

Teenager's dream

Fares Dessouki, the latest squash talent to emerge from Egypt, outlines to Rod Gilmour his part-time attempt to reach the sport's top table

"Hi Fares, We have a place for you in the qualification of the British, please let us know by today, 17:00 UK, if you're available to play."

And so, with this email from the Professional Squash Association just 10 days before the British Open, began the latest chapter in the impressive rise of Egyptian teenager Fares Dessouki.

He could have been studying, on a flight, playing a marathon five-gamer or even sleeping, but fortunately he wasn't and two weeks later he was taking on triple world champion Nick Matthew in the quarter-finals of the second biggest tournament on the PSA calendar.

The 19-year-old from Alexandria had arrived there by virtue of four victories over higher-ranked players, including one against his hero, former world no.1 and eighth seed Karim Darwish.

Indeed, the 2013 British Junior Open champion had looked in such good touch that it was not inconceivable that he could have become the first qualifier to reach the final since Chris Walker in 1991.

As it was, Dessouki admitted to being "full of nerves" against Matthew and bowed out in straight games.

However, there was enough evidence in Hull to suggest that Dessouki will eventually become the next Egyptian to grace the world's top 10. He is already 36th in the world.

I say 'eventually' because for the next three years at least he will pursue his

academic career – like some of his compatriots (Tarek Momen and the Elshorbagy brothers) have done before him. He has just completed the first year of a four-year business course at university in Alexandria.

"I'm trying to be a part-timer, to study and play at the right time," said Dessouki, who can only train in the lead-up to a tournament for an hour or two per day before studying in the evening.

The combination has worked to such an extent that he should be billed 'King of Qualifying'. At both the Sky Open in Cairo and the World Championship late last year, he made the last 16 and the second round respectively via that route.

Is he enjoying the multi-tasking? "Yes, but I'm getting tired, so I try to make it more fun for myself!" he replied. "I see it as two jobs and differentiating between them.

"It's a great position to be when you achieve good results in the exams. It makes me want to play better squash and get higher grades at the same time."

It was a friend of his father who told swimming and gymnastics enthusiast Dessouki there "was a sport called squash" being played at Alexandria's Smouha club.

After surviving the cauldron of the Egyptian National Championships in his junior career, he

ended it by winning the British Junior Open last year.

"You see many talents, but they go crazy inside the court," said Dessouki of the intense competition at the Egyptian Nationals.

"There are lots of nicks, drop shots and diving. It is very difficult to win it, but if you do, you will be able to compete outside Egypt and be a good PSA player."

The Nationals represented a steep learning curve for Dessouki, one he is still benefiting from today.

"I have to keep on working really hard. I know there are other players who want it as much as me. No one can know what will happen in the future."

However, if he carries on the way he is, he will be a fully-fledged senior before too long.

"I had a dream that one day I would play Karim Darwish on the PSA Tour," he says. "I did that and have now beaten him."

"I used to tell myself when I was growing up that I would play the best – and here I am."

DESSOUKI'S DIET? IT'S PIZZA AND COKE!

Fares Dessouki's breakthrough to top-level squash has been the most dramatic for some time, but his success has come despite a worrying lack of sports science back-up in Egypt.

When asked about his warm-up routine, he replied: "I do some stretching, a bit of running and jumping with the rope. That's it."

The teenager explained that Egypt doesn't possess the technology for him to do anything more sophisticated.

"We don't know how to warm up or do it well," he said. "I have many stretches, but not like other players. If I see other players, then I copy and see if it works for me."

As regards his diet, it sounds like a typical teenager's. He recalled the build-up before his British Open quarter-final: "For two days I was sitting with Ong Beng Hee (Malaysia) in my hotel room. I ordered pizza and Coke, and he said how could I eat this a day before my match. I said 'no problem'."

Fares Dessouki shouts for joy as he wins another point in his shock British Open win over fellow Egyptian and former world no.1 Karim Darwish

THE SQUASH PLAYER