

Richard Eaton remembers

MAHMOUD EL KARIM

To have seen Mahmoud el Karim wearing long cream flannels, playing in a style once described as so exquisitely elegant that “it was beneath his dignity to hurry” and afterwards drawing expressively upon a cigarette, it might seem as though he remains a legend only because he shows just how far squash has moved on.

In fact, the tall and sociable Egyptian had a galvanising effect on the game during the early post-war era, after which his longer-term influence upon compatriots who eventually created the most dominant squash nation of all time is also significant.

Karim’s career spanned changes in which squash began to make its first evolutionary leap. When he won the British Open for the first time in 1947, beating England’s Jim Dear, it was the last time the title was decided by challenge matches.

When he won it the following year, he beat Dear again, but only after succeeding in the kind of draw which we would recognise today. There were 16 players and Karim had to win four matches. This required a very different kind of mentality and stamina.

Karim was different too because, unlike compatriot and predecessor Amr Bey, he was neither wealthy nor well-to-do, but came from a poor family. He thus symbolised some of the socio-economic changes which were seeping into the sport.

After switching from tennis to squash at the Gezira Sporting Club in Cairo, he started an era in which it could no longer be assumed that players from England, the country which created the game, would always make serious challenges for the British Open title. After Dear’s defeat it was not until 1967 that an Anglo-Irishman, Jonah Barrington, won it and not until 2002 that Peter Nicol, an Anglo-Scot representing England, won it.

If Karim’s style was easy on the eye, his chat was often just as pleasing to the ear, qualities which together created a chemistry that evolved into a part-myth, part-legend of magical Egyptian strokemakers, something embodied a decade later by Abou Taleb, then in the 70s and 80s by the likes of Mohamed Asran and Ahmed Safwat, and more recently and most impressively by Amr Shabana and Ramy Ashour.

As the squash-writing legend Rex Bellamy once wrote: “Karim was accurate and had a beautiful precision. And he had a similar beautiful touch to that which so many Egyptian players of the modern era have possessed. It was almost as if it were a trait to which he gave birth and propagated.”

In fact, there have been many fine players from Egypt characterised more by artisan qualities, Gamal Awad, Karim Darwish and Mohamed ElShorbagy among them. But the proportion of dazzlingly creative Egyptian players has still remained wonderfully high.

When Karim’s graceful destructiveness was superseded in 1951 by Hashim Khan’s breathless hitting and rubber-screaming speed, he decamped to North America, where he won titles with the harder ball too, eventually moving to live in Montreal for more than a quarter of a century, during which he had considerable influence on the spread of the game’s international version.

Karim still remained fond of Britain all his life, despite having spent time here in the

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post-war austerity era, when life was neither comfortable nor easy. He also remained grateful for his treatment by British writers. “They gave me confidence,” he said. “Without them there would have been no Karim.”

In the early years of his fame he enjoyed the patronage of King Farouk and was later on good terms with President Nasser, always being greeted as a national hero whenever he returned to Egypt.

Thus, he retained great affection for his home country, returning for good at the age of 72 to become director of squash of the Gezira Club, the place where for him it all started.

He died 11 years later, close to the turn of the millennium, and words appropriate for an epitaph were uttered by Roy McKelvie, a distinguished player turned author and journalist. “Karim was a joy, the most beautiful stroke player, with a range of shots beyond anybody else,” he said. “If I had to play the eternal match, in heaven or hell, I would play Karim, just for fun.”