

# MAKER OF CHAMPIONS



## Martin Bronstein talks to the doyen of British squash coaches, Malcolm Willstrop

**M**alcolm Willstrop has been around for ... a long time – he won't go into exact dates ("What is this British obsession with age?") – and he has certainly been around: he has had a lot of jobs and a few professions and met people from all walks of life. So any conversation/interview with him will include a lot of anecdotes, some strong opinions and a few outrageous statements.

Make no mistake, nobody manages Malcolm Willstrop, who has produced more champions than any other coach. Yes, 'great' coaches have appeared, shone brightly in the reflected light of one outstanding player and then disappeared. Malcolm Willstrop goes on for ever. He has been coaching (he admits in an unguarded moment) for 70 years and claims that his pupils have notched up 60 British titles between them.

Willstrop first came across squash at St Peter's School, York, the oldest public school in Europe, which boasts Guy Fawkes as an Old Boy. ("I wasn't there at the same time," Willstrop quips.) He took to the sport and ended up being a pretty handy player.

"I've played for Yorkshire, Durham and Norfolk and qualified twice for the British Open when it was amateur.

"It was played at the RAC Club and my well known opponent couldn't get my name right – "Martin Wilshire?" – and thought, as I came from Durham, I must be a miner. I was at Durham University at the time, but he got me so riled I slaughtered him. That gave me great satisfaction," he says with a grin.

When it was time to do his national service, Willstrop went into the Royal Air

Force and was commissioned – the youngest officer in the RAF at the time. This was a very bright young man, pure Oxbridge material, but on applying to Cambridge he got a shock.

"I was rejected by Cambridge. I had never failed at anything in my life before so I couldn't cope with that. I went to work for Timeform," he recalls, alluding to his other great sporting love – horse racing. Then came a call from his old headmaster, who could not abide the thought of such a good brain wasting his time in bookmaking and offered him a teaching post.

Malcolm took the job, teaching English, but more importantly started coaching squash and rugby.

"At assembly I used to watch the boys go in and out and, if I was looking for a scrum half, pick out suitable candidates. And that's where Ian Robinson came from.

I saw him as a nine-year-old, kicking a rugby ball, sent for him and got him playing squash.

"Then I decided to get a degree and that's when I went to Durham for four years, studying English, French and philosophy. I worked for a bookmaker in the holidays and also on building sites." By this time, Willstrop had a family to support, which accounts for his industry.

After university, he went to Gresham School in Norfolk to teach English, French and sports. That was the start of Gresham's reign as the champion squash school. It started



Willstrop advises his son James at the 2009 World Open

with Gawain Briars, John Cordeaux and Richard Millman, who all went on to glittering international careers in squash.

Success for Willstrop also came closer to home through his son Christie, his stepson David Champion and his son by his second marriage, James. And while he was in Norfolk he helped Cassie Jackman to become the British number one.

After Gresham, he moved to Pontefract, where he has since established his own unofficial centre of excellence. Apart from James, Vanessa Atkinson can be found there every

week, Saurav Ghosal, the Indian champion, is almost a fixture at the club, Lauren Siddall practises there as well as helping with the coaching, and there are players from Sweden and Canada whose

parents feel it is money well spent to send their offspring to Malcolm in this small town in the north of England.

I ask him if he hasn't got bored.

"I've been coaching for 70 years and I still love it. How can you get bored? I don't charge excessive

amounts but I coach an awful lot of people: between 24 and 40 people a day. I coach over 100 kids in a week. There's a five-year-old-girl, Layla Johnson, who is an absolute joy to coach; she almost has too much talent. Then there's Sam Todd, who is going to be a big star. Look out for Ellen Cooper too, and Emma Champion, James' niece. These young players energise you; how can you get bored?" he says again with passion.

As Pontefract is in the heart of Rugby League country, he gets dozens of rugby players coming for squash coaching.

"I treat them the same as the kids: 'You do this, you do that.' Except there was this huge New Zealander and I said to him 'You can do what you like'."

The big question that hangs over Willstrop is why he was never tapped as National Coach.

"I did apply for the SRA [Squash Rackets Association] job but it was given to another candidate. It was a political appointment. I now have a

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consultancy role with England Squash and Racketball – small, but it helps me to go to tournaments around the world. And next season I shall be in charge of the England Under 11 squad, which I'm very happy about."

A small town in Yorkshire may be an unlikely place to find one of the world's most sought-after and respected sports coaches, but with the Pontefract squash club almost his home and the Pontefract race course just around the corner, what is the betting that he is a very happy man.