

The golden comeback

Nick Matthew talks to Rod Gilmour in detail about his remarkable recovery from going under the surgeon's knife to retaining the Commonwealth men's singles squash title

It is a story that starts in Sheffield with a simple twinge in his right knee before heading to a rock concert and then on to numerous, imaginative fitness techniques and rehabilitation sessions.

Then, some 250 miles north, three-time world champion Nick Matthew is ordered to sit on chairs around Glasgow city centre following his nomination as England's flag-bearer for the 2014 Commonwealth Games.

Days later he looks into his arch rival's eyes in the singles final and thinks that he might be falling just

short of his golden dream. We should know better.

The narrative after each of Matthew's singles matches in Glasgow was always the same. The defending champion was asked how he felt. The answer was that only five weeks previously he had been lying on a hospital bed after a knee operation, wondering if he would ever play at the Scotstoun Sports Campus, the Games' squash venue. He was happy just to be in Scotland – but gold was always on his mind.

His travails had started innocuously during a technical session with coach David Pearson, one involving little movement; perhaps two steps to every shot and back to the T. He then moved to a routine ball and something seized up in

his knee.

Several factors entered his mind. Was he cold? But then again he had warmed up, as any world champion should. "It was a weird feeling," he recalled.

He saw an English Institute of Sport physio in Sheffield that afternoon and then had an appointment with ESR physio Jade Elias and a knee expert in Manchester the following day. There was swelling, but no real problem was found. He was walking okay, but occasionally he would jar the knee.

A few days later he went to see rock band Kings of Leon. At one point he was struggling to walk up some steps and only a chance encounter with Richard Higgins, the EIS doctor who was a member of the Team GB medical staff at the 2012



Nick Matthew, followed by his squash colleagues, is given the honour of leading England's Commonwealth Games-winning team into Celtic Park at the opening ceremony

Olympics, changed the dynamics.

"What's wrong with you?" the surprised doctor asked, before suggesting that Matthew booked himself in for a scan.

Two days later he went in to see the doctor. The following day he saw a specialist and on the Monday – a week after the aggravation had started – he was having an operation at Claremont Private Hospital in Sheffield.

A couple more days and his Commonwealth plans might have been in a mess. "I had to take the plunge," Matthew said. "As far as knee ops go, it [a meniscus tear] is the best of a bad bunch. At least it wasn't a cruciate.

"You go through trauma. Then you are under anaesthetic and [later] you have hip and lower back problems, because you're not planting your foot properly. I couldn't do anything to loosen them up."

The Yorkshireman admitted that he had a 10-minute "wobble" on being told that he had to have the operation. However, his determination soon returned and at no point in the recovery process did anything less than gold enter his mind.

The subsequent days were the "calm before the storm". Together with Elias and Mark Campbell, his strength and conditioning trainer at the EIS, who specialises in boxing, the trio hatched a plan to get Matthew ready for Glasgow 2014.

"I was being re-evaluated every three days, but I could chart my path to Glasgow," he recalled. "It is a bit like a ladder, but I couldn't hit every rung due to the time restraints. I had to skip a few rungs and risk falling off. That was the best analogy I heard for it.

"There was a happy medium between the two. Mark was the one who was pushing me, Jade held me back. My mentality is more like Mark's, but Jade was the one who said that it was the accumulative stuff that you put in [that matters] rather than improving it day by day."

Campbell, a 6ft-plus Kiwi, admitted that he had to use his imagination to get Matthew on the road to recovery. "The main issue was that it was mostly upper body work that we focused on," he explained. "Squash players have amazingly fit, strong legs, but are generally quite light up top.

"So you just pragmatically put in place all the steps, follow the instructions from the medical team and take it step by step to get him there. It wasn't ideal, but sometimes that can make it all the more rewarding. It didn't change the focus and for me it was just a testament to Nick's mental toughness."

Matthew had given Campbell a "statement of intent". 'Keep me fit and I'll be fine, the squash will come back dead quick' was the mantra.

So the following weeks saw Campbell use a series of machines which he

adapted for the England no.1: rope-pulling with a sled attached, single-leg cycling, upper-body rowing and seated boxing, to name but a few.

There was a constant theme running throughout the recovery: glutes, core and upper body. "The latter felt like it was in bits, as it was the only way I could raise my heart-rate," admitted Matthew.

He winces at the mention of the cycling – describing it as "the single most difficult thing I have done" – an idea which was also initiated by his wife, Esme, a physiologist at British Cycling.

Campbell would take the pedal off the right side, put a box in its place and then tell his pupil to "hammer it" with the left leg. To put this into context, cyclists do this exercise with both legs and take it in turns. "There was no respite and no light pedalling with one leg," Matthew said. "Even moving the pedals was hard. I was walking round in circles at the end."

Campbell admitted that his pupil likes to go to "deep dark places" in relation to his cardiovascular and metabolic conditioning – but this was testing Matthew's mettle to another degree.

When Matthew took a day off after one session in the days leading up to Glasgow, Campbell knew he was ready.

There was one small problem. The defending champion had been instructed by Elias not to go to the opening ceremony due to the amount of standing around. Then came the turning point.

"There was no way I wasn't going to go after being nominated as England's flag-bearer," he said. "That was a bit of a worry, as before that I had to sit down to take the pressure off for a month or so."

Elias had to carry a seat with her to the stadium until the pair got to the entrance at Celtic Park.

"Carrying the flag beats gold medals and everything else," Matthew said. "You don't get nominated unless you have been successful. If anything, it put some pressure on me, as I had to win the thing now."

His last competitive match before lining up against Xavier Koenig, the Mauritian solicitor who was his first-round opponent in Glasgow, had come in the final of the British Open in May, when he was beaten by Gregory Gauthier.

"The best thing about the first day was the fact that there were two matches," Matthew said. "During my training I had never been on court more than once per day."

Matthew ultimately raced through to the final without dropping a game, overcoming team-mate Peter Barker in the semi-final to set up an enticing clash with James Willstrop, a repeat of the 2010 final in Delhi.

The final ebbed and flowed. Scotstoun was packed and there were representatives from every major British paper, which meant some of the press had to stand at one point. When Willstrop

levelled at two games each, nothing was separating them. They even had the same number of points.

"I do remember looking at his eyes at the end of the fourth," Matthew recalled. "At that point I was wobbling and he looked strong. He was the man and I knew I had to get a good start in the fifth, which thankfully I did.

"Weirdly, I visualised every round and what the score would be. In the final I saw it 3/2 to me, so I was prepared for it."

Matthew may not have been prepared for the early throes of his rehabilitation, but he had come through the ordeal.

As Campbell said of his remarkable comeback: "Don't get me wrong, it shook him a bit to start with - as it should - but once he was on it, I have never seen anyone do it better."

Road to recovery

With Nick Matthew's right leg out of action following surgery, physical conditioner Mark Campbell's main priorities were to maintain his cardiovascular levels, his strength and his conditioning by working the rest of his body. The New Zealander set a four-week schedule to get the Englishman ready for Glasgow.

Week 1 (operation at start of week): Left leg strength, upper body strength.

Week 2 (post-operation): Left leg strength, upper body strength, non-involved cardiovascular work, light bike sessions/pool sessions (physio-led), squash movement patterns (squatting and split squatting) (physio-led), light isolated single leg strength on the involved leg.

Week 3: Left leg strength, upper body strength, non-involved cardiovascular work, aerobic conditioning bike sessions and pool sessions, squash movement patterns (squatting and split squatting) (physio-led), light isolated single leg strength on the involved leg, light static hitting on court (physio-led), light squash court movement (ghosting) (physio-led).

Week 4: Leg strength, cardiovascular conditioning, ghosting and squash movement patterns (physio-led), court sessions with static hitting/ghosting, solo court work, coached hitting/feeding session, progressive hitting to match play (v local club professional), full match play by the final day of the week (Sunday v Alister Walker).