

Let's hear it for the local heroes



## **Peter Doohan, right, after he defeated Boris Becker in 1987**

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You wonder sometimes whether the local heroes realise the lifelong impact they make on all the snotty-nosed little kids who are looking up at their faces as if they are seeing fireworks burst across a sky for the first time.

You wonder whether the local heroes understand the example they set when they conquer the world and then come back to their local club as living proof that anyone with a big enough heart and a large enough dream can make it all come true from an identical starting point.

You wonder whether Peter Doohan had an inkling of how much a town like Newcastle was buoyed when he knocked Boris Becker out of Wimbledon in 1987 and how he did it.

There was no grandstanding and no histrionics when Doohan just went out there and did at The All England Club what Novocastrians do best, just having a bit of a crack without much fuss and bother and seeing what comes of it.

Doohan did not blink when someone more accustomed to the bright lights tried to monster him.

He just did what he had always done from day one at District Park in the Newcastle suburb of Broadmeadow, served-and-volleyed his way to victory with the immovable demeanour and physical presence of a BHP smoke stack.

It was surprising and not surprising to the kids who had grown up watching Doohan, who was eight years older than me, hitting balls on the synthetic grass courts of Distro. It feels like yesterday.

Newcastle's complex of 30-plus courts was full to overflowing every Saturday for the arvo comp, and every Sunday for the district titles. There would be times you simply could not get a court in what memory now serves up as heady days for tennis.

On more recent visits home, Distro has resembled a ghost town — the front bank of courts used to be the jewel in the crown. I still have dreams about playing there when the grandstand would be packed for the better local matches. The last time I saw them, those courts were in ruin. And if they're only inhabited now by ghosts, Doohan is among them after one of the more humble and likeable souls in world tennis passed away on Saturday at the age of 56 from motor neurone disease.

I was one of those snotty-nosed little kids who used to watch Doohan — a professional tennis player — rushing the net with a game that was forged on and ideally suited to Distro. They were more like glass than grass.

When he heavily sliced his serve and covered the net like a warm blanket, he appeared unbeatable. He certainly was in Newcastle. You wondered how anyone, anywhere in the world on the professional tour, could get the better of him. If you thought Wimbledon used to be quick, you should have seen those artificial-grass front courts at Distro.

Thirty years ago, he beat Becker in four sets and put his hands to his head in beautiful disbelief.

No chest-thumping. No showmanship. Just the courage of having attacked the most attacking player in the tournament.

Not all the snotty-nosed little kids back home could serve-volley as crisply as him, as much as we had tried.

It was difficult to rush the net when you could barely see over it. But Doohan's win struck a chord. You could go from Distro to Wimbledon. No one had to play at Broadmeadow forever. Mark Richards was the same to us Novocastrians. The world surfing champion would return from conquering Hawaii's Sunset Beach and we would gawk at him when he jumped off the pool to surf the break called Ladies in the Newcastle suburb of Merewether. Unforgettable.

Dutchy Holland was the same. He played grade cricket in Newcastle after his Test appearances and again, he just seemed like such a decent man that it made you think you did not have to be larger than life to succeed in a sporting life.

Every professional athlete has a home town. Every AFL player. Every NRL player. Every Socceroo. Every unemployed Test cricketer. Every Olympian.

If they're from a major city, they have a home park. They should never forget what sort of power they have to keep their sports alive and give an inspirational kick up the backside to all the young 'uns trying to emulate them right now. Wherever these successful athletes started, wherever they grew up, they should get back there and tell impressionable teens how they did it. The effect will be profound.

Elite sportsmen and women can appear as untouchable as Hollywood movie stars because we mostly only see them on our screens. When one turns up and says he lived just up the road and had a hit or swam laps or swung a club or bowled quick in this very spot, everything changes to young minds. Everything becomes possible. A path emerges because someone has already walked it. The local hero.

Richards still surfs at Merewether. His humility is profound. I saw him catching waves at Ladies a couple of months ago. He was wearing a floppy hat. I'm aged 47, yet still overawed by him. I mumbled something about the waves being good. "If I can catch one!" he laughed. MR saw himself as nothing special. Which was endearingly special.

Newcastle itself is like that. Doohan was like that. He twice won the junior boys' title in Newcastle. To every other junior champ — look where that can lead.

His passing has triggered an outpouring of emotion in the tennis world. This was a six-foot-four giant, and a gentle one at that. Reputations don't matter? In the long run, they do.

I'm not sure if the main court at District Park has a name but there's a prime candidate for an honorary mention now. The Peter Doohan Court.

That'd be suitably low-key and powerful. Serve-and-volley may have died. Doohan has died. Has tennis in Newcastle died?

But the memories of men like him deserve to be preserved on the stamping grounds where they originally made their marks. Because one thing will never die: the existence of snotty-nosed little kids needing someone to look up to.

Becker's loss to Doohan 30 years ago was hardly the only shock defeat in his career.

But something about it always touched him: the sheer old-fashioned decency of the conqueror with the clunky old Prince Pro racquet.

Becker wrote a perfectly understated tribute yesterday: "RIP mate! You were the better player."