

Is England's golden age nearly over?

Richard Eaton investigates whether England will be able to continue their position as one of squash's superpowers when the current crop of world-class players retire



Nick Matthew

“We won't be here for ever,” Nick Matthew said recently. It sounded like the first toll of a warning knell. We are not as young as we were, he might have added. Enjoy us while you can.

This has been the golden age of English squash, so conventional wisdom says, and now it is almost over. But has it been a golden age, is it almost over and are England heading for a comedown? It happened to Pakistan and Australia.

The answers seem to be: yes, it has been; yes, it may be; and no, not necessarily.

What is certain is that England have never been so successful as in the last decade and a half.

They have produced four men and one woman who reached world no.1; one man and one woman who became world champions; and four men's and two

women's teams who won world titles. Last year England had the world's top two players for the first time. It's an excellent record.

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Everything... is there

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But can it possibly continue? With the Allam British Open taking place later this month and the World Men's Team Championship next month, it is a timely question.

It is also timely because Matthew is now 32, James Willstrop is 29, Peter Barker 29 and Daryl Selby 30, while Laura

Massaro is 29, Alison Waters 29 and Jenny Duncalf 30.

Age affects people differently, so it would be silly to downplay any of them. But Matthew's words reverberate. They won't be here for ever.

Moreover, Emily Whitlock, aged 19 and just outside the world's top 20, looks like the only prospect good enough to reach the top. Why, with so much Lottery funding, do England not have many potential replacements? Egypt have.

Other questions are asked about England's system. Is it flexible enough to accommodate outsiders? Has it adversely affected the coaching market? Does it put enough resources into talent identification?

Criticism can be helpful, but it can also be a hindrance to a governing body trying to cope with a changing world. They need to stay clear about their goals and methods, and maintain faith through setbacks. Maintaining morale thus becomes crucial.

England Squash and Racketball (ESR) are operating amidst fewer clubs, fewer participants, fewer coaches and significantly fewer talented young players, particularly women, than 20 years ago. This is not easy.

Nevertheless, they still have the world's best system, according to Britain's first male world champion, Peter Nicol. “It was brilliant,” he said. He even abandoned his Scottish squash-playing loyalties to join it. Without that, he could not have extended his reign as world no.1 to a remarkable 60 months.

Although that change took place more than a decade ago, Nicol believes the system still has outstanding qualities. “The whole regime changed three years ago and maybe those things lasted longer than they should,” he admits.

This may be an allusion to the addition of a coaching development system and an academy programme. The latter caters specifically for younger players, who now no longer just have to hop on to the senior programme.

“Everything needed for a modern professional player to flourish is there,” Nicol said.

“I think we will find someone unexpected. Sarah-Jane Perry is an example,” he added, referring to the 23-year-old who leapt into the top 20 this year. “Not everyone thought she would do that.

“It takes different answers to make



ESR president
Peter Nicol

those strides. I made mine at aged 19. Nick (Matthew) made his at 23, 24; then again at 27, 28. Daryl (Selby) came through a lot later.

"It's easy to say England won't be as good as before, but you never know what will happen. I read that we don't become adult till our 30s sometimes now. We always grew up later in the UK, maybe more so now."

Nicol's praise is particularly directed towards ESR's sports science. But other people may make criticisms, he

ASHOUR BIDS FOR REVENGE

Event: **Allam British Open**
Venue: **Hull**
Dates: **May 20-26**

Ramy Ashour, incomparably the world's best player in the last six months, is hot favourite to become the first Egyptian to win the British Open in nearly half a century.

He will also be seeking revenge over England's Nick Matthew, who played exceptionally to beat him in last year's final and is defending the title in his native Yorkshire.

Since then, though, Ashour has succeeded Matthew as world champion and suggested he may have conquered the fitness problems which for a long time prevented him from realising his exceptional talents.

Matthew is seeded second in his quest for a fourth British Open title, something no other Englishman has achieved, but he may face a difficult semi-final with Gregory Gaultier, the only Frenchman ever to win it.

Ashour, meanwhile, could be confronted in the last four by another Yorkshireman, James Willstrop, who has twice been within one point of the title.

acknowledges, from worthy viewpoints.

Phil Whitlock's are the most conspicuous. The former England international coached his daughter Emily to world-class, helped Massaro become world no.1 Nicol David's closest challenger and pulls no punches.

"They just tinker with the existing structure, instead of having their own ideas, ripping it up and starting from scratch," Whitlock says.

"What goes on is a whole methodology. It's a history. It's difficult to break it," he alleges, suggesting that the system is too set in its ways and though it is necessarily generic, that it should be less so.

"It works for me, so this should work for you' is the attitude," he claims. "Not enough time is spent trying to help individuals. I was told that Emily wouldn't break through till she's 22 or 23. By that stage it's too bloody late."

Whitlock is concerned about the chasm between junior success and senior attainment, into which players can fall disastrously. "The culture seems to be to play junior tournaments till you're 19, then think 'I'll start adult tournaments now'.

"So the boys start at 400 in the rankings and the girls at 300, and they cannot get into any qualifying tournaments," he says. "They don't understand the system. Parents must be up in arms."

Whitlock also believes England's system hinders club coaches. "Several coaches are definitely anti-ESR," he alleges. "They produce a player and he is taken away from them. They feel undermined."

By contrast, Malcolm Willstrop, once a bitter critic of ESR, now fulsomely praises the governing body. "The most important thing is having a good system and England have the best in the world – in physiology, fitness trainers, everything," says the coach who has produced more

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England has the best system

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champions than anyone for three decades now. "Sport is cyclical," he emphasised, repeating a familiar, but persuasive mantra. "Look at Australian cricket and Pakistani squash. They used to be unbeatable."

Willstrop coaches his son James and claims that ESR look more favourably on outsiders these days. "I always feel comfortable when I go there," he said. "It's a co-operative set-up. People work hard for it. If we maintain this system, the players will at some stage emerge."

Whitlock disagrees. "When I coached Laura (Massaro), there was a transformation (in her game), but ESR were not there to facilitate it," he claims.

"No-one came and asked 'what are you doing?' No-one offered me money to support Laura. I couldn't support her as I wished. Whether she can go on and become world no.1 I don't know. Maybe she can."

Willstrop's praise should have pleased Keir Worth, ESR's head of coaching and performance, who is proud of the system. "It's better than it's ever been," he says.

"We are more rounded in sports science and medicine, strength and conditioning, psychology and nutrition, and performance lifestyle.

"Our structure is better. Previously, players came from a stronger club structure, where day-to-day work was prescribed by good coaches."

Now, though, club coaches are at a premium. Attitudes are affected. "One of the challenges is educating players so they don't think being best in England equates to best in the world," Worth says.

Another challenge is compensating for the smaller talent pool. "Now it's about getting people into squash and getting them committed," Worth explained.

"Under 15, the programme is very much about retention and trying to expand the talent pool, rather than being elite.

"But although we don't have the same volume of players, I think we will still have quality, world-class players."

Worth is hopeful about the prospects of Adrian Waller and Joe Lee, believes Tom Richards, recently world no. 12, can continue progressing at the age of 26 and thinks Chris Simpson has made an encouraging push. He also points out that Charles Sharpes is still only 21.

He reminds us, too, that Whitlock is very young, claims Perry's breakthrough is significant and predicts that England will have a high-quality under-19 boys squad by the end of next year.

There may, though, be self-imposed barriers holding other youngsters back. David Pearson, the former national coach who coaches Matthew, thinks so. "We should look at the mentality issue," he suggests.

"When Lottery funding started, people appreciated it. As years have gone by, they see it as a right rather than something which can help them become world-class.

"That can prevent young players putting in the time needed. It's not the whole story, but it is in there.

"It must be very frustrating for someone like Chris Robertson (Pearson's successor as national coach) who has been a world-class player and knows about mentality more than anyone. He must be pulling his hair out."

Robertson weighed up the pros and cons of this comment, and decided to be

frank. "A gap has emerged between the players we have and those coming through," he admitted.

"Some think 'I will become the next name' – and that's not the motivation needed in this game. But the culture isn't strong enough for a senior player to knock it out of them.

"I don't know whether that's been lost or whether it's as David suggests, but this is the way some younger people are now. They don't realise what sacrifices need to be made. So many things need to work in your favour that time is something you can't waste."

It creates tough new challenges. "I knew when I came it would be hard," said Fiona Geaves, ESR's junior high performance coach. She is concerned about the decline in the number of clubs and the loss of juniors.

Geaves knows these problems are not peculiarly English and has discussed it with Michelle Martin, the three-times former World Open champion who coaches at the Australian Institute.

"She's trying to deal with the same thing," Geaves said. "It's a global problem, especially for women and girls. They have more distractions – they get into girly things, boyfriends."

Both believe the great changes the world is experiencing have contributed to there being fewer youngsters in squash. Other sports have suffered similarly.

"There are computer games, apps, and this and that, and it's a global fight to keep them involved with sport," Geaves says. "We have to find ways of getting more juniors involved.

"I am trying to talent-spot more. Maybe we need to identify players and help them now, rather than spreading ourselves so thin."

Needing reasons to be cheerful, it is worth talking to John Milton, the good-humoured coach of Mark Chaloner and Borja Golan, both top-10 players. Despite the tough economic climate, he has a

favourable forecast.

"There are more young players having a go at squash professionally than I can remember," Milton says. "Some of them you would question whether they are good enough. But that's been the case with several players I've worked with and they've gone on to world-class.

"The standard path has been through university and a degree, so that you have a career after squash. Nowadays there is no guarantee of a job, so why not let your kids try something they really want to do and can only do at this age?"

"Parents sometimes view it like this

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now. There is actually an increase in young players taking squash seriously, which I wouldn't have expected."

Another seeking reasons for optimism is Paul Carter, the former assistant national coach, whose task is to generate more high-quality coaches.

"The talent pool has gone and coaches have gone, so we need to be more accommodating – and ESR are," he says.

"In the past, we have not invited coaches and they became isolated. But performance and coaching are now under one roof – so that's what's happening with Robbo [Chris Robertson] and myself."

Carter has a warning, though. "Some players get coached beyond their understanding of the game," he reckons.

"There is too much prescription. It becomes far too much one way," he claims, meaning that coaches tend to prescribe how to playing rather than observing how they instinctively do things and helping them generate their own styles.

"If you watch the top boys in the world, they have all sorts of different styles. Squash is about spatial awareness, so let them play, and play different sports, to learn different awareness."

Carter's words remind us that squash is moving into a new age. Steering its movement may require new thinking and an ability to recognise different trends.

David Campion may be doing that. The assistant national coach has studied the rankings of England's recent greats at different ages, aware that players break through at different stages these days.

"People were asking where the next players were coming from a decade ago," Campion said. "And yet of the under-19 squad then, six reached the top 10 – Peter Barker, Daryl Selby, James Willstrop, Alison Waters, Laura Massaro and Jenny Duncalf.

"We didn't know they were going to

EGYPT SEEK TO DEFY THE ODDS

Event: **World Men's Team Championship**

Venue: **Mulhouse, France**

Dates: **June 9-15**

Egypt's defence of the world team title may depend on whether they can avoid political misfortunes and a funding crisis from weakening their squad.

Two years ago they narrowly upset England, the favourites, even without Amr Shabana. Now rumours suggest they might lose more than one of their wonderful players.

A full-strength Egypt could expect to win a third successive title, but if they are depleted, then Nick Matthew, James Willstrop and Peter Barker, England's triumphant trio of 2007, might win it back.

Meanwhile, France and Australia have attracted legends from retirement, respectively Thierry Lincou, the 2004 world champion, and David Palmer, twice a former world champion, in 2002 and 2006.

Palmer, who is one month short of his 37th birthday, reported he had been playing "quite a lot".

As for Lincou, who is 37 already, he said: "I'll play for France unless they pick Lucas Serme or I'm injured." If they face each other, it should be a great highlight.



England's team at the 2011 World Championship (l to r): James Willstrop, Daryl Selby, Peter Barker and Nick Matthew

come through. You can't always make a call at that age."

Campion has identified that Lee Beachill, who became world no.1, was ranked only 31 at the age of 22, whereas Waller is ranked 33 and is not quite 23. Furthermore, Matthew, who twice became world champion, was ranked only 36 at the age of 22, while Lee is ranked 42 aged 23.

"It's difficult to predict where they might get to. But, at their ages, Beachill and Matthew were in similar positions," Campion says. "They are not far behind."

We must hope he is right. If he isn't, England may have a wait.



Phil Whitlock gives advice to his daughter and top prospect Emily