

NOT DONE YET

James Willstrop reflects with Mike Dale on how his life has changed since his epic Gold Coast zenith – and what the immediate future holds

James Willstrop will head to Birmingham this summer as defending Commonwealth Games men's singles champion but admits the "whole landscape has changed" both on and off court since his unforgettable golden moment four years ago.

The Yorkshireman still recalls his straight-games victory over New Zealand's Paul Coll on the Gold Coast in 2018 with a sense of awe. "It was kind of faultless," he says. "It was one of those rare days when you feel like you're walking on air."

Coll is very much a different beast now though, as is robust Welshman Joel Makin. Willstrop's mentee Patrick Rooney is now ranked above him, while close friend Saurav Ghosal and Malaysia's Eain Yow Ng will also pose tough tests in Birmingham.

Squash's pecking order has altered, but infinitely more profound for Willstrop has been the shift in his priorities and perspective following the death last year of his father Malcolm.

"For those who were closest to him it is still tremendously hard," says the 38-year-old. "It's not going away for me. There's just a gaping hole. He was an enormous personality and you're never going to find someone who can replace him."

Anyone who witnessed Malcolm's masterful influence over Pontefract Squash Club will understand the void his passing has left. James has moved into his father's old office as he, partner Vanessa Atkinson and coaches Jayne Robinson and Matt Godson have tried to keep his coaching sessions and philosophy alive.

"Now that I coach the kids he used to coach, I have a thousand questions I want to ask him," says Willstrop. "I now totally get how hard it was, and yet how easy he made it look. Running sessions day in, day out with professionals, three-year-olds, box league players... he did it all. The commitment was monstrous.

"I'm now realising the true extent of his brilliance and dedication. He wasn't

everyone's cup of tea but the people he invested in just got so much out of him. He was just an outstanding, incredible, legendary coach. The club is nothing like it was. We're missing him badly, but we are battling on."

The former world no.1 admits to a "very, very difficult balance" between his desperation to maintain his father's standards at the club and his own commitment to his PSA World Tour and England duties.

It will be Willstrop's 39th birthday a week after Birmingham 2022. When quizzed on the prospect of retirement he is non-committal and perhaps a touch evasive, but it seems he may resist the temptation to bow out in front of an adoring home crowd this summer. He says: "I'm not a great planner in life generally. It [his career] will stop when it stops. I don't need to know when it's going to finish. I know a lot of athletes want it in their head in the lead-up to their last tournament, but I'm not particularly keen on setting limits for things.

"I certainly wouldn't ever want to publicise it when it comes to my last tournament. I feel like that would add stuff that I wouldn't really need. I just want to play in Birmingham, enjoy it for what it is, see if I survive it and how I feel afterwards.

"I wouldn't rule out carrying on, because when I do things like last October [when, at the US Open, he became the oldest male player ever to reach a major quarter-final] it shows I can still hold my own against very good players.

"I love being out in front of a crowd playing the sport. I still get a massive high from it. So when you know you're still capable, it's quite hard. You don't want to let that go. I'm just going to wait and see. It will depend on a lot of things – whether my body holds up, whether mentally I want to keep doing it, or just play a bit less. Who knows?

"Things have changed so much in my and Vanessa's lives. With Malcolm passing things have gone in a direction

we were never expecting. Suddenly we're both trying to keep the incredible system in order that Malcolm put together at Pontefract over so many years. That's a hell of a job, especially when I'm still playing professionally and Vanessa is commentating for Squash TV. We can only do so much of it. It's not a simple answer. There's a lot to think about."



Malcolm made Pontefract a squash mecca, producing two world no.1s, countless other PSA Tour players and, perhaps more importantly, making squash a lifelong passion for thousands of people in a little Yorkshire mining town with little else to offer them.

"I'm very, very keen to protect his standards and I'm not going to let them go without a big fight," says James. "The kids have got to keep behaving well, but I've been a player

all my life, not a coach or a leader, so suddenly having to keep control the way he did is very, very hard.

"There's no way I can do it the way he did because I'm a different person to him. I enjoy a lot of aspects to it and some I don't as much. He hardly ever missed a day but I cannot be at the club 24/7 because I don't want to stop playing. We'll just see how things go."

For now, England's most capped player of all time is focused on staying healthy ahead of July's Games.

Winning the men's World Doubles title alongside Declan James in Glasgow in April

seemed the perfect preparation, but two weeks later Willstrop pulled out of the World Championships in Cairo with an injury.

"The first thing is, I just want to get there," he states. "All season I've tried to keep my ranking up and I've worked hard at the squads specifically for the Games.

"There is a slight sense because you're a bit older that you're on borrowed time, but I just feel really fortunate to be even thinking about playing at the Commonwealth Games.

"Almost every match the butterflies are still there. I think that's part of the drug of what we do. Sport at the highest level always has that high. After all these years bounding around the squash court, you never take that for granted."

"In almost every match the butterflies are still there"

TREADING THE BOARDS

Willstrop's love of performing extends beyond the squash court. He is a lover of live theatre and an award-winning actor, having appeared in numerous amateur productions in his native Yorkshire. This summer, he got to combine his two lifelong passions.

As part of the build-up to the Commonwealth Games, he starred in *Outside The Box*, a new play celebrating the history of squash. It premiered at the end of May at the University of Birmingham squash venue, forming part of the Birmingham 2022 Festival.



Brought to life on three glass-walled courts, the play's cast includes inner-city schoolchildren and explores the sport's fascinating origins from a London prison to the mountains of Pakistan and beyond. It pays tribute to the sport's greatest players and highlights amazing stories such as Maria Toorpakai's battle for the right simply to play the game in South Waziristan.

Willstrop was introduced to the play's creator Jake Oldershaw, Director at Untied Artists, by WSF president Zena Woolridge.

"I'm so glad we got talking to each other and managed to pull this together," said a beaming Willstrop. "What an opportunity this is for me to work in a production made by a professional theatre-maker – and for it to be about squash, wow! It's a wonderful thing."