

Paul McNamee

**finding
the right
space**

PHOTOS: JAMES LAURITZ

Paul McNamee's success as an administrator reflects beliefs which the former Wimbledon doubles champion applies to all aspects of his life. Kate Johnston discovers why this passionate and thoughtful man feels just fine about the decision to work part-time at this stage of his life.

When Paul McNamee was building his tennis career, he read books on everything from Zen to right-wing ideology. He took this willingness to listen to sometimes diametrically opposed ideas into his work as CEO of Tennis Australia and now Executive Chairman of Golf Australia, forming a belief system around how to achieve goals. And he's done it in a strikingly individual way. The man has incredible energy, he has business and people skills – and he also has that often elusive quality to which many aspire – leadership.

“If you know what you want to be and if you share that vision of the future, then everyone in the organisation knows how to behave,” says Paul. “I think at work you've got to feel really, really deeply that you know where it's heading. Obviously each day needs to be well-structured. But if you're not really sure what the bigger goals are, that can lead to problems. It's unfair if everyone's got a different view of what you're really trying to achieve.”

This ability to keep “one eye on the ball and one on the summit” was the key to Paul's successful reign at the Australian Tennis Open. It gave the organisation a fundamental identity from which all employees could take direction. “With the tennis we were really committed to engagement with Asia, really stamping our mark on, and being a good citizen in, that region.

“So if you want to be in a leadership position, to play an ambassadorial role in the region, to be big in the region, then you have to behave ambassadorially and behave big. If you do, there will be a change of perception

I don't mind people who rock the boat a bit. You need that creative energy, that creative tension.

and then the reality will change. But even before behaviour has to come a sense of how one should behave based on where you want to be. For instance, if you want to go to Asia, then how you deal with Asia and the people you employ to deal with it have to be very ‘in sync’ with Asian business culture.”

Though Paul is savvy with numbers, (he has a degree in statistics), it's clear he's not your typical businessman. “I do think the bottom line matters,” he says. “Some CEOs are too people-oriented and some get there because they're really nice and don't upset anybody but they're not necessarily going to take the organisation forward. I don't mind people who rock the boat a bit. You need that creative energy, that creative tension. You've got to have some people who make you think about your strategies and where you're going. It's such a healthy thing. If everyone is either thinking the same way or afraid to have a different view, that's the beginning of the end.”

Some may have thought it was the beginning of the end for Paul when he turned down the biggest job in Australian sport, head of the Football Federation of Australia (FFA). He had

left the Tennis Open to work with Golf Australia in a part-time position as Executive Chairman, and came “this close” to accepting the soccer job, a job he and everyone around him had thought was the obvious next challenge.

“Everything was heading that way,” says Paul. “But I said no. It would have been going from the fireplace to the oven, so to speak. Also, when I walked out of there I realised something wasn't right: I wasn't excited enough. I'd wanted to stay on with the golf in some capacity and the FFA didn't really get that I needed to protect Golf Australia from perceptions that I would be abandoning it. After all, I'd been hired to ‘save’ golf. Soccer is a great sport and I'd like to be involved with it at some point but now's not the right time.”

Although he has not looked back since trusting this gut feeling, working part-time has proved an interesting transition. But Paul approached the adjustment using the kind of philosophical framework and creative mindset through which he's always discovered what's best – whether for him personally or for an organisation.

“Going part-time is a massive change,” he says. “But it's better for me at this point – for my health and stress levels. It also sits better with where I'm at now as a 52-year-old. What I've learnt is that you want to sit in harmony with the different phases of your life. Surely by this age you have some wisdom to impart, some skills to do that, and the ability to let go and allow motivated and talented younger people to do the managing.

“Now my role is to add value. The value of baby boomers is going to become very

important in the work force. We've got fewer young people now. Organisations are going to need extra resources and the greatest resource will be the baby boomers – but not full-time. It's the wrong dynamic."

"If I didn't fully understand that at first it was because I almost felt guilty about admitting I was part-time," he continues. "People assumed I'd gone from full-on tennis to full-on golf, but I'd moved to a three-day week. It gives me the space to breathe. I recently spoke to another guy who was sharing the view that it's difficult being part-time; you end up doing more – out of habit and because

Surely by this age you have some wisdom to impart, some skills to do that, and the ability to let go and allow motivated and talented younger people to do the managing.

there's stuff to do. Then I realised the only way I could manage this was to designate the days – Monday, Tuesday, Thursday. I'm strict with that and it's worked. I fundamentally believe that part-time is right for me and now I'm proud of it."

Of course, his family was also a consideration. Paul is father to 11-year-old Rowan and, as is common these days, he's somewhat of an older father. "Yeah, I was on the [tennis] circuit for a long time!" he laughs. "The circuit's a difficult place for a family – I got married after I retired. I recognise that these years with my son are really valuable, because by the time Rowan's 14, Dad's not going to be cool."

Atmosphere counts

Paul's wife Leslie runs a feng shui and yoga business in Melbourne called 'Wind and Water', and Paul believes creating good energy and a positive environment is one of the keys to improving any event or business.

"Success flows from an environment," he says. "You go to one sporting event and there's a good atmosphere and it's exciting – there's a lot of energy around it. You go to another and you can't put your finger on it, but for some reason, it's flat. That's what feng shui is about – the feeling you get when you go into a space. Why does it feel good? A positive vibe is intoxicating and seductive – and creating and managing that is the key."

Paul's own energy is contagious. Perhaps it's been handed down from his mum, who is still going strong at eighty-five. "I came from a rock-solid family," he says. "My mum and dad were still holding hands after 60 years. Mum comes to the races when [Paul's racehorse] El Segundo runs. When I went to Birdwood for the Hopman Cup I took her to the casino to show her how to play craps, but the craps table was closed. So I said, 'Mum, have you ever played roulette before?' She said 'No'. She's always played one-cent pokies. So we played roulette together.

"Mum's lucky enough still to be living at home. My son's so close to her; it's great to see that bond. She still comes over and babysits sometimes. Rowan also helps look after mum. I remember when I was seven or eight my grandfather would come and stay – he'd had seven kids and he'd move around from one to the other. Now families are smaller, my son's the only child. Hopefully we won't be a burden on him."

Whatever the future brings for Paul and his family, whatever new goals he sets, one senses that the interesting balance he finds through keeping both an open and yet focused mind will help him make the most of each new life stage. "I think there is an uncertainty with being in this age group," he says. "There are no givens because you're almost formally past the employment age. But I think there's less to fear about that now than there was in previous generations.

"I'm not afraid of moving on to something different, maybe outside of sport. It's not what you do, it's how you do it. You don't know what's down the road but things have a way of popping up. The key is to just deal with the space you're in now and try and make that a better space." **YL**

