my eyes, I can almost hear the hysteria in the air when Borg, my one-time doubles partner, would be mobbed by hysterical fans. He was a superstar, to his contemporaries as well as his fans. I recall Chris Evert and me marvelling at the scene from the upstairs window of the women's dressing room; after hearing the screams, we looked down and saw a dot of blond hair in a sweatband and those broad shoulders in an orange Fila tracksuit top, Björn surrounded by policemen trying to ensure his safety. Today, there are underground tunnels to help players get from the locker rooms to the show courts without having to navigate crowded walkways, but he never had the benefit of that. Even when he was finishing matches, fans would run on court to grab his sweatbands. Those

on-court invasions still seem extraordinary when everything else about Wimbledon was, and is, so formal, with the all-white clothing regulation and tea lawns, the band playing jaunty tunes and the army of service stewards helping the public find their seats. Borgmania was a sign that tennis suddenly had blockbuster glamour, and I was so lucky to be competing during those heady days when our sport became box office.

Of course, my dream was to win the ladies' singles title. I certainly had my chances, but I never converted them. My greatest successes were not on the grass courts of Wimbledon; it wasn't my favourite surface. Two matches that I should have won haunt me – a quarter-final against Martina Navratilova in 1976, the year I won the French Open at Roland-Garros, and a semi-final against Betty Stöve in the following year (I'll go into the gory details of both later). To have not capitalised on two chances at Wimbledon when your dream is to win it … well, you never quite get over it. I was never the same player again. Those painful losses broke something inside of me. But I blame myself, not the place. It hasn't affected my love for Wimbledon at all. And here's the great thing about working on television: I have all these great players on the programme as studio guests, and we've all had our nightmares as well as our triumphs. Thanks to our dear old British weather, and numerous rain breaks before the introduction of the covered courts, we've shown clips from bygone years of each other's milestone dramas just to keep the banter going. It's not just great fun, the comments amount to group therapy! Mac was in the studio once when I had the misfortune to sit through the end of my horrible match against Martina in 1976. I had two

break points to go, two breaks up in the third set and then I just threw it away. I could hardly look as the footage played … I had a face like thunder as my 20-year-old self swept up her rackets, towel and handbag and stomped off the court. But all Mac could do was take the mickey.

'Your *handbag*!' he laughed.

And it did look ridiculous. Players today tote around their huge athlete's kit bags and there I was slinging on my little shoulder bag with my accreditation pass dangling from the strap.

'Your face may have got you through the gates,' I said to Mac, 'but I needed my competitor's badge and it was tied to my handbag!'

I've fronted the BBC Wimbledon coverage alongside many of my friends and former rivals for three times as many years as I was a competitor, and the former-player-turned-broadcaster is a fun club to be in. That's something I muse on every year when I'm having my private moment of reverie on the roof. It's a small world and the players who loved their tennis careers tend to stick around. During the Championship, you might see former Grand Slam champion Jim Courier interviewing Novak Djokovic for Tennis Channel on the raised terrace next to the Broadcast Centre or Mac coming down the steps in his Converse sneakers en route to taking up position in the BBC commentary box. There's the bench opposite the referees' office, close to the entrance of the Media Centre, where for years Venus and Serena's father Richard Williams used to sit, almost inviting anyone to come and talk to him. How the years whizz by. When Venus arrived at Wimbledon in 1998, already the previous year's US Open finalist aged 17,

I sat down to interview her. She had asked if she could bring her younger sister along and I said fine. On camera, Venus introduced Serena and told the world to look out because Serena was going to be better than her. I remember laughing out loud, thinking, *Oh yeah?* Venus herself had just burst on to the scene. She was so athletic, so powerful, so tactically aware, it seemed impossible that her baby sister could be even more formidable. That's the beauty of sport. You just never know what will happen next.

I wake up each morning during Wimbledon looking forward to the day. Nerves don't bother me any more, but I have the same feeling I did every day as a player. I'm either going to do a good programme or a bad one. It's like winning and losing in tennis – there's nothing in between. I leave the studio each day asking myself the same questions I did when I left a tournament, the questions Mr Roberts urged me to ask of myself. What worked and what didn't? And why? What could I have done better?

As a presenter, I've had my highs and lows too. Live television can be a white-knuckle ride as it is, but add in the emotion of watching a British player, and I'm a wreck. I make sure I am scrupulously impartial on air but I always want the home players to succeed because I know how special it is to play well at Wimbledon for an appreciative crowd. In 2013, Andy Murray was two sets and a break down in his quarter-final against Fernando Verdasco and I was living every point with him in the studio, so nervous as he looked like he was down and out. Jo, the sound lady, filmed me screaming and fist-pumping and sent the clip to Judy Murray, who later passed it on to Andy and his wife Kim. So embarrassing. I got an email from Judy after his eventual victory, saying I was getting

more wound up than she ever would. I don't know how she sits so composed in the players' box with the cameras on her as Andy plays with his heart on his sleeve. Jane Henman, Tim's mother, always used to say she lost 5lb through tension every Wimbledon.

That year, of course, Andy went on to win – the first British men's Wimbledon champion since Fred Perry in 1936 – and that ranks as my absolute career highlight. Earlier that year we had persuaded him to take part in a BBC documentary. The British public had started to warm to him after his desperately emotional speech on Centre Court the previous year, when he lost to Roger Federer. I knew that if the public saw the 'real Andy' then they would take him to their hearts, as privately he is funny and personable. Andy agreed, and I travelled to Florida to film with him. We also filmed him walking his dogs and I interviewed him at his home in Surrey where he opened up about his memories of the Dunblane massacre, breaking down in tears as he relived the horrific shootings that took place at his primary school in Perthshire when he was an eight-year-old pupil.

Incredibly, from those two sets down through the Verdasco challenge, he went on to win Wimbledon. Without doubt, walking on to Centre Court to announce him as winner was the best day of my television career. The journey to that final was immense, and for him to beat Novak Djokovic and emerge victorious after such a seemingly endless last game really put us all through the wringer. That last game was the most terrifying … I thought if Andy didn't win that service game he might lose the match.

The 1999 highlights programme produced my most mortifying gaffe. Steffi Graf had announced at the beginning of the

year that she would be playing her last Roland-Garros and Wimbledon. Having lost the final to the hard-hitting US Open champion Lindsay Davenport, Steffi had taken her leave of Centre Court and I was asked to close the show by linking to a montage of her greatest moments. At the end of every show I hear a hard count through my earpiece to the moment when I should stop talking. It's not professional to underrun or overrun; I need to be saying goodbye as the count goes from one to zero. In those ten seconds, I decided I would close with the line, 'After a magnificent career, Steffi waves a final farewell to Wimbledon and her beloved Centre Court, but at least she walks away with some great memories.' In my ear, I could hear the producer ask where the closing montage was … this was ten seconds to go before I would deliver my line.

Adrenaline is running high. Where was the montage? Would my words work if we didn't have the clips? Needless to say, with seconds to go, the video compilation was ready – everyone had played a blinder to put it together on time – and I ploughed on and delivered my line: 'After a magnificent career, Steffi waves a final farewell to Wimbledon and her beloved Centre Court, but at least she walks away with some great mammaries.'

I lay my head on the desk as there were huge gasps from the gallery. Martin Hopkins, the daytime producer, burst through the doors in hysterics. 'At least you were factually correct,' he roared. We all burst out laughing. The next day I got a message from the men's locker room thanking me for 'stating the bleeding obvious'. My embarrassment was complete.

CHAPTER 3

COMING OUT FIGHTING

It was my sister Jane, six years my senior, who got me into tennis. I won't say 'introduced', because it was under duress. She'd started playing tennis at our junior school and she was very good. The Marist Convent, juniors and seniors, shared tennis courts. Some doubled as a netball court and a rounders field, but there'd always be at least one net up. I used to beg Jane to let me go and play with her after school. Mostly she'd let me tag along to act as a ball girl: 'Well, you run around quite well,' she'd say. 'At least you can pick up balls for me.' I was always the last resort. If she couldn't find anyone else to play, she'd let me have a go with a racket. I used to try so hard to hit balls back for her, but I was all over the place.

We had a fabulous PE teacher called Mrs Chadwick who saw how much I loved the game and the challenge to improve enough to give Jane a game. She used to stay back after school sometimes

and give me a bit of coaching. At the time, there was a government or community initiative that set tennis challenges for junior school pupils. Can you hit 20 balls over the net inside the court? Can you get ten serves in a row in the box? Your teacher would sign the form to verify you'd met the goal and a few weeks later a certificate would arrive in the post. From the age of six or seven, I'd started sticking mine on my bedroom wall as incentives to improve. And then Mrs Chadwick would announce the next challenge. It would sometimes take me weeks to get there but eventually I would and she'd send off another form. I loved those days at school when she'd seek me out to say, 'Susan! Your certificate's arrived!'

After school, I'd trail after Jane into Oldway Mansion, which was halfway between home and the beach. Sadly it's semi-derelict now, but the grand nineteenth-century house had a formal garden modelled on the Petit Trianon in Versailles, with ponds and acres of informal 'pleasure grounds', including a dozen or so public tennis courts that backed on to our primary school. There was a lovely café and we used to pay half a crown or something to hire a court for an hour.

Oldway was heaven for kids. We liked to play hide and seek, ride our bikes there or muck around on the putting green, but what I loved most was going to the club to play tennis at weekends. Mrs Easterbrook, who I thought was about 100 years old, ruled the roost and welcomed all ages. Sometimes I'd play doubles with her against her fellow club regular Joyce MacDonell and another middle-aged lady. Their enthusiasm made a lasting impression on me. One of them served underarm – but trust me they were very competitive. It was a lot of fun. If you'd asked me my life's

ambition when I was ten years old, I would have said I wanted to grow up to be Mrs Easterbrook. I used to think I would be that lady who is still playing tennis when she's 100.

My parents first met at the local golf club. My mum, Betty – who I sadly lost this year at the amazing age of 100 – had been engaged during the Second World War to a fighter pilot who was killed in action. Mum spent much of the war years in Sussex, looking after children who had been evacuated from London; her voluntary work included working alongside nurses, helping out however she could. After the war she returned to Devon and, as she said, there weren't that many men her age around. Her mother, my grandmother, was playing a lot of golf with a chap called Bob Barker – full name Robert Charles Barker – who had moved to Paignton from Leicester. Mum met him at the golf club and got to know him, and they married in 1948. Dad was born in 1905 and there was a 16-year age gap between them, but I never noticed that as a child. By the time I was born, Dad was 51, but he was always slim, fit and active, and very hands-on in terms of conjuring fun for us. After Jane was born in 1950, my parents bought a lovely house for £4,000 at 20 Barcombe Heights, which remained our home for 35 years. It had three bedrooms, one family bathroom and a sun lounge that ran along the back of the house, overlooking a steep garden with beautiful views over Paignton to Brixham and out over the sea. Barcombe Heights was a really happy street and I'm still in touch with our neighbours – two of whom play tennis and one is even a member at Wimbledon.

After Jane, Mum had a miscarriage and a stillborn child, and then my brother Neil arrived safely in December 1954.

Mum never had a salaried job in her life; she was happy to be a stay-at-home mum. Dad was an area representative for Bass Charrington, the brewery company; he was based in Plymouth, and his job was to oversee a group of pubs mostly in Devon with a few across the border in Cornwall. Mum and Dad decided that two children were enough on his salary, but less than six months after Neil was born, Mum found herself pregnant again. Jokingly, she used to tell me that she went to the doctor to say she didn't want another baby. She thought Dad really wouldn't want another mouth to feed. One night she drank too much gin and bounced herself down the stairs, thinking, because of her previous miscarriages, this might do the trick. It didn't, and I was born on 19 April 1956. It's part of our family lore that I came out fighting, determined to make my presence felt, as if I knew I had to.

My ability to battle through adversity was tested almost immediately. I caught whooping cough as a very young baby. Mum remembered me turning blue and at night she would have to walk backwards and forwards along the landing in our upstairs hallway for hours on end, holding me up against her shoulder, because I struggled to breathe any time she tried to put me down. Several times I just stopped breathing, and it was touch-and-go for three days. She had taken me to the hospital but they said there was nothing they could do. It was what it was. My parents would have to ride it out and hope for the best. It wasn't until I was a professional player on the women's tour that Mum told me I'd been so ill for so long I was never christened. I arranged that for myself when I was 21.