

ADVANTAGE LLOYD

FEW of his fans would have guessed it, but when former British tennis number one John Lloyd was at his peak on court, he was suffering from a serious health problem. Here he tells GRAEME WHITCROFT about the stomach pains that brought him misery for over 20 years. John, 51, now lives in Los Angeles with his wife Deborah, 51, and children Aiden, 17, and Hayley, 15, and this month was made captain of the Great Britain Davis Cup team.

AS I LAY on the bed in a Florida clinic with the pain from yet another stomach spasm washing over me, I couldn't help but feel extremely low. Here I was, at just 27, supposedly at the peak of my fitness and my career as a tennis player, yet I was in agony from stomach cramps almost every day.

In some ways I had been lucky. The pain hadn't stopped me from reaching the Australian Open final four years earlier, nor getting as high as number 21 in the world rankings.

Funnily enough, I can't ever remember any stomach pain during a game. I have this theory that during the actual match, the body's natural adrenaline kicks in and your system shuts out any pain. So I was fine on court — but off court, the pain was wrecking my life.

For as long as I can remember I've had a dodgy stomach — what's known as an English tummy. That meant that whenever I travelled abroad, I would have mild stomach pains and cramps.

But over the years those pains had gradually got worse and by my mid-20s the cramps had become crippling spasms of sharp, shooting pain that felt as if someone had a knife and was twisting it in my stomach.

It was not uncommon to suffer the attacks on a daily basis. Sometimes they weren't so bad — just mild tenderness in my gut or a feeling of being bloated — but other times it was full-on cramps that left me bent over double.

My friends got used to me moaning about it, but my then wife, the world number one women's player, Chris Evert, used to worry like mad and nag me to do something about it. It wasn't much fun for Chris, either. We could be at the cinema or in a restaurant and I would have an attack and all I wanted to do was go home and lie on my bed.

Despite the pain and the misery, I had done absolutely nothing about the problem — which is typical of a man. I hadn't even seen a doctor. But, in my defence, this was years before conditions such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome and colitis were common knowledge.

BY MY late 20s, the attacks were becoming so frequent and so intense that Chris finally insisted I be checked out properly. At the time we were living in Florida, so I booked myself into a specialist stomach clinic.

For two days, I was poked and prodded and had tests to see if I had a blockage. I had an X-ray and remember having to drink this absolutely vile milky substance beforehand and valiantly trying not to be sick.

But when the results came back they were all negative, with absolutely no sign of any irritation or blockage. According to all the tests, there was nothing physically

Agonising stomach spasms plagued my career for 20 years. Now I've finally found a cure

wrong with me. One of the doctors asked me if I had considered that the problem was all in my mind. Believe me, I was so desperate that I hadn't ruled it out.

Another doctor said it could be stress related and I thought this did make more sense. After my Australian Open final appearance and marriage to Chris Evert in 1979, it was getting to be increasingly difficult to have a private life.

However much I suspected stress, I still didn't have a proper diagnosis and that was quite deflating. But I picked myself up and carried on. I was determined that, if it was at all possible, I would cure it myself.

First of all I had some allergy tests, but they were inconclusive. In fact, they showed that I was allergic to foods I didn't even eat!

So then I started to do my own food management — which was difficult because I already had a pretty healthy diet. I was in good physical shape and I obviously didn't smoke or drink much alcohol.

I knew that spicy foods didn't really agree with me, but I didn't eat enough of them to be a problem. I thought that maybe I was eating too much cereal, so I cut it out for a few weeks but nothing

happened. And I tried the same with pasta to see if that would make any difference, but it didn't.

Then I moved on to salads. Again nothing. I did the same with spinach and green vegetables, but the pains continued. In the end I went back to self-managing the pain by taking indigestion tablets — and the stronger the better.

I retired from professional tennis in 1984 when I was 30 and my marriage to Chris ended three years later. I took a few years off and did some coaching before going on to the men's senior tour in 1989.

The stomach problem wasn't as bad on the senior tour, but it still

Pain-free: Tennis star John Lloyd says that he has never felt better

reared its head far too often for comfort. Then, without warning in 1995, it got really bad again.

This time medical science had moved on and I had an endoscopy examination — a camera passed down into my stomach via a tube — but again the test was negative.

This was my lowest point, but just as I felt I was stuck with this condition for the rest of my life, a minor miracle happened. I was at a cocktail party when I heard someone talking about a natural supplement for stomach problems.

To be honest, at first I didn't pay much attention because, although my second wife Deborah is a big believer in alternative remedies, I am a bit sceptical.

But soon after that I heard the same product, Natren's Healthy Trinity, mentioned again, this time on an LA radio talk show. Purely because I liked the radio host, I thought I would give the tablets a go.

The first thing I thought was how expensive they were, but despite that I decided to go ahead and take them. They were basically very good quality probiotics — the good bacteria that keeps the gut functioning efficiently.

I had no idea if they would work, but after

six weeks I realised that my stomach pain was significantly better. From often being a daily problem, it was now a lot less frequent.

A few weeks later and the pain went altogether. A few pain-free days became a week, then ten days and so on. It was amazing.

ON A scale of one to ten, my pain had been a pretty constant seven. Now it was zero. I was pain-free for the first time in years and couldn't quite believe it. I began to look forward to going out for dinner — something I had not been able to enjoy properly for many years.

Not surprisingly, I think probiotics are amazing little things and I make sure that I always have some with me wherever I go. They're my lifeline.

Sure, I still get the odd stomach twinge, but these are easily controlled with one indigestion tablet. Yes — just one, and not the ten a day I used to have.

While the tablets haven't made me seek out other forms of alternative medicine — I still remain fairly cautious about it — it has been an amazing transformation.

I no longer live under the tyranny of pain, and even now, ten years on, I am totally thrilled and thankful about that.

■ Buy Natren's Healthy Trinity from www.dnavitamins.co.uk

Old Wives' Tale

An apple a day keeps the doctor away

APPLES — and especially their skins — are a good source of dietary antioxidants, the chemicals in food that help fight disease. These help neutralise reactive molecules called free radicals, which have been linked to cancer and heart disease. An apple a day could also help fight Alzheimer's. Scientists at Cornell University in America discovered that the antioxidant quercetin protects brain cells against oxidative stress, a tissue-damaging process associated with neuro-degenerative disorders. Red Delicious apples contain the highest level of antioxidants.