

Odds in coach's favour

Rob Owen, the former British Open quarter-finalist turned professional gambler, tells Rod Gilmour about his colourful career, which now includes becoming a squash coach



Rob Owen at his day job as a professional gambler

The career of Rob Owen has been one of vision and numbers. He started out as a chess fanatic, played squash professionally, retired aged 26, became an optician, then professional gambler before offering a sideline in free squash coaching.

His life has been as colourful off court – he has clearly enjoyed the trappings of success – as it sometimes was on it. Never tell him that gambling is all luck, though, and that squash relies on talent, especially when he is paying the lunch bill at a swish London restaurant on a freezing December day!

“People misunderstand the word talent,” he says. “The press once said I was the most talented for my age, but I disagree with that. I just practised more and hit more balls.”

Owen is thankful for meeting the great Jonah Barrington, then aged 40, as a 15-year-old in Solihull at a time when he used to practise on his own. “I was a bit rebellious and perhaps he saw a bit of him in me,” he recalled. “Under him I went from being very average (the first round of the British under-16s) to the British Open under-19 final, beating Jansher Khan in the semis.”

Owen’s career was marred by various disciplinary problems, though he says he enjoyed a reasonably successful career, reaching a high of 19 in the world before quitting the sport.

The Midlander says it was a “privilege” to play when he did, but he soon came to realise he wasn’t as good as his peers. Even aged 22, he knew that he wasn’t going to go on forever (he never reached British no.1) and quit four years later.

He studied for four years in London and gained a degree in optics as he

reached 30. He purchased his own opticians’ practice, but the bright lights of the capital soon gave way to full-time gambling.

“You look at sport slightly differently through gambling and I have applied some of these attributes to my coaching,” says Owen. “A lot of it is logical and I look at life in odds. If someone hits six drop shots from the back and only two go up, I’ll say don’t play that shot.

“I’ll look at it simply what works and what doesn’t. The attention to detail is key, for example wrist and movement positioning. These are technical aspects I also apply to gambling: a jockey’s riding position, a tennis player’s footwork. That has been very useful to me.”

There are no algorithms or spreadsheets. For someone who started out in chess (quitting aged 14 to pursue squash), maths and, crucially, patterns of play are all in his head. “What I can do is evaluate an eventuality into a price,” he says. “I can make quick decisions and spot talent. I am looking for weaknesses and strengths, and I can apply that to the odds.”

His dedication was honed from hours of self-motivation spent on court. In the beginning the gambling was a “24/7 operation, watching cricket in India to horse racing in Australia.”

“Mathematics is part of daily life,” he says. “People say there’s nothing more risky in what you do. But I don’t actually gamble. The odds are always in my favour when I bet. I’m odds-on to win every time and the percentages are on my side. It’s impossible for me to lose.”

How so? “Over a period of time if you give heads or tails, I will have a grand on heads at 2-1,” he replied. “I will keep doing that all day long, as the odds will be in my favour.”

There is also a refreshing tone as to how Owen views his second job as a coach. “I’m happy to put my hand up and say I have a lot of strengths and weaknesses,” he admits. “A lot of coaches might not do that, as they are scared of losing players. That’s not having confidence in your own ability.”

His friendly influences in London included Rob Wright, *The Times* racing tipster, while he has also been eager to learn off the squash greats too. He recently spent two weeks with Australia’s former world champion, Rodney Martin, who opened his eyes to the sport. “It was the way he talked about squash,” Owen said. “As a player [Martin won the 1991 World Open], he would always look for weaknesses against the top players and you could see his brain ticking the whole time.”

Owen has built up a solid stable of players at his own academy, who train at the West Warwickshire Club in Solihull. He currently has eight under his wing, including Jaymie Haycocks, George Parker, Nathan Lake and Joel Hinds.

“I am not doing it for financial gain,” continues the former British Open quarter-finalist. “I never really charge them for my time. I do it for the love of the sport, as I always thought for a long time that players like myself weren’t putting anything back into the game.

“People like Peter Marshall and Del Harris have been lost to the game. There were some very good players in the 80s and 90s who were highly ranked but who have completely left the game.”

Owen came into coaching by coincidence. He had watched Chris Ryder run a squash camp a few years ago and saw a few areas that could be bettered in his game. The recently-retired Ryder took it on board, asked him to coach and it grew from there.

Owen says: “I believe in attacking squash, but I tailor to each individual player. Some need an arm around them, others need a rocket up them. I don’t like complicated squash. It’s all about vision and imagination.”

For example, he used to revel in cutting the ball – Owen will sometimes use a wooden racket in his coaching, as it offers better instruction in how to swing –



Rob Owen comforts George Parker after the teenager’s defeat in the British Junior Open semi-finals

whereas many of the top juniors hit the ball too flat.

"You look at all the top players: Ramy Ashour, Jonah, they all used to cut the ball," he says. "George hits the ball too flat and it always used to sit up the whole time. Although he is exciting, his squash hitting isn't great, but physically he is fantastic. He has immense talent, but he needs to know that his racket work has to increase."

Despite Owen's growing stable, he is quick to look away from the mainstream headlines generated by the success of triple world champion Nick Matthew.

"We are being left behind by other countries," he says. "We don't attract the talent pool that other sports do."

Can he see future success for England's next crop, though? "I see small signs at a much younger level and Chris Robertson [ESR national coach] seems to be doing a fantastic job at the top of the game," he replied.

"Chris is bringing that ethos back to the game and getting back on court with the bigger players. We are starting to see the results."

Just like Owen has done on a daily basis since quitting as a player and returning to the sport as a coach.

THANK EVANS FOR SQUASH!

Dan Evans, the British tennis no.2 and a West Warwickshire member like Rob Owen, tells Squash Player of his love for squash and how it has improved his tennis

"My parents were always at the club, so I played squash before I started playing tennis. I picked up a racket and it went from there.

"I always used to play in a higher age group, but when I first started to play tennis tournaments, it began to take over.

"I only played when I was young so it wasn't that physical. But it has definitely helped shape my game. I learnt how to hit certain shots.

"I use my hands more on the squash court and that aspect has definitely gone into my tennis. Squash has also benefited my backhand slice, for example.

"I watched the World Championship final in Manchester. If it's on TV, I will always watch it and if there is a Premier League squash game on at the University, then I will go and watch."



Ryder's remedies

Chris Ryder, the Hertfordshire player who retired from the PSA Tour at the end of last year, is leaving the full-time scene generally optimistic for the sport's future, but also with some advice for its rulers, writes *Simon Redfern*.

Having been on the Tour for 14 years, the 33-year-old former World University champion has witnessed plenty of change, some good, some not so good.

"By far the most significant change has been the introduction of PSA SquashTV. It's professionalised our image and gives me a lot of hope in that direction," he said.

However, while lauding the men's professional tour for introducing their own on-line television channel, Ryder had words of praise and criticism for the PSA over refereeing.

"Refereeing is a major problem," he stressed. "I think the three-ref system was good for cutting down on unnecessary backchat from players, which didn't reflect well on our sport - but the actual decision-making needs to improve now too.

"Also, understandably a lot of emphasis is put on the top tier of tournaments while the lower and middle tiers are neglected. I think the PSA is a long way off fulfilling its potential here,

which would allow a more profitable and sustainable tour for more players."

Ryder, who reached a career-high of 33 in the world rankings in 2008, is speaking from a position of strength here. "At a lower ranking it's tough to make ends meet sadly," said the six-time PSA Tour event winner.

He now wants to help develop junior squash in Birmingham while gaining experience in club management, but

added: "Ultimately, I'd love to own and run my own squash club."

That keenness to put something back into the game is matched by the likes of Hadrian Stiff, Jon Kemp, Jonny Harford and Ben Ford - and makes him hopeful for the future of the game in England.

"We're coming to the end of a very strong English era and it's less clear who's going to be competing in the top 10 for England in five years' time," he said.

"But it's good to see more ex-pros choosing to make their living coaching in the UK and strengthening our junior system - and I'm sure this will pay dividends in the next decade.

"It's all about junior coaching for long-term sustainability, isn't it? Therefore, a consistent message from England Squash reinforcing the need and 'best-practice' of getting large numbers of juniors playing at club level is by far our biggest priority.

"At an elite level I would like to see a greater emphasis on talent-spotting. I think a lot of juniors reach the top of the rankings because of their strength, size or time spent on court, or number of tournaments played, which can easily beat better technical and tactical talent at that age...not necessarily a long-term win. This opens up a long debate on what 'talent' is, though!"



Chris Ryder, who ended 14 years on the PSA Tour in December