

The affable Suzanne McFadden

Eleven years ago, sports writer Suzanne McFadden wrote a story on young gymnast BELINDA MOORE. She was horrified at the headline. Now the gymnast has turned journalist and is out to exact some writing revenge.



A kindly neighbour has left a bowl of stewed apple on Suzanne McFadden's doorstep and, being the resourceful type, she has used it to bake some muffins.

"We can be the guinea pigs," she says, pulling the muffins from the oven.

"That's the beauty of living in a village," says McFadden, profiler extraordinaire and Whenuapai Village dweller.

I am impressed when she brings the muffin wrapper up to her mouth to try and eat the stuck bits – and then stops herself. She realises I am doing what she has done so well her whole career: observing and writing about personal tidbits to expose to the world later on.

I'm trying to find signs of a sharp, nose-to-the-ground journalist type, but McFadden is all soft edges and mumsy.

She's the kind of relaxing person you just want to curl up on the sofa with, for a chat and a cup of tea. This is exactly what we're doing.

I wonder if the fact we take our tea the same – white, no sugar – and share a passion for being female sports journalists could be a sign I might be destined to be half as successful as her.

I'm also trying to recall our encounter 11 years ago, when she was a *New Zealand Herald* sports reporter and I was a representative gymnast and the subject of one of her stories.

I clearly remember the headline blaring from the front page of the sports section: "Belinda wins battle of the bulge." A huge colour photo had me wearing nothing but a leotard.

That headline was not the best thing for an insecure 16-year-old with serious eating hang-ups.

I seize my opportunity and confront McFadden about it.

She looks mortified the 16-year-old she interviewed back then is now a grown-up journalist, back to exact revenge.

In her defence, she claims she didn't write the headline, and I believe her.

The list of McFadden's journalistic triumphs is long. It includes two Round the World campaigns, three America's Cups and two Olympics spent

covering yachting.

She has two Qantas Media Awards for Sports Feature Writer of the Year and was a finalist in the Writer of the Year category. She's had stories published in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and *USA Today*.

Husband Eugene Bingham – they met while both were reporters at the *New Zealand Herald* and were married in a cave at Tawharanui – says his wife's ability to tell "the people stories" is what makes her such a successful writer.

You may think he is biased but it is a refrain that comes up again and again when people talk about McFadden.

Her ability to take the lives of athletes, who, let's face it, can be a wee bit boring at times, and find their hidden, personable sides, is unrivalled in New Zealand sports journalism.

McFadden always wanted to be a sports writer. Her parents never had any boys so she became her father's "surrogate son".

Growing up in Wellsford, she played cricket and hockey at Rodney High School.

She played netball once at school, skinned her knee and thought, "To hell with that sport".

Yet something must have stuck because she has covered netball for the last 21 years. She will head the official media website for the World Netball Championships in Auckland in November.

As a young reporter straight out of a six-month journalism crash-course at the then Auckland Institute of Technology, McFadden thought she had secured a job at the *Herald* when the chief reporter asked her to "come in".

It was a mix-up, she didn't get a job and was advised to come back in six months.

"I cried all the way home on the bus."

Instead, she had a stint at the *Bay of Plenty Times* which, McFadden says, gave her a wealth of reporting opportunities.

She did end up back at the *Herald* but initially not in sports.

She spent six months doing the court round (the scourge of any new reporter) until her life was threatened by a criminal who probably didn't like what McFadden was writing about him.

This is all very hard to believe because

the woman sitting opposite me is so wholesome I can't imagine her writing anything remotely nasty.

"He came in the next day and grabbed me and said 'I'm going to kill you'," she recalls matter-of-factly.

At that point it was time to demand a round change. Suzanne got her wish and was moved to sport.

Try to dig around to get a feel for what it was like being the only female in the *Herald's* sports department.

McFadden says she never really noticed any overt sexism. It never occurred to her she would be treated differently because she was a woman.

She's diplomatic in her answer and probably trying to keep valuable contacts on her side.

After all she never really got to cover traditionally men's sports even though she remembers being "pretty in love with rugby and cricket".

Fiona Rotherham, editor of *Unlimited* magazine and McFadden's cousin, says McFadden was able to fit in with the *Herald* boys without being one of them.

But she thinks McFadden was frustrated she didn't get to cover rugby.

Says Rotherham: "Why can't women write about rugby? It's just ridiculous."

But being assigned to yachting – "a sport I knew nothing about" – was a great break for McFadden. Her yachting coverage gained international recognition and helped cement her reputation as a writer.

McFadden is not one for keeping records of her writing triumphs. She ferrets in her linen cupboard – "Please excuse the mess" – for the only newspaper clippings book she has. She has kept it from her first America's Cup in 1995 but can't find it.

Her kids' knick-knacks fall out as she rummages around the shelves. The cupboard illustrates who McFadden essentially is: a mother first, a journalist second.

The order the roles take is almost imperceptible to an outsider because she does each so well.

Marc, McFadden's eldest child from a previous relationship, is 16 and has grown up with his mother's career. McFadden

juggled her work as a solo mum for the first 10 years of Marc's life.

When she resigned from the *Herald* after 11 years to become a freelance writer, she was pregnant with Kieran, now five, within a week.

That's when McFadden's endometriosis first appeared. Endometriosis is a potentially crippling disease of the womb. For some women it can be a stronger-than-normal period pain. For others, like McFadden, it is more debilitating.

"There are days when I can't get out of bed. But I try not to let it affect my work."

McFadden has had four major operations in the past two years and says she manages two "good weeks" out of four.

Hearing this, I hope she is on a "good week" and not secretly wanting to creep away from this interview, grab a hot water bottle and have a lie down.

But no, she's up and about, taking washing off the line and showing me family photos which adorn the walls.

Dan falls out of the office. Dan who? Dan Carter of course, though not the real one – he's pretty busy in France right now – but a life-size cardboard cut-out. Not in his Jockey underpants either I note, rather disappointed.

"Oh yes that's Dan," McFadden says, rather obviously. Is it normal for sports writers to have cardboard cut-outs of the people they write about?

As it turns out, it's one of those friend-owns-a-printing-company kind-of stories.

Out comes McFadden's rip-snorter of a laugh, very deep and very loud, as she tells me how sometimes when she's outside walking past her office window late at night, she sees Dan propped up against the wall and mistakenly thinks there's a man in the house.

McFadden says she just wants to make people happy with her writing.

"I feel guilty that what I'm doing is not really helping, but maybe it is just in different ways."

And with that she's off, with just enough time to fetch Kieran from the school bus before she tries to track down the mystery villager whose empty stewed-apple bowl she has.