

In the **SW**ing

Squash Wellington Newsletter

Guest edited by Ann Smith, Board Chair

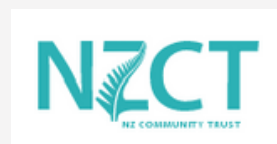
SUPERCHAMPS 2022



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FEATURE ARTICLE

EVAN WILLIAMS – CAREER RETROSPECTIVE

As announced last month, 32-year-old left-hander Evan Williams (Ngāti Porou) has retired from professional squash. In the SWing writer **Catharine Sayer** talks trophies, travel, te Reo and Tawa with the ever obliging Williams.

A time and a place

It's on a bleak Sunday morning that we arrange to meet at the Khandallah club, chosen to humour me as I have another interview to conduct there. Familiar to me as a buzzing tournament venue, the silence is eerie in the deserted lounge. I can't even rustle up a cup of tea, never mind procure whatever fancy coffee this Wellingtonian is bound to prefer, so it's not the ideal start.

Evan's timing is, as always, impeccable. Reliability goes to the core of the man, as I know from receiving detailed and timely development squad or rep team reports in my board member capacity. He's unflinchingly professional, but certainly not vanilla. Done his way, there'd be more atmosphere in squash through courtside entertainment, heckling and walk-on anthems. He's clearly due another appearance at the Island Bay Open.



My timing, by contrast, is poor; not because I suspect Williams may have had a large one the previous night (which I do) but being bang in the middle of the Commonwealth Games, for which he missed out on selection.

Bittersweet symphony

To get the skeletons out early, it's clearly a touchy subject. He confesses to not having brought himself to tune in to the coverage, apart from the men's final and he'll likely watch the mixed doubles final and the women's doubles final if the NZ pair gets that far. It's not pique or disinterest that I sense, but hurt over the missed opportunity to showcase his skills on the big stage with his international peers one last time.

Despite the pain, Williams has nothing less than admiration for his gold-medal-winning erstwhile teammate and roommate, Paul Coll. Coll's success doesn't rankle with Evan, quite the contrary. Given his own absence from the team, Williams resists any temptation to dismiss the event as meaningless, instead suggesting – based on his own 2018 Commonwealth Games outing – that the experience will be Coll's career highlight.

I nevertheless change the topic, the job in hand being to explore Williams's 22 years of competition – many in Wellington and New Zealand colours – rather than exploring tired old tropes about the thin margins separating the elites from the rest of the field.

Total recall

Williams is comfortable to relate his own successes which relieves me, since false modesty in athletes is a personal bugbear. I may be excessively envious of those to whom reward comes without much effort, but even so, I have no truck with the, “*Oh, I just fell into it, entered junior nationals for fun on a spare weekend and landed myself a national title*” line spun by many a professional. I find Williams's detailed descriptions of the graft refreshing. His recall on where he has played, who against and more interestingly, his feelings at the time provide real insight into the athlete psyche.

FEATURE ARTICLE - EVAN WILLIAMS



Cousins' shield runners-up with Hutt City, 2021

The detail he supplies of the foundation years does more than provide backstory to the recent successes (for which, see end panel); it supplies useful insight on how to make squash great again, a topic Williams also grapples with, having been pivotal to Wellington's glory days.

The pain he evinces when mentioning that the district's 2020 junior boys' rep team were seeded tenth and last in the inter-district competition is visceral. Wellington's slide down the pecking order from the days when it tended to either win the comp at junior and senior levels or be the beaten finalist seems to hurt personally.

Williams clearly cares about his sport. He doesn't have all the answers to turn its minority status around and doesn't suggest he's cut out to be an administrator, but

he finds astonishing our administrators' lack of enterprise and creativity to successfully market a product with so many positive attributes.

The pool room

Since I've already mis-stepped by mentioning the Comm Games, I put the boot in by scolding him for not turning up with any meaningful mementos for a photo-shoot, contrary to instructions. He has a pre-prepared answer for that one that passes muster, though: all his trophies were meaningful in their own way, so it

made no sense to pick anything in particular out of the cabinet, or more properly, the shrine lovingly tended by his parents in their Tawa home.

Juniors

We talk about junior squash at Tawa at length, me anxious to understand quite what the club did right. Williams talks fondly of junior nights heaving with 70 kids, 100 even on party nights. He found himself amid a group of 7 boys all driven to outdo each other.

"We just wanted to play, to win. We didn't know any routines or drills or have a coach but were just desperate to beat each other and I suppose win as much as we could around the district too."

His tournament career actually started with 3 losses, one to a girl (ouch), at Club Kelburn in the Ngā Hau e Whā tournament. This was soon after his 7th birthday, by which time he was accustomed to falling asleep on the couches at the Tawa club where his parents played tournaments. Soon after, he and his brother Braddick, his elder by 3 years, became hooked.

"We stole the sport from our parents."

Evan (front and centre) winning his first age-group title, aged 11, next to the girls' U11 champ, Joelle King



FEATURE ARTICLE - EVAN WILLIAMS

Ruthless

In 1999, a young Williams put Kevin Rāwhiti, one of the top seeds, to the sword in a triple skunking for the under-11 title at the national age-groups competition staged in Ashburton. His fascination with sport psychology may have just started here given his recollection of events:

“I was just out to do what I always did –play my best to try to win, but this guy was just shaking. He couldn’t move; he was rooted to the spot! He’d clearly played alright to get through the rounds to the final but just froze on the day. I didn’t understand it at all.”

Several months later, aged 11, he obtained sponsorship from racquet-maker Prince, who has been loyal to him ever since.



At 13, Williams got his first taste of international squash, playing in two Melbourne tournaments with a 50-strong NZ Junior squad. At this time, Australia was generally the stronger nation and Hong Kong’s representatives also left a favourable impression on the tourists.

By 14, Williams had won the Tawa senior club champs, beating Braddick – by then an A-grader – en route, no mean feat for a still-growing teenager. There was no in-house group of A-grade men and women to whom the band of seven aspired; their drive came from within and success became addictive, all bar one becoming A-graders in time.

He knuckled down to the academics too, achieving near fluency in te Reo Māori at Tawa College, although these skills have since dissipated thanks to years of touring.

By now, the tight band of juniors were in the Wellington development squad and picking up drills to practice back at Tawa from district coach – yes, the district employed a coach – Neville Fyfe. They started to become talked about in the district and Williams remembers them ruining many an opposing interclub team’s night by collecting senior scalps.

“At Upper Hutt one time, my father Graeme walks in with his gear bag and gets greeted warmly by the host team, who were mentally chalking up the win already. The other lads and me emerge from round the corner only to be faced with a volley of “Bloody hell Graeme, we may as well have stayed at home!” and similar sentiments.”

This reception was kind compared to an experience aged 13 at Khandallah, when an adult B-grader addressed him in female anatomical

FEATURE ARTICLE - EVAN WILLIAMS

terms between games. Williams rightfully doubted that it was a term of endearment, confirmed by his shocked mother, Sandrina, when clarification was sought post-match.

Out of adversity

Williams made A-grade at the tender age of 16 – this in the days of a much greater player base and arguably a much higher standard – but at the end of that season suffered a couple of losses that put him back down to B-grade. Losing that coveted status stung, and spurred him on to an intense block of off-season training.

On the back of this stint, in 2006 he won the NZ Junior Open aged 16 (seeded 9th), beating an 18 year old in 5 sets. Winning the North Island champs a few months later and reaching A1 status by June proved that he was the real deal.

His reward was selection as no. 1 in the NZ team for the world junior championships held that year in Palmerston North. “Reward” is Williams’s term, despite it earning him the 19-year old Ramy Ashour as his opponent, then ranked 22 in the world and already a seasoned professional. Oh, and Ashour’s teammates were Tarek Momen and Omar Mosaad. At least Evan made the cut: Mohamed and Marwan el Shorbagy were still works-in-progress and had to make do with the individuals’ event.

What goes on tour

I’ve harangued Williams before about tour life, mainly to extract juicy morsels of gossip, which generally relate to non-Kiwi players, loyal teammate that he is.

Today, however, we focus on figuring out how it works and how to work it. While there was (and is) a convoluted PSA manual on the tournament entry system, structured guidance on the housing, coaching, physio, nutrition, mental health, visa, hotel and travel side of things was conspicuously absent, whether from the PSA or from Squash NZ. *Work it out for yourself using whatever connections you can pick up* appears to

have been the mantra of the day.



He credits former NZ international Martin Knight of Kāpiti as being the closest thing to a tour concierge, whose attention to detail – in writing pages of instructions at times – appears to have been on a par with that of Williams. We muse only half-jokingly as to whether there’s a business consulting opportunity here, to give systematic, informed advice to emerging players on how to give the pro life their best shot.

Armed with racquet skills, tenacity and the encouragement of Anthony Ricketts and Paul Hornsby, both NZ national coaches at different times, Williams threw himself into full-time training and competing aged 21. Through the connections he forged, he managed training blocks of varying lengths in Yorkshire and mini-tours of PSA tournaments in its North American, Australian and New Zealand swings.

FEATURE ARTICLE - EVAN WILLIAMS

Flying solo

As has been the case during the most recent 3 years in New Zealand, during which he has found serial PSA success, Williams estimates that 95% of his training has been done solo. I remark that it must be rare to sustain a respectable world ranking without a training group of similarly driven athletes, which he acknowledges but, displaying remarkable self-awareness, distinguishes himself from the crowd:

“I know what I need to do and I’m good with being solitary. I’m accountable to myself and demand the best of myself. I don’t need others to spark me into performing high quality training routines. No one, not even Matt [Green, his coach and close friend] really knows how hard I train, what time I get out of bed for various elements of it or how long I stay on court or in the gym after my clients are gone.”



Down but not out

The mood darkens when we discuss the adversity that has overshadowed his adult career. In 2013 he was in the form of his life, reaching 79 in the PSA world rankings including a straight sets victory over Martin Knight, then ranked 49, in a PSA Challenger event in

Invercargill. Disaster struck when his wrist snapped during a practice hit in Perth before another tournament.

“I knew it was serious when I couldn’t even turn the door handle to get into my hotel room.”

18 months’ inactivity – including a delay to surgery on poor initial advice – followed. Williams emerged from the successful surgery and 6 months of rehab eager and determined to reach his previous heights once again. Bewilderment, to put it at its most generous, characterises his response to Squash NZ’s refusal to provide campaign funding for a short tour of Australian PSA events to kick-start that process.

The lack of alternative prospects for international success at that time (besides Coll and Campbell Grayson, already part of the fold), provided fertile ground for conspiracy theories around selector and funder biases, theories still operative today.



FEATURE ARTICLE - EVAN WILLIAMS

The jettisoning of an athlete who had, pre-injury, demonstrated the work ethic and results arguably capable of supporting a top 50 ranking felt callous.

While it would have broken many, Williams persevered, albeit venturing into coaching to support his ambitions.



I've been to Hollywood, I've been to Redwood

To many newbies on the scene, Williams is primarily known as a coach, whether it's through giving private lessons for his coaching business, as lead coach for Squash Wellington development squads and representative teams or the recipient of coaching awards. This seems unlikely given his start in coaching:

"I was an assistant to Nick Mita, the district coach, in the Squash Wellington school programme that ran across the district, in Upper Hutt, Redwood in Tawa, Wainui, you name it. I hated the experience of trying to enthuse kids who had no interest in being there. Even now I much prefer helping people who already have that desire to improve. It's not that I don't like engaging with people; actually I really enjoy figuring out how to get the best out of people and it's a privilege people sharing their aspirations and fears with me. But I'm a quiet person who isn't particularly good with screaming kids. Matt Green, though, he loves that..."

Chips on both shoulders

Williams comes across as brooding and I'm concerned that he'll be haunted by resentment at retirement not being entirely on his terms. I worry that he'll struggle to move on to a life in which he can cherish his successes and appreciate his own worth, free from the slights of selectors or sports administrators, real or perceived.

"Not at all; I've been transitioning more towards coaching for the last two years anyway. I do look back and wish I'd been able to enjoy the successes a bit better. I remember winning my first PSA tournament [Waikato Open, 2015, beating Lance Beddoes] and immediately criticising myself for having played too many cross-courts. That title was a really important milestone, but I was too quick to think about the next tournament rather than enjoying it."

Hindsight's a wonderful thing, but the mentality of not wanting to rest on one's

FEATURE ARTICLE - EVAN WILLIAMS

laurels is a hallmark of a high performance mindset, explaining how keenly he and other athletes have been affected by knockbacks from “the system” on which they depend.

Tellingly, despite “wellbeing” being the buzzword of the high performance system these days, Williams reveals that while having been a carded athlete at times, an invitation to a sports psychology session has never come his way.

These days he gets his dose of wellbeing and fun from socialising (“which I generally keep separate from squash although I’m certainly up for a beer and catch-up with squash mates at tournaments”) and playing competitive poker at various seedy venues in the lower North Island. He enjoys the anonymity of the poker scene and reveals that while he may not be as high a roller as Rob Owen, Paul Coll’s coach, his mastery over the chips kept him afloat during the lengthy injury layoff.

Back to the successes, he does acknowledge his talent and achievements – both the volume of titles and the sustained period of dominance – and relishes his parents proudly suiting up in his New Zealand rep attire on the district’s bowling greens.

Haere rā, for now

It’s hard to imagine watching a livestream of a NZ PSA tournament without hearing polite enquiries being made of the referee by the twin forces of Evan and fervent supporter and cousin, Aaron. It’s even harder to imagine Wellington producing a champion of such distinction and longevity any time soon, unless it’s the masters’ version of the man, whose debut is only two years away.

Farewell and thanks cuddie; you’ll be missed.



E Evan, he tauwhāinga pono koe, a, kua tohu i a koe, to rohe me to whenua i runga i te hōnore. Kua mauria mai e koe te ahuareka me te whakapehapeha ki to iwi, ki to whānau me to takiwā. E oha atu ana mātau ki a koe.

Most memorable matches

Win v Rex Hedrick (AUS) at SquashXL, Auckland, 2019:

“It was the only time I even got close to beating him yet was a comprehensive win! On a cold, dead glass court, with a free arm willing to strike and my cuddie vocal in support, what could go wrong?”

Loss, for NZ in World Men’s Team Championship quarter-final v Daryl Selby (ENG) in Washington DC, USA, 2019:

“A whirlwind. Nothing to lose against one of the all-time greats. Almost going 2/0 up and having it broadcast on Squash TV was amazing. The bittersweet feeling after was immense. Just played the match of my life and didn’t win. That’s sport for you! I knew that match was big when Matt Green admitted he wanted me to win, even against his beloved England!”

EVAN WILLIAMS - HONOURS

JUNIORS (1999 - 2008)

Titles

National Age-Group Championships

U11 1999

U13 2000

U15 2003

U17 2005

U19 2007

New Zealand Junior Open
2006

North Island Junior Age-Group Championships

U11 2000

U13 2002

U15 2004

U19 2006, 2008

National Junior Inter-District Team Championship
(for Wellington)
2001, 2002, 2006

New Zealand Representation

World Junior Team Championships

2006: Palmerston North, NZ (no. 1 string)

2008: Zurich, Switzerland (no. 1 string)

NZ Secondary Schools Team
2005, 2006, 2007

Squash NZ National Awards

Most improved Junior 2006

SENIORS (2009 - 2022)

Titles

New Zealand National Championship
2020

Professional Squash Association tournaments
2015: Waikato, South Australia
2016: Waikato, Shepparton
2019: Southland

2021: Henderson, Waikato, Panmure, Auckland

National Senior Inter-District Team Championship
(for Wellington)
2004, 2007, 2008 (as junior)
2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2017 (as senior)

Senior Club Champion
2004 - 2008 (as junior)
2009-2016 (as senior)

New Zealand Representation

World Team Championships

2011: Paderborn, Germany

2013: Mulhouse, France

2015: Egypt (cancelled owing to civil unrest)

2017: Marseille, France

2019: Washington DC, USA

2021 Malaysia (cancelled owing to Covid)

Commonwealth Games

2018: Gold Coast, Australia (singles and doubles)

World Team Doubles

2018 Manchester, UK

2022 Glasgow, UK

Squash NZ National Awards

Most improved Player 2006, 2007, 2011

Personality of the Year 2020

Development Coach of the Year 2021



PARTICIPATION

SUPERCHAMPS

The lead up to this year's competition had everyone on edge. With another wave of Covid and the cold/flu in full swing, there were changes coming at us, right up until the first game! Once it started teams continued to manoeuvre their players just to field a team.

As per usual there were upsets across most grades, one in particular at C grade in the first round with the #10 seed (so last) taking a win over the #3 seeds. Big news at Khandallah! Meanwhile, over at Upper Hutt you could be forgiven for thinking at times that you were watching a dodgeball match. Love the enthusiasm, desperate to keep that rally going, bodies on the line and maybe a couple of Joelle moments, you know, the one where Allison Waters almost hit that ball for it to never return? #closecall.

Overall though, what a weekend! Despite the run of illnesses leading up to the event, it was another great year. Even more so, super exciting to see so many new players get a taste of their first Superchamps. To those players, congratulations. We do hope you had a blast and are ready to take off next year!

A big thanks to all the playing teams and managers for the awesome effort over the weekend, in particular your flexibility with changes to allow everyone to participate.

A huge congratulations to the all the winners who will be heading off to their respective Nationals in September.

B Grade:

Women: Tawa

Men: Thorndon

C Grade:

Women: Thorndon

Men: Upper Hutt

D Grade:

Women: Kapiti

Men: Thorndon

E Grade:

Women: Martinborough

Men: Mana

Thank you to our host clubs and their members for looking after the players and supporters over the weekend. Countless burger patties flipped, hot chips fried, and delicious homemade treats inhaled.

The amount of work that goes into running this event doesn't just happen on the weekend. It begins weeks before and this year had added complexities of multiple team and draw changes due to illness. These are the people who arrive well before the first tie begins and leave well after the last tie has ended.

A massive thanks to Chris Sinclair - Tawa, Radar Galliers - Wainuiomata, Heather McClean - Khandallah, Brett Simon - Upper Hutt and all your awesome team of helpers!



PARTICIPATION

SKILLSOFT MASTER OF MASTERS SERIES

The final round of the series was held on the 19th-21st August at Kapiti Squash Club. Despite the low turnout, likely due to the Hemi Rangi Doubles and the Taranaki Open being on the same weekend, it was great to have the event continue, nonetheless.

Thanks to Hayden Lloyd and the team at Kapiti Squash Club for putting on a great tournament.

As this was the final round of the series it came down to this tournament and there was a photo finish in the men's! We crowned 2 new champions and settled on the top five placegetters.

Women's Champion

A big congratulations to Jeanne Yells from Khandallah. Having entered all the Masters tournaments and winning all of her games, Jeanne clocked up the maximum 75 points!

Runner up was Alissha Canning of Hutt City followed closely by fellow club mate Michelle Burns in 3rd.

Mens Champion

Heading into the final round, there was a tie for 1st place between Gary Aukett and Matt Leahy, and at the completion of the tournament they were still tied (57 points). This meant the winner was decided by countback and with Gary having won 10 games over Matt's 6, congratulations going to Gary Aukett from Hutt City.

Runner up Matt Leahy followed by Terry Hession of Hutt City coming in 3rd!

Join us at the Wellington Awards night to award the champions green jackets and prizemoney (1st to 5th).

A massive thank you to Kath and Skillsoft for their continued support of Masters squash and this seasons MoM series!

skillsoft

2022 Wellington Masters Representative Team

Congratulations

...to the following players on their selection to represent Wellington at the Masters Inter-District Championship event.

Alissha Canning (Debut) - Hutt City
Lee-Ann Du Toit (Debut) - Thorndon
Cheryl Sullivan (Debut) - Island Bay
Jeanne Yells - Khandallah
Leanne Dawson (Debut) - Hutt City
Margaret Harlen (Debut) - Tawa

Tim Seymour - Kapiti
Gary Aukett (Debut) - Hutt City
Matt Green - Tawa
Evan Michelson (Debut) - Island Bay
Alf Izzett (Debut) - Hutt City
Geordie Grieve - Tawa

Team Coach: Matt Green
Team Manager: Bryan Smith

The team will compete in the individuals' competition between 9-11 September and then in the Teams event from 12-13 September.

Bryan Smith
Masters Convenor



PARTICIPATION

Women's HEAD800 Final @ Khandallah

Following the Upper Hutt and Otaki rounds, the final series was held at Khandallah on Sunday 14 August.

Congratulations to the series winner **Natasha Dowse** from **Mana**.

Other placings:

Runner Up – Alison McCabe from Tawa

3rd: Manami Miyuki from Club Kelburn.

This series continues to provide a great platform for beginners, and every year we see new faces come through. It is even better when we see players move into interclub and the club tournament circuit, which is often the case.

Our thanks to all the amazing players who have taken part in the series, and all our fabulous host clubs and the teams of volunteers who get behind the day.

Our biggest thanks go out to our sponsor @sportcoltd for their continued support of this event through the awesome @headsquash_official merchandise.

Check out the grins of some of those that walked away with flash new kit.

If your club would like to host a tournament next season, reach out to Russell at admin@squashwellington.org.nz.

*Thank
you!*



Natasha [R] pictured with Tracy from Khandallah with her spoils



Runner Up Alison with Tracy



3rd place, Manami and Tracy

PARTICIPATION

New Zealand Masters Team event

Formerly known as the AD Long cup, the NZ Masters team event was recently held in Hawkes Bay.

This is the 23rd year of the event and, in that time, only two Wellington clubs have managed to get their name etched on the trophy, Mitchell Park (2012 & 2013) and then Kapiti (2018 & 2019). There have definitely been some hard-fought challenges from other Wellington clubs over the years, this year being no different with Tawa Squash entering three teams. The A team or Team 1, according to the registrations, got so close. So close in fact that the winner was decided by countback after a 2/2 tie in the championship final. Unfortunately, it was not to be this year but there is no doubt they will be giving it another crack next year.

This competition is open to all clubs so be sure to look out for the call next year, grab some mates and make a weekend of it. Teams can be all male, all female or a mix but you'll need to get in early as it is always oversubscribed!



Runner Up - Team Tawa

L-R Matt Green, Damon Winter, Sam Atkins, Andrew Smith



L-R Tim Seymour, Geordie Grieves, Aaron Havill
Front - Boom Boom Richie Hoare



L-R Matt Leahy, Bryan Smith, Chris Appleby, Richard Creasey



Sam Atkins no doubt wooing the crowd!

COMPETITIONS

WELLINGTON JUNIOR OPEN

Congratulations to this year's Wellington Open Junior Champions, Molly Hawkins of Hutt City Squash and Ben Jones of Red Star Squash. Both players faced the number one seeds in their division in equally thrilling matches. Ben Jones caused upsets throughout the weekend from 8th seed to take his maiden Wellington Junior title.

This is also Molly's first Wellington Junior Open title!

Congratulations to you both!

Our thanks to Hayden Lloyd and the Kāpiti team for hosting the event this year. Despite the multiple changes leading up to and during the weekend, it was great to be able to continue with the event.



NZ SENIOR INTER-DISTRICTS TEAM CHAMPIONSHIP

Good luck to our Men's and Women's teams who will be playing in Auckland over the next few days to compete in the Senior Inter-District Team Championship.

Both teams will face some pretty tough competition which will make for one thrilling weekend.

Our Women's team will kick off the campaign on Friday at midday. Seeded 5th they take on Northland (4) in the first round. Round two for our team will start at 6pm against either Central (8) or Auckland (1).

As for our Men's team, who are seeded 2nd behind Auckland, they spin racquets on Friday at 3pm against Waikato (7) with their 2nd round scheduled for 9am Saturday morning.

You'll be able to follow the team's progress via our social media platforms, Facebook and Instagram.

Good luck everyone! Go well, play hard and have fun! Go Black'n'yella!



COMING UP

Thorndon Open

HEAD 9HUNDY at Mana Squash

Tawa Squash 4th Court Opening

Open to the public from midday

Club Kelburn B & Below

Mana B & Below (waitlist only)

Upper Hutt C Grade Men Fundraiser

Check out Squash@Upper Hutt Facebook for more details - \$20 per person

Wainuiomata Quiz Night Fundraiser for Junior Programme

Email woasquash@gmail.com; \$50 per team (4-6 per team)

Masterton Doubles

26 August

28 August

28 August

01 September

08 September

10 September

24 September

30 September

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CAPTION THAT!



This bunch looks pretty proud of itself. Is it the Tawa seconds at the AD Long Cup the other week? Give us a caption (or identify these reprobates) by emailing admin@squashwellington.org.nz

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SQUASH WELLINGTON

2022 AWARDS

Friday Oct 14
Mana Squash Club
Ngati Toa Domain
Doors open: 5:30 PM
Dinner served: 6:30 PM
Awards commence: 7:00 PM

**JOIN US TO AWARD
VOLUNTEER, CLUB,
PLAYER OF THE YEAR
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\$30 per person

**RSVP by 5pm Monday 3rd October
to Russell Henderson at
admin@squashwellington.org.nz**