



WALK THIS WAY

Battling away on a squash court, Dame Susan Devoy always gave it her all. Now she's putting her considerable energy into a campaign to get New Zealand women moving. She sat still long enough to tell **Fiona Barber** about the joy of walking.

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SLOW AND STEADY, they say, wins the race. But when Aesop penned his fable *The Tortoise and the Hare* to illustrate the point, he clearly hadn't met anyone quite like Dame Susan Devoy.

New Zealand's greatest ever squash player was born with her switch permanently set to high speed. And her turbo-charged life proves that fast and furious can produce truly stunning results – eight British Open squash titles and four World Championship crowns in a decade; more than 20 years of championing a number of charities, including a fund-raising walk the length of New Zealand for muscular dystrophy; and completing three Rotorua marathons. Not to mention having four sons – by Caesarean section – in five years.

A life jammed on full-throttle seems to perfectly suit the 45-year-old symbol of sporting supremacy who once admitted to spending precious down time when the family was away spring cleaning until 2am. “I don't relax; it's not in my personality type,” she admits.

And now she is running a new campaign with the same vigour that once propelled her spring-loaded body around the squash court.

Susan, recently voted the fifth most trusted New Zealander in the annual *Reader's Digest* survey, is one half of the team behind Wonder Walkers (www.wonderwalkers.co.nz), a website which extols the joys and benefits of walking and helps women stay on track.

“It's good for the body, soul and planet – and it's free,” Susan says. >>>

IF YOU THINK WALKING sounds a bit pedestrian, a bit tortoise-like for this driven Dame Commander of the New Zealand Order of Merit, CBE, MBE and former chair of the Halberg Trust, think again. The “born-again walker” and her friend and business partner, Paula Thompson, want to mobilise New Zealand women. First up, they’re aiming to establish a national walking sisterhood through Wonder Walkers. “We want to start a healthy epidemic, one step at a time,” Susan says.

The trick, say the women, is to motivate and inspire women, rather than threaten them with “thou shalt exercise or thou shalt get diabetes” missives.

Visit the website and you’ll see information on walking tracks and routes, events, groups in your area, gear, medical and nutrition experts, psychological and fitness advice, competitions, blogs and a forum at the heart of the Wonder Walkers’ online community. Here you’ll read about Sarah from Stockholm, a Kiwi who was motivated to stride through the long, dark Swedish winter, and local women sharing everything from dodgy knees to walks with dogs to the scourge of methamphetamine or P.

So far, 5500 women have signed up and both member and visitor numbers have been steadily growing since Wonder Walkers went live a year ago.

Make no mistake, Wonder Walkers is a business which needs to make money, says Susan, and “we’ve invested significant amounts of the family silver in this and both our partners have said, ‘Stop!’”

But it was also born out of a strong conviction that walking was good for women, and as a result, their families. It was

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also kind to the environment and could raise money for good causes through charity events.

Fittingly the pair’s friendship and their resolve to step out of their comfort zone and into new territory, were set in motion while they had their trainers on.

When Susan was the chief executive of Sport Bay of Plenty and Paula the chairperson, they’d “solve the problems of the world” while they strode around Tauranga with their dogs.

They saw schemes to get people active come and go until someone said to them, “Put your money where your mouth is.” And so they did.

Paula, a lawyer who is a former chief executive of the Tauranga City Council and current chair of the Bay of Plenty Community Trust, finds that pounding the pavement frees up her mind and makes her more creative.

“I can start off the day feeling stressed and after a good walk things seem a hell of a lot better,” she says.

For Susan, the simple process of planting one foot in front of another is a crucial part of maintaining her wellbeing. The woman Paula calls an “Energizer Bunny” goes running and has started playing non-competitive squash as well as coaching, but walking, Susan explains, is her “sanity”.

“I need any form of exercise but I like walking. It might be a reaction against the four concrete walls [of a squash court].”

Simply put, “Walking is my antidepressant of choice.”

Today The Australian Women’s Weekly is in the chunky 1970s Tauranga home she shares with husband, John Oakley, and their four sons – Julian, 16, Alex 14, Josh, 13, and Jamie, 11.

The boys are downstairs in their “male den”, a cavernous rumpus room; Tui, her beloved spoodle, is cruising around sniffing the strangers; and the grand young dame of New Zealand sport is downright fidgety.

It would be an overstatement to say she’s playing up, but being styled, made-up and halted in her tracks long enough to have photos taken is probably more of a challenge than walking a marathon. “I don’t sit still, really,” she says.

Outside, on a footpath bordering one of Tauranga’s main roads Susan, with The Australian Women’s Weekly photographic posse corralling her into position, is drawing toots and stares from passing motorists. “It’s all right,” she quips, “no one recognises me; I’m not in my trackies.”

But they do recognise her. Decades of sporting triumphs, public speaking, work for good causes and the odd cameo under the media blowtorch have made her instantly recognisable.

Case in point: In April, Susan was rocked when she discovered that a testimonial she’d written for broadcaster Tony Veitch to have his passport returned was instead presented in court. It was produced when he was being sentenced for injuring his former partner with reckless disregard.

Susan, who knows the sports journalist and is friends with his stepmother, had written the testimonial because she believed he deserved the chance to work again and needed his passport to try for overseas jobs.

“I was gutted,” says Susan, who spoke out publicly against the unsanctioned use of the document and that a pertinent paragraph had been removed.

It wasn’t the only part of the saga to leave a sour taste in her mouth. “When it was going on, people were trying to get me to say nothing – like I should just put it down to a bad experience.”

But shying away is not part of who Susan is, and her four boys know it. When she tried to use the experience to teach them about the value of honesty, they homed in on their mum’s ability to stand up for what she believes in.

“I said, ‘What’s the motto in all of this?’”

“One said, ‘Don’t mess with the Dame – or she’ll go psycho.’”

Her ability to tell it like it is has made her a popular and trusted New Zealander and political parties have long recognised this public appeal.

“When [former Tauranga MP] Bob Clarkson was hanging up his hat, I got a call from the local people from National.”

And once, “Howard Morrison asked me if I’d like to run for the Maori Party. The only ones who I haven’t been approached by are the Greens and ACT.”

She says she’s a concerned New Zealander but it takes a thick-skinned person – and one with true political savvy – to survive in the Parliamentary playpen. “I would be someone who would put their foot in their mouth,” she admits.

As for the public service, she says, “Given my personality, I wouldn’t be able to sit that long in a meeting.”

Besides, there are four growing boys at home, around which a women’s walking revolution is being engineered.

“As much as it sounds really corny, I do believe my time here with the kids is important. I could throw myself into Wonder Walkers, but at what expense?”

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Susan's biggest priority is raising her four boys (from left) Alex, Julian, Jamie and Josh.

TIME IS WHAT'S REQUIRED to support the boys in their lives and activities, including squash, rugby, athletics and golf. John's position as general manager of Lima Orthopaedics in New Zealand, an Italian company which produces artificial shoulder, hip and knee joints, regularly takes him away from home and "we're just a really busy household," Susan explains. "Between 3pm and 9pm it's basically chaos in our house."

And she's not too fussed on taking to heart social justice advocate, commentator and author Celia Lashlie's advice that women should "get off the bridge" and allow fathers to step in when it comes to their adolescent sons. There is room for both, she maintains. "I built the bridge. I'm not getting off it."

So it's the space at either end of the bridge that is devoted to the Wonder Walkers movement for women, many of whom are also busy with their families and work both within and outside of the home.

Why walking? "Women like to walk because they can talk. They like to share their experiences," Susan says. "We're great blabberers." That blabbering extends to the online Wonder Walkers sisterhood, where Susan, for once, is among lots of other females. "We've got a great little community."

Susan Elizabeth Anne Devoy was born in Rotorua, the youngest of seven children and her parents' only girl. She grew up in a simple weatherboard and tile house, extended to include a seven-bedroom "dorm" to accommodate John and Tui Devoy's brood.

Like her older brothers, Susan grew up around squash courts and during intervals at tournaments the boys were competing in, she would have a hit around.

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While all the Devoy's were mad keen on squash, the youngest member of the family was also fixated on reaching the very top. In 2005, one of her brothers, Paul, told *North & South* magazine that his sister had a steelier attitude than her siblings when it came to the family sport.

"Julian, Mark and I were all New Zealand reps. We were talented but we didn't have that determination. She was the only one who had a goal to rise to the top."

In 1983 Susan met John, then an A-grade squash player from Christchurch, who became her manager, mentor and husband. The pair became inseparable as Susan cemented her position as the world's best female squash player. It was a crown she wore for a decade and only relinquished when she was good and ready. "I was always motivated by the fear of losing," she admits.

After retiring in October 1992, at the very top of her game, Susan had her four boys, then moved from Auckland to Tauranga and became CEO, then chairperson of Sport Bay of Plenty.

"When you have been a sportswoman and then a mother, you don't have a formal qualification so you have to keep reinventing yourself," she says.

In recent years the reinvention has extended to fronting a television ad for the Ministry of Health's *Like Minds, Like Mine* campaign. You will have seen her talking about one of her former Sport Bay of Plenty employees, Aubrey, who has bipolar disorder. In the ad Susan says Aubrey gave his fellow workers a gift – the ability to talk about mental illness.

What you won't have seen is Susan Devoy, reinvented as a backroom squash coach and mentor. The former world

champion is coaching juniors in Tauranga and "the C-grade ladies in Te Puke on a Wednesday night".

"I didn't think I'd ever like coaching," says the woman who never thought she's set foot on a squash court again.

"I get such a buzz out of kids enjoying something."

Susan has her own teaching techniques, which probably don't come out of the official squash coaching handbook.

When playing some college boys she offered them \$5 for every point they won against her. No one managed a single point – until she put the price up to \$10.

"Within two minutes I'd lost \$20. You have to incentivise children in lots of different ways."

And this month she'll be managing the junior women's team travelling to the World Championships in Chennai, India. "I'll be mother hen," she laughs.

There is no talk of a return to competitive squash, however. There simply isn't the time or the drive – or, perhaps, the physical sharpness she'd demand of herself.

She says she "stupidly" snapped an achilles tendon last year when she was having a hit around during a junior tournament Jamie was competing in. "It went bang. It was the first day of the school holidays and Josh's birthday and I had to crawl around on my hands and knees.

"That was my first major injury ... and my last."

So it's back to a spot of running, although that takes its toll on her joints these days and, of course, stepping out on the footpaths of Tauranga with Paula and their dogs.

It's not a bad way to do business, or to maintain a friendship.

The women admit they're chalk and cheese, but have always complemented each other.

Says Paula, "We're able to highlight each other's strengths and weaknesses without taking offence.

"Susan really is extremely quick-witted and has a heart of gold – and as wide as the Pacific."

And, no, says Paula, she doesn't think the dynamo dame will ever slow down. "Never a dull moment," says the woman who has done the hard yards – literally – with Susan.

Susan remembers their relationship at Sport Bay of Plenty this way: "She was my life-saver. She was the brain and I was the brawn. She told me what to do and I'd do it and take the credit."

With a cast of just two, Wonder Walkers is an ongoing challenge for the women. "It's been an incredible learning curve," says Susan of their website business. "If we can make a success out of something we know nothing about, just imagine how good we would be at something we do know about."

Eventually they'd like to have about 100,000 members, run charity walking events and, of course, make a decent living. They joke that it's only a matter of time before Oprah Winfrey calls.

But more than anything, Wonder Walkers is a labour of love, a daily fix of health and humour for the women of New Zealand.

"We're trying to say that 30 minutes [of walking] is enough. We're trying to say anything is better than nothing," says Susan, who suspects she may be "in the middle of a mid-life crisis".

If she is, then she knows exactly what to do about it. She can arrange to meet Paula, put Tui on her leash and keep practising exactly what she preaches – one therapeutic step at a time. ■