

# Richards aims for the top

Tom Richards, the current world no.15, outlines to Rod Gilmour how he is planning to move up to the next level and challenge the top players

**T**he British Open is upon us and don't some players know it. With no PSA World Series event since March's Kuwait PSA Cup, hundreds of hours have passed for Tom Richards as he contemplates reaching the last eight of a major tournament for the first time in his burgeoning career.

For the last few months he has been seen practising for hours on his own on court at the leafy environs of the St George's Hill club in Surrey, headphones on, at one with himself.

That's just how he likes it and the largely solitary confinement means that fire and ambition burn deep inside the 26-year-old just thinking about the sport's oldest event.

"I need that motivation to think about a specific tournament coming up," says Richards, speaking at a training week in Guildford for England's southern-based players.

"Now it's the British Open that is always at the back of my mind. If it wasn't for that, I wouldn't be doing court sprints,

ghosting or in the gym every day."

There have been the odd weekend league matches in Germany and Italy in the last few weeks to keep the competitive juices flowing, but a strong run in his home tournament, which this year will be held at the KC Stadium in Hull, is the ultimate goal.

If he achieves a last-eight berth, it will underline Richards' credentials as a future England no.1, a position he has clearly thought about achieving in the next few years.



Tom Richards (right) plays a drop-shot against Nick Matthew in last year's British Open

"If you look at it crudely, Nick Matthew, James Willstrop and Pete Barker will eventually retire, and then you hope that players take on similar rankings as them," he admits.

For a few years Richards, the world no.15, has knocked on the door of an England call-up at major team tournaments.

He made his senior England debut in 2011 at the World Cup in Chennai against Mexico. Six years after turning professional, he was finally wearing the white and red national colours, and there were nerves aplenty as Barker and Willstrop looked on from the sidelines.

He is currently England's no.5, but that is likely to change considering he is nearly three years younger than his nearest compatriot, Barker, who will be 30 in September. Playing for England on a consistent basis, he says, is firmly on his mind.

"It has always been that if you play for England, you generally win events and I hope that continues," he says. "I have always held playing for England as the pinnacle of what you can do.

"Of course the aim is to still to take on Egypt in team events and tournaments. I am hoping we can carry on doing this."

For a player who hopes to rack up a wealth of international caps, Richards can't remember his first match for England – for the record it was the inaugural under-15 European Championships in 2001, when he was 13 – but he can recall the tournament.

It was part of a classic English upbringing, with sports-orientated schools in Surrey being followed by 'A' levels in French, biology and psychology at Esher College. There were a maelstrom of sports to choose from and no real focus on squash at that stage.

"It is a cultural thing," says Richards. "The young Egyptians come on tour having played 1,000 hours of squash, street-smart and supremely gifted with a racket. With the English, they play a lot of other sports as well.

"You are exposed to all these different sports, with no hurdles to cross. It takes time to get the hours in and hone your craft."

One aspect of Richards' game which is unlikely to change is an occasional show of anger on court. "I was a real hothead in my youth and had a real temper on me," he admitted, before laughing and adding: "I'm sure I still am!

"I would attack at will, try to hit everything into the nick and generally run all over the place. I was raw, but I was having fun. I'd like to think I have calmed down and have retained the raw flair – but with a bit more framework around it."

"That drive, that fire" as Richards puts it, is a trait of all great players. "I think I need to retain some of that natural

instinct," he continues. "I am an emotive player, but I need to recognise that line of it being a hindrance or helping. I like watching people who are feisty, so I don't want to lose that within myself."

His stability on court has in part been down to the succession of wise heads who have coaxed him in the right direction.

First there was Ross Norman, New Zealand's former world champion, who coached Richards for a couple of years from the ages of 16 to 18. Former world no.1 Peter Nicol offered his services soon afterwards and Barker was also a guiding hand when Richards first started out on tour. Then there is Danny Lee, the head coach at St George's, who knows his game better than most.

His steady climb into the world's top 20 suggests he is still on the rise, happy with his game and ready to take on – and beat – players who have been mainstays at quarter-final level and beyond. He recognises, too, that he is a better player than six months ago. One would suggest he is ready for the next step.

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"I've done my time," he says. "I've played all the top guys and my game and fitness are at a level where I can compete with the best.

"There are obviously some players who are a step above, but even if they are on a bad day, then hopefully I can cause an upset.

"I used to be in the position where I was happy to be there or make a game of it. Now I'm out to win."

That much was proved at this year's British National Championship, when Matthew said after beating Richards in the semi-finals that a few years ago he was "just pleased to be there... now he was out to win the tournament".

A sign, perhaps, of a current English no.1 hinting at the next generation? It is, of course, too early to tell, but Richards is definitely evolving. His fast play, use of angles and penchant for the volley is now entwined with a fitter, stronger body.

"There is an added pressure when you get to the top of the rankings, as you're representing a nation that is historically very strong," Richards concludes, when asked about aspirations for hitting the top of the national rankings.

"I'm definitely aware of that. I don't want to leave any excuses before I finish the game. You can only give it your best, play as hard as you can and then hopefully the rewards will come."

There's another laugh, before he adds: "We'll just have to see."

# Path to the top

**Tom Richards singles out three former and current world stars who have shaped his career:**

**Ross Norman** – I had one lesson a week from 16 to 18 years old with him. He used to batter me, but it was invaluable. He taught me that if I wanted to be a professional, then you have to be fit and strong, and there was no excuse not to be. At that age you need to be told that to be prepared for the senior game. If you can't make yourself do the training, then don't bother. You need that inner drive and to do things for yourself.



Tom Richards relaxes off court

**Peter Nicol** – He was different from Ross. Peter made me work on technical elements of the game, such as movement patterns and transfer of weight. These may be seen as boring aspects of the game, but they form very important parts of our sport. I was being exposed to these hard-working elements aged 18 and 19, and that was invaluable.

**Peter Barker** – I kept on ringing Peter until I got on court with him when I was starting out in the professional game. He enjoyed the fact that I was willing to work hard and improve my game – perhaps that's why he let me in. He benefited from it I think, too, in that he got some decent training out of it! That is the culture of the English game – that all it takes is a phone call and we are willing to help out younger players to make them better.