

Richard Eaton remembers

AZAM KHAN

The name of Azam Khan, a Pakistani regarded by some as the greatest squash player of all time, raises a few eyebrows, because it appears on rolls of honour less often than it should. At least that is the view of some influential people within the sport and they may be right.

Azam is usually remembered as just one member of the Khan dynasty which transformed squash in 1960s, but he was perhaps the most surprising of them all.

He was a brilliant enigma who changed sports in order to succeed at squash, who put family loyalty before his own glory and who won four British Opens, but who may still have been better than the three champions who succeeded him.

Though these British Open successes – effectively the World Championships of that era – were important for Azam’s business future, they appear to have been secondary to the people who mattered most to him.

An emphatic advocate of Azam’s greatness is Mike Oddy, a fine British no.1 of the 1960s, who described the Pakistani as “the perfect orthodox squash player”, blessed with the ability to play a volley drop from anywhere.

Azam was so special, Oddy reckons, that he carried his elder brother, Hashim, in their last two British Open finals and lost when he could have won them. The Scot is not alone in that view.

Oddy also claimed that Azam could have won the British Opens captured by Mohibullah Khan and Abou Taleb, and possibly one or two of Jonah Barrington’s too, but for premature retirement. If so,

Azam might have won 10 British Opens, which would have created a record surviving to this day.

Against that there were also one or two critics who thought Mohibullah had been generous to his uncle Azam in the final of the 1961 British Open. “There was,” according to another leading British player of that era, Dick Hawkey, “so much of the elder brother business.”

Azam did not deny this. “Respect for an elder brother is very much ingrained in our Pashtun culture,” he said. “The words bhai sahib (respected brother) meant everything to me. He (Hashim) was my coach and mentor.”

There were many reasons why Azam should have felt like that. Hashim persuaded Azam, a tennis coach, of the advantages of switching to squash. Not only did he train and teach Azam, but he also helped bring him to England and set him up for a life change which resulted in his becoming domiciled in London for more than half a century.

Barrington also hints that Azam may have been greater than his legend. “If Hashim was the most devastatingly savage of the great Khans and Roshan the most beautiful stroke-player, Azam would have been the little accountant, methodically

arranging all the bits and pieces of the game, having everything under close analysis, with nothing out of place,” Barrington writes with typical eloquence.

“He was meticulous, organised, ruthlessly clinical and very deft...he was unbelievably efficient...he constantly sucked you into situations from which it was impossible to extricate yourself...he was totally silent oncourt, like a little bird...he moved like a ghost, silently hither and thither.

Wherever you hit the ball, he was there.” The widely accepted version of Azam’s retirement is that a ruptured Achilles ended his ability to compete at the highest level. Much later, though, Azam said that it healed after 18 months and that the real reason for his permanent retirement was the death in 1962 of his 14-year-old son. “I completely lost interest after that,” Azam claimed.

He diverted his energies instead into running the New Grampians Squash Club in Shepherd’s Bush, a famous facility which survived right up until six years ago and which in its heyday counted comedian John Cleese, actor Dennis Waterman and the late Formula One world motor racing champion, James Hunt, among its members.

Pictures of the two Khan dynasties – first Hashim and Azam in the 1950s and 1960s, then Jahangir and Jansher in the 1980s and 1990s – adorned every inch of wall space. In the minds of many of us they still do. Perhaps we should frame Azam’s a little more prominently.