

Perry's dream comeback

Sarah-Jane Perry outlines to Simon Redfern how she fought back from a worrying back injury to impress in the Tournament of Champions

Sarah-Jane Perry could scarcely have wished for a better comeback from a worrying back injury than she managed on her maiden appearance in the recent Tournament of Champions in New York.

Sidelined from the WSA Tour for the best part of four months by two fractures in one of the vertebrae in her lumbar spine, she felt that making the main draw of the \$50,000 event and so playing on the famous glass court at New York's Grand Central Station would have been a good start to 2014.

Instead, the 23-year-old from Birmingham took up where she left off last year by astonishingly repeating her quarter-final performance from the Malaysian Open.

Along the way she defeated two players ranked higher

than her, namely Egyptian Omneya Abdel Kawy, the former world no.4, and England team-mate Jenny Duncaif, the seventh seed and ex-world no.2.

"The week was really positive for me, particularly backing up on consecutive days against players ranked above me," Perry commented. "It's not a bad venue to make your comeback either!

"I tried to go into the tournament without expectations, but when you know the reward for a main-draw place is playing on the glass court in such an iconic venue, it's hard not to place any on yourself, so getting through to the quarter-finals was a bit of a bonus.

"Having got to the quarters, I was disappointed not to go further, but I would have happily taken it before the tournament started. Overall, I'm ecstatic to be back where I left off, if not better."

However, Grand Central Station seemed a distant dream last September, when the world number 17 was first told what was causing her stiff back.

Perry takes up the story: "The diagnosis came just after I got back from Malaysia, where I managed to played through a lot of stiffness and a bit of discomfort, but no pain.

"I was told the approximate timescale for healing was 12 weeks, at which point the fractures should be healed and then training can be built back up gradually. Every case is individual, though, and everything would need to be very closely planned, controlled and monitored."

As a member of England's European title-winning squad last spring, she rightly received the best attention that England Squash and Racketball could offer.

"I was up at the National Squash Centre in Manchester for a couple of days every week," she recalled. "Let's just say I know the M6 very well now!

"In Manchester I worked with the England squash physio, Jade Leeder, and strength and conditioning coach, Keith Barker. I was in contact with them all the time, even when not in Manchester, as it is so important that everyone has the complete picture at all times. I also used my more local English Institute of Sport Centre in Birmingham regularly.

"The base of the rehab was a lot of low-level exercises, which we then progressed to more functional ones, and a lot of pilates and stability work. I was particularly excited to use some cutting-edge methods and equipment as well, such as blood-flow restriction training and the anti-gravity treadmill.

"It was a long process, but I am definitely stronger from it, both physically and mentally. It's periods like these when you realise how much you do or don't love doing something. It's such a privilege to be able to travel the world doing something you love and I can't wait to keep pushing my limits and see where it gets me."

While it was the longest period Perry has spent on the sidelines in her near three-year professional career, it wasn't her worst injury.

She explained: "I tore a tendon in my foot almost two years ago now – that was pretty nasty!

"Such a long rehab period is always going to test any player mentally, though, so I tried to just look at improving what I could do to make sure everything healed well and to become as robust as possible to minimise the likelihood of anything similar happening in the future."

While she was recovering from the fractured vertebrae, the British Under-23 champion realised how much she missed the Tour.

"I was gutted to find out I wasn't going to be able to play for the remainder of 2013," she said. "I missed the biggest tournament of the year in the U.S. Open, as well as Carol Weymuller, Monte Carlo and Hong Kong, all of which I was planning on playing.

"I had a good start to the season in Malaysia, making the quarters of a World Series for the first time, so it was frustrating to not have the chance to build on that.

"It was weird not packing to go away or wasting time in airports and hotels for a few months, but I'm sure the resentment for those will return quickly!

"The WSA calendar is busy now. I'm really excited for the rest of the season and hopefully I can keep pushing towards the top 10 and beyond."

She has certainly made a fine start to 2014.

